A truly happy way to spend your money

It's giving to causes that matter to you. Let financial expert Nicole Lapin help you do it so it's both meaningful and money-smart.



THERE ARE SO MANY worthwhile organizations—and let's face it, our funds are limited—that we have to find the right way to support the ones close to our hearts. Before I could afford to donate money, I went on mission trips. And now I'm an ambassador for Step Up, a nonprofit that helps girls fulfill their potential. What's been consistent is how I look at what I've got (time, money, compassion) before I figure out how to contribute. Here's how you can give back, regardless of your financial state.

IF YOU'RE FOCUSED ON PAYING OFF DEBT

You may *want* to take a break from handing your money to Sallie Mae, but don't. That only sets you back (interest never stops accruing), and it'll be hard to get going again.

Volunteer your time. I firmly believe that time is more valuable than money—giving something you can't make more of is so powerful. Use yours to teach computer skills at a senior center or share career advice at an employment agency. Catchafire.org can connect you to groups that can use your talents.

Donate your stuff. Contact your local chapter of Goodwill and ask what they need. Then, when you clean out your closet or playroom, remember that the recipients are likely families too, and whatever you drop off should be something you'd happily pass on to a friend.

IF YOU'RE BUILDING YOUR SAVINGS

We all should have six to nine months' worth of living expenses in the bank. If you're still working on that, get creative with how you make donations.

Shop at philanthropic stores. I love to buy from brands that partner with charities, like Toms shoes or One Hope Wines. You can also shop through Amazon Smile (a portion of every purchase goes toward your cause).

Get others to give with you. If the dollar amount you can afford feels small, organize family and friends and contribute a larger sum together, perhaps in lieu of gifts among adults this year. Another idea: Raise money for an organization through a fund-raising walk or—*eep!*—a polar-bear plunge.

IF YOU HAVE MONEY TO DONATE

Put aside 2 to 3 percent of your monthly income for charity. How good does *that* line in the budget feel?

Write one check per charity. A little money here and there is great, but it won't have the same impact as one lump sum, since each donation has processing fees taken out. Use Charity Navigator's tracker to make sure at least 65 percent of a donation goes to the cause itself, not to the CEO's salary.

File for a tax deduction. Keep a receipt of your donation, even if you pay in cash. You can't deduct for volunteering time (although you and I know it's priceless), but you can write off the cost of any transportation to get there. It's a nice bonus—but helping others is the best way to feel truly rich.

Former CNBC and CNN anchor Nicole Lapin is the author of the financial best-seller *Rich Bitch* and one of the stars of the CW show *Hatched*.

Photographed by BRECHT VANTHOF