

## Protecting Yourself During Troubling Times

Posted on May 9, 2014

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If you've read a newspaper in the past few years, you may have been alarmed at reports of a volatile stock market, high unemployment, and retirement plans in jeopardy. Ever wonder if there's anything you can do to protect yourself during troubling financial times? There is. And the more you can do to protect yourself from the economic factors outside your control, the better off you'll be — not only now, but also when the Great Recession is officially behind us.

**1. Finish your college degree or diploma** – What do most people who have survived the recession financially intact have in common? A college degree. The unemployment rate for people without them is about double that for those with a bachelor's or better. If you haven't completed your undergraduate coursework, get it finished now to improve your employment prospects. Degree holders can expect to earn about \$15,000 a year more than those with only some college completed. But, if traditional college is not for you, don't worry. There are tons of one- or two-year technical diploma programs available that will give you the hard skills necessary to move into the workforce immediately upon graduation.

**2. Cut your living expenses** – The more you can do to reduce your



monthly living expenses, the better. That might mean carpooling to save on commuter costs, trading in your vehicle for an older model to cut down on your car payments, or even moving to a cheaper apartment. Sounds painful, but once you make a few cuts on your monthly expenditures, the savings add up fast. Just be sure to put it into an emergency fund in an interest-bearing account.

**3. Stay employed while job hunting** – This one isn't entirely under your control, but if you've contemplated quitting your job — don't. More hiring managers are enacting “unemployed need not apply” policies. It's not illegal, even if it doesn't seem fair. Bottom line: Having a job while job hunting makes you seem more desirable in a competitive applicant pool, so don't give up on yours, even if you can't wait to leave.

**4. Pay off debt ASAP** – If you have any debt with unfixed interest rates — like student loans, credit cards, or

a mortgage — refinance to secure the best terms you can. Then pay that debt down as quickly as you can. If interest rates rise, you'll save a bundle in the long term and you'll feel the freedom of being debt free.

**5. Network when times are good** – Having a group of people concerned about your wellbeing means you've got a list of people to call if you're ever out of a job. To take one personal example: A friend of mine was laid off at the beginning of this year. She got home that night and starting calling people she knew in her industry — and one of those calls quickly led to a job offer. You never know until you ask. The news can seem bleak, but the economy has weathered worse dips before. At the end of the day, economic indicators simply reveal trends by individual consumers. Make the right choices to protect yourself and your family and sooner or later, the economy will recover. It always has.