



## Appreciate Teachable Moments and Wake-Up Calls

*The road to success is currently under construction.  
Take time to enjoy the ride.*

– Unknown

Despite expert recommendations by government agencies and splashy media campaigns, many people don’t change their health or financial behaviors unless they absolutely have to. It’s not that we don’t know that future problems can be prevented or postponed by positive action. We do. Many people also live in a state of denial. They think, “Heart attacks.... diabetes.... obesity...inadequate retirement savings... mortgage foreclosure...etc., that will happen to other people, but not to me.” Yet, when it comes to health and personal finances, people generally reap what they sow.

You can either “**pay now**” by investing time and money in prevention (e.g., eating well, exercising, setting aside retirement funds, limiting debt) or “**pay later**” by suffering the consequences of poor health and financial behaviors (e.g., heart bypass surgery, bills for doctors and prescription drugs, inadequate retirement income, debt). In other words, if you’re a sedentary, overweight smoker, your lifestyle could be compared to a train wreck that will happen sometime in the future. When experts use “you’re at increased risk for...” warnings, they include **everyone**.

Life-changing events often provide the motivation required for taking positive action to improve health and increase wealth. In the education field, these events are called “teachable moments” because people often seek out information at times when they need to cope with a situation or make a decision or complete a necessary task. Adult learners, particularly, need to see a reason for learning something in order to invest their time doing so.

Teachable moments also exist outside the classroom in daily life and can include both positive and negative life events such as the following:

	<b>Positive Event Teachable Moments</b>	<b>Negative Event Teachable Moments</b>
<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shopping for exercise equipment</li> <li>• Improved personal health status report</li> <li>• Media reports about health care advances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cancer, heart disease or other serious or life-threatening diagnoses</li> <li>• Death of a friend or family member</li> <li>• Health risk factor assessments (e.g., diabetes)</li> <li>• Media reports/studies about health “issues”</li> </ul>
<b>Wealth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receipt of windfalls such as an inheritance</li> <li>• Marriage or remarriage</li> <li>• Birth or adoption of a child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial problems (e.g., calls from creditors)</li> <li>• Loss or reduction in income (e.g., divorce)</li> <li>• Poor financial assessments (e.g., net worth)</li> <li>• Media reports/studies about financial “issues”</li> </ul>

When you experience a “teachable moment,” recognize it as such and take positive action. As a positive financial example, consider the receipt of a windfall. This is “found money” that you hadn’t planned on receiving, such as an insurance settlement, inheritance or contest prize. Windfalls have the potential to greatly enhance financial security, but only if they are managed wisely. Windfalls may also provide the motivation required to take an investing course or consult a financial advisor. Conversely, a negative financial example of a teachable moment is hearing retirement planning for baby boomers described as a “perfect storm” of simultaneous problems (e.g., uncertainty of Social Security, eroding employer benefits, low household savings). As a result, you may decide to start saving and not rely entirely on the government or your employer for future financial security.

Negative teachable moments in life are often referred to as “**wake-up calls.**” A wake-up call is a warning to take action on something that was previously denied, overlooked, or neglected. For example, the events of September 11, 2001, were seen as a wake-up call to strengthen U.S. homeland security. With respect to health, red flags of a need to change current behavior include the following:

- Body mass index (BMI) greater than 25 due to gradual weight gain over time
- Sedentary lifestyle with little or no daily exercise (25 percent of Americans get no physical activity)
- Diagnosis or symptoms of pre-diabetes (about 41 million Americans have pre-diabetes)
- Smoking habit (about 25 percent of men and 21 percent of women are smokers)
- Poor eating practices (e.g., high fat, low fiber, large portion sizes)
- Highly stressful lifestyle resulting in symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, and migraines.
- Sustained elevated blood pressure (120/80 is considered normal; 140/90 or higher is a red flag).
- Chronic and/or life-threatening diagnoses such diabetes, asthma, cancer and heart disease
- Family history of a particular disease or condition (e.g., colon cancer)
- Death of a close friend or family member with similar health practices to yours (e.g., smoking)

Unfortunately, many people take their health for granted, figuring they’ll “beat the odds” of risks associated with an unhealthy behavior. They pay more attention to wake-up calls at a hotel than to the wake-up calls in their own life. It often takes a personal health care crisis to prompt a change.

There are also a variety of financial wake-up calls. For example, after 9-11, some families were motivated to draft wills and purchase life insurance because they heard about the problems experienced by victims’ families who lacked these documents. After the Enron scandal, some workers reviewed their 401(k) plan contributions and reduced their employer stock weighting. Some financial red flags include:

- Low retirement savings and net worth (average baby boomers have only 12 percent of what they need).
- High household debt (average U.S. households carry about a \$9,300 credit card balance).
- Low (inadequate) or no life, disability, liability, and long-term care insurance to cover large risks.
- Use of high cost “fringe” financial services such as payday lenders and check cashing stores.

- High percentage (more than 10 percent) of investment assets invested in a single company or industry.
- Consumer debt (excluding mortgage) to net (after-tax) income ratio of 15 percent or higher.
- Contact from creditors regarding overdue payments, charged-off debts, etc.
- Low credit score (under 720) and negative information (e.g., late payments) in credit report.
- Lack of a will, trust, or other estate planning documents by people with dependents and assets.
- Negative cash flow in daily spending (i.e., expenses greater than income).
- Stress resulting from financial difficulties that starts affecting physical health.
- Deteriorating marriage, spousal abuse, or a spouse who is disabled or in poor health.

Again, some people choose not to heed these financial wake-up calls until major damage has been done to their credit history, net worth, health, relationships, or financial security. Don't be one of them. Complete the **Teachable Moments and Wake-Up Calls Worksheet** to determine whether you ignored or responded to teachable moments and wake-up calls in the past and how you would like to handle them in the future.

## Teachable Moments and Wake-Up Calls

Teachable Moment	Health	Wealth
Describe a “teachable moment” that you experienced in the past.		
How did you handle the experience and what did you learn?		
What “teachable moments” do you anticipate within the next five years?		
What wake-up calls are you concerned about and why?		
What action can you take to address the wake-up calls in your life?		
What resources do you have to assist you in taking action?		
What obstacles do you expect to face and how will you address them?		
What are the consequences of doing nothing about your wake-up calls?		



## Action Steps

Health	Wealth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the most important health wake-up call in your life right now and take action to address it.</li> <li>Research the consequences of doing nothing about your health wake-up call (e.g., Internet search).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the most important financial wake-up call in your life right now and take action to address it.</li> <li>Research the consequences of doing nothing about your financial wake-up call (e.g., Internet search).</li> </ul>

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