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## When Your Bills Pile Up

Many people ignore bills when they experience financial difficulty. Some fear contacting their creditors. They don't understand the consequences of not paying their bills. Ignoring debts will affect your credit rating. In addition, creditors may take action against you in an effort to get payment. Or, your bill can be turned over to a debt collector. Your property can be repossessed or foreclosed on. You may be forced into bankruptcy.

However, several options may help you manage financial difficulties when bills pile up. You may set up a debt repayment plan and discipline yourself to follow it.

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### Setting Up A Debt Repayment Plan

1. Find out who you owe and how much you owe.
2. Decide how much you can pay back and when you can pay it back.
3. Set up a plan for paying back your bills.
4. Discuss your plan with your creditors.
5. Control your spending by sticking with your debt repayment plan until bills are paid.
6. Occasionally, look over your plan to see if you are keeping up with your bills and your daily living expenses. If there is a change in your income, you need to raise or lower your monthly payments accordingly.

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### The Amount Of Money Owed

When you have more bills than you can handle, the first step is knowing who you owe and how much you owe. Organize your credit payments by using the "**Monthly Expenses**" below. Creditors include financial institutions, credit card companies, utility companies plus any other company or person you owe money to. Collateral is an asset you pledged to back up a debt. This could be a car, a house, etc. APR is an annualized measure of a finance charge stated as a percentage. Monthly Payment is the amount due each month on an installment loan or the minimum due for revolving credit. Balance Due is the total amount you owe the creditor less interest ( you may need to call the creditor for this information.)

Remember to consult an expert (e.g., accountant, financial planner, lawyer) when dealing with any serious financial issue.

### Monthly Income

#### Average Monthly Income

**Salary/Wages/Commissions**

**Interest & Dividends**

**Social Security**

**IRA/Keogh**

**Pension/Profit Sharing**

**Rental Income**

**Royalties/Copyrights**

**Reverse Mortgage Income**

**Other:**

**TOTAL INCOME:**

## **Monthly Expenses**

### **Average Monthly Expenses**

**Rent or Mortgage**

**Groceries**

**Clothing**

**Laundry & Dry Cleaning**

**Utilities (Electricity, Gas, Water)**

**Telephone**

**Transportation**

**Homeowner's Insurance**

**Life Insurance**

**Medical Insurance**

**Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs**

**Other Health Care Expenses**

**Caregiving Expenses**

**Church**

**Gifts/Contributions**

**Social Expenses / Entertainment**

**Other:**

**Other:**

**Other:**

**TOTAL EXPENSES**

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### **Credit Payments**

List all of your credit agreements. These will include installment loans (the same amount is paid each month) and revolving credit (the amount varies).

### **Decide How Much You Can Pay Back**

On a piece of paper list your monthly take-home income and total it. Next list the expenses for which you have to pay the same amount each month (i.e. mortgage/rent, car payment, etc.). Below these expenses, list the expenses that change (i.e. food, clothing, etc.). Think about the expenses that come periodically (i.e. car registrations, gifts for holidays, etc.). Determine the portion of each periodic expense that will be added as a monthly expense. Total your monthly expenses.

**Compare your monthly income with your monthly expenses.** See if you can decrease some

of your expenses so you will have more money to pay back your debts. Examine the expenses that change and the periodic expenses. These will be the easiest to adjust. Design a bare bones spending plan. This spending plan may not be how you would like to live the rest of your life, but for a short time until your debts are paid off it's tolerable. Your goal is for your income to equal expenses and debt repayment.

Decide on spending priorities for the upcoming months. If possible, raise some extra income but only after you have cut your expenses as far back as they can go. Put your credit cards aside and, if necessary, cut them up.

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### Set Up A Plan For Paying Back Your Bills

Next, review your credit agreement(s) and develop a reasonable plan. There are a number of methods you can use to pay your bills. Five methods are listed below.

**1. "MOST IMPORTANT" METHOD.** Pay those debts most important to your credit rating or to maintain your family's safety. For example, you need to pay for rent, food and utilities. Is there some item that can be repossessed or foreclosed on? You may need to make a payment on the car to keep it from being repossessed. (Cars tend to be repossessed more quickly than furniture and appliances, unless the furniture and appliance contract is recent and a large amount is owed.) Other debts may not be as important and a minimal payment may be all that needs to be made for a while. If you owe on store and/or bank credit cards, you should try to make some payment on them each month because these businesses typically report monthly to credit bureaus and nonpayment effects your credit rating.

**List your creditors that are most important.**

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**2. "LOW BALANCE" METHOD.** Pay off bills with the lowest balance due. For example, if you owe only 2 more payments on your car or refrigerator, you may want to pay those first. Then the money you used for those payments can go to pay off other debts. Which debts do you have that could be paid off in 2 or 3 months?

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**3. "HIGH INTEREST" METHOD.** Pay off those debts with the highest interest rate. Find out your interest rate by closely examining the monthly statement. Interest charges can be

very costly. Paying off those debts with the highest interest rates can free more of your money to pay on other loans. List your debts that have the highest interest rates.

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**4. "NEW PAYMENT PLAN" METHOD.** The general rule is that credit payments, not counting mortgage payments, should not exceed 15-20 percent of your take home pay. If they do exceed that amount, you could work with your creditors to set up a new payment plan for your debts. This idea works well with utility companies when you have high winter bills and lower summer bills. To set up a new plan, you need to know your monthly take-home income and your monthly bills total, minus mortgage or rent.

### Example

.Determine the amount you can pay for bills.

If your take-home income is \$800 per month, you can safely afford \$160.

$$\$800.00 \times .20 (20\%) = \$160.00$$

.Determine the percentage you can pay toward each bill. Total your bills, excluding the mortgage or rent payment. If your bills total \$210, you can pay 76% towards each bill.

$$\$160 \div \$210 = .76 (76\%)$$

.Multiply each bill amount by this percentage.

This is what you would ask the creditor to accept each month.

$$\text{Utility bill } \$60.00 \times .76 = \$45.60$$

$$\text{Telephone bill } \$40.00 \times .76 = \$30.40$$

If you find you can pay more, make your payments as large as you can. Which creditors do you think you could talk to about a new payment plan?

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### Your Figures

.Determine the amount you can pay for bills.

$$\text{\$} \times .20 = \text{\$}$$

Your monthly Amount you

take-home income can pay for bills

.Determine the percentage you can pay toward each bill.

$$\text{\$} \div \text{\$} = . (\%)$$

Amount you can Monthly bills total  
 pay for bills (excluding mortgage or rent)  
 .Multiply each bill by the percentage in Step 2.  
 This is what you would pay each month.  
 Utility bill \$ x . = \$  
 Telephone bill \$ x . = \$

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**5. "DEBT CONSOLIDATION" METHOD.** You could get a loan to pay off all your debts. The payments on the consolidation loan would be less than your current payments because they are spread out over a longer period of time. Monthly payments will be lower, but in the end it will cost more because you will pay more interest. If you do this it's important that you stop using your credit cards and don't take out any other loans until all your debts are paid.

## Discuss Your Plan With Your Creditors

Now that you've decided how you're going to pay each of your bills, you'll need to contact your creditors. They can be contacted in person, by telephone and by mail.

### In Person

The best approach is to call and make an appointment to talk to the creditor in person. When you call, ask to speak to the person in charge of bill payment problems. Explain your situation briefly and ask if there are any records you need to bring. At the appointment, explain your situation and how long you expect your financial problems to last. Show sources of income and strategies for paying family expenses. Ask the creditor to reduce payments temporarily or let you pay only the interest, or extend the term of the loan. Emphasize that you want to work out a mutually acceptable plan. If your plan isn't acceptable, ask what the creditor would suggest. If an agreement is reached with the creditor, write down the details.

### By Telephone

When you contact a creditor by telephone, ask to speak to the person in charge of adjusting bill payments. The person who answers the phone often is not authorized to make payment changes. Wait to explain the details of your problem until you have reached a manager or supervisor. Explain the reasons you can't pay your bill and how much you can pay now. If the creditor doesn't accept your proposed payments, ask for specific suggestions of what to do. By working together the bill will get paid. Keep a record of each call including the date, with whom you talked and any arrangements made.

### By Mail

When contacting a creditor by mail, write a letter stating the reason you are unable to pay the full bill. State the amount you are sending as partial payment and your plans for future payments. See sample letters on page 6. Type the letter or write neatly. Keep a copy of the letter for your records. You'll need it when you receive a letter or call from the creditor responding to your proposed payments.

The following sample letters may be helpful in preparing a letter. Change them as needed to fit your specific situation.

Be truthful and specific about your situation (such as being laid off, having an accident, extended illness, reduced work hours, divorce, etc.) and how long you expect it to last. Don't promise to do things which may not happen.

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### **SAMPLE LETTER 1 (partial payment)**

**Date**

**Your Address**

**Account #**

**Name of Creditor**

**Attention: Delinquent Account Representative**

**Address**

**City, State ZIP Code**

Dear Sir or Madam:

Due to (list the reason for your financial problem), my income has decreased. I can not make the entire payment on the above account at this time. I have enclosed a reduced payment of .

By carefully adjusting my budget, I expect to send a (weekly, monthly, quarterly) payment of \$ . If these terms are not acceptable, please contact me to discuss another arrangement. I will not take on additional debt until I am restored to sound financial standing. I will increase my payment as soon as possible.

I can be reached by telephone at between the hours of .

Sincerely,

Your Name

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### **SAMPLE LETTER 2 (unable to send a payment now)**

**Date**

**Your Address**

**Account #**

**Name of Creditor**

**Attention: Delinquent Account Representative**

**Address**

**City, State ZIP Code**

Dear Sir or Madam:

Due to (list the reason for your financial problem), my income has decreased. I can not make the payment on the above account.

I have prepared a realistic, minimum budget for my living expenses and have developed a debt repayment program. I am asking each of my creditors to accept a reduced payment. I will send a (weekly, monthly, quarterly) payment of \$ beginning (list date). If these terms are not acceptable, please contact me to discuss another arrangement. I will not take on additional debt until I am restored to sound financial standing.

I will increase my payment as soon as possible.

I can be reached by telephone at between the hours of .

Sincerely,

Your Name

## After Contacting Creditors

Remember, even after you have contacted your creditors, you still have the responsibility to pay your bills. Until you get back on your feet, don't use any more credit. Try to keep up with the payments you have agreed to. Creditors will be less likely to give you a break the second time around.

If you are unable to work out agreements with creditors that make your situation manageable, consider consulting a third party, such as [Care One Credit Counseling](#)

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## Last Chance Efforts

When all else has failed, filing for bankruptcy is the legal release from debts. Bankruptcy is based on the premise that we all make mistakes. It allows individuals an opportunity to start over again. Bankruptcy should not be considered as the easy way out but as a last resort. Bankruptcy stays on your credit history record for ten years. There are three bankruptcy choices for those who cannot repay their obligations: Chapter 7, Chapter 11 and Chapter 13.

### Chapter 7

If you choose to use the Chapter 7 bankruptcy, certain property can't be taken away from you to pay debts. The court takes the non-exempt property, sells it, splits the proceeds among your creditors and then erases any remaining debt. Some debts, such as alimony, taxes, child support, fines, some student loans and debts incurred under false pretenses can not be discharged. Chapter 7 bankruptcy can be used once every six years.

### Chapter 11

For Chapter 11, a proposed reorganization plan is sent with the debtors disclosure statement of assets and liabilities to the creditors. The creditors vote on whether to approve the plan. Whatever their decision, the plan finally gets submitted to the bankruptcy court for approval. No court trustee is assigned to oversee the case. The Chapter 11 bankruptcy may be converted into a Chapter 7 bankruptcy meaning the debts will be wiped out and all non-exempt property will be liquidated for creditors.

### Chapter 13

Chapter 13, or Wage Earner's Plan, allows you to stretch payments over a short period of time (such as two-three years). No property is repossessed or sold and creditors must promise to stop collection efforts, interest and late charges.

A Chapter 13 plan is developed by the debtor and the debtor's attorney. The repayment plan is submitted to the bankruptcy trustee. Fifty percent of the creditors must accept the repayment plan. The debtor may not incur any additional debt until the current debts are paid.

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