

Recession realities: unlimited fun on a limited budget

Tough economic times can mean tough decisions for individuals and families trying to get by on a shrunken budget. For many, spending on leisure activities is the most logical place to start cutting back. But the decision to forego regular entertainment activities can be frustrating for people who feel like they are not only cutting out fun, but also valuable time with their friends and family. The added anxiety of today's economy has made social connections that much more vital: studies suggest that being socially connected and experiencing a sense of belonging can provide individuals with a kind of "vaccination" that helps ward off depression—an important preventative strategy during the recession's darkest days.

Finding ways to socialize cheaply can also take some of the pressure off. Whether you, friends or family members are coping with reduced hours at work or even a layoff, the last thing most people want to do is to decline a social invite because it's too expensive. Getting back to entertainment basics is a great way to get face time with loved ones without anyone having to lose face. Before you start turning down invitations to socialize remember, a little creativity can go a long way. Consider:

Getting together and getting in shape. Exercising together is an inexpensive, fun and healthy way to stay connected with friends and family. Join a running or mountain biking club with your partner or friend and you'll not only strengthen your body, you'll strengthen your relationship as well. Staying fit sets a good example for children and gets them on the right track for a healthy lifestyle. Whether it's a walk through the park or a round of Frisbee in your own backyard, exercise can be a great way to enjoy quality time together without breaking the bank. And it's also a great way to fight the blues: regular physical activity can help you shed recessionary stress and, studies suggest, can alleviate mild to moderate depression.

Reinventing story time. Got a library card? If you don't, get one. It's an easy and inexpensive way to get access to thousands of books, DVDs and CDs for borrowing. Many libraries also have exciting events calendars, with readings, movie nights and activities for children. Check out your local library and see what it has to offer.

Reserving front row seats at home. Enjoy a night at the movies in the comfort of your own home. Invite some friends over and enjoy the latest flick. If you and your friends have a favourite television show, make it a weekly ritual to watch it together. Take turns hosting and providing the snacks. You'll enjoy the show, each other's company and the extra money in your bank account.

Embracing your creativity with money. Many museums, theatres and sporting events offer special deals during off-peak hours and may have special discounts or free admission for children or seniors. If you have a flexible schedule, take advantage of mid-week showings or games. If you are a baseball fan, buy tickets for a minor league game. You won't have to compromise on excitement or on seating.

Getting back in the game. Video games are fun and many of them are designed for a group experience, offering an interactive experience which appeals to the whole family. If you aren't into high-tech gaming or it's outside your budget, dust off your board and card games, and rediscover the spirited debates and outright belly laughs only an 'old fashioned' game night can generate.

Expanding your mind on a dime. The web offers unlimited options for inexpensive learning opportunities. Whether you want to learn a new language, take up yoga, or experiment with a new recipe, it's all online. From ballroom dancing, to swimming, to karate, many community centres offer a wide range of inexpensive or free classes to pique any interest. Plus, you'll learn something new and interact with your community at the same time.

Making an ordinary dinner extraordinary. You don't have to be in a restaurant to feel like you're dining somewhere special. Pack up dinner, and your family or friends, and go to the park for a picnic. If romance is on the menu, turn the lights down, light some candles and take some time to get close with your special someone. When entertaining a group, make it a potluck and share recipes. Your friends won't just enjoy

sampling each other's culinary creations, it'll also give everyone a chance to reconnect and catch up.

Getting your hands dirty. Make gardening a group activity. Pick out your favourite flowers and plant them together. Have your kids take ownership over the caretaking of a plant and watch them bloom with pride alongside their carefully tended plant.

When looking to have fun on a limited budget, creativity is all that's required. And a decrease in entertainment spending can mean an increase in connecting with the people who really matter. With fewer expensive social outings in your schedule, you may find yourself enjoying more quality time—and more fun—with family and friends than ever before.