



# Consumer News & Views

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



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## Consumer Confidence Steady in March

The Conference Board, a business research group, said Tuesday that its consumer confidence index ticked down to 104.7 in March from a revised 104.8 in February.

U.S. consumer confidence was little changed in March as fading fears of a recession took a backseat to growing concerns about the nation's political environment ahead of November's presidential election.

- Recession fears continued to trend downward.
- Consumers expressed more concern about the US political environment compared to prior months.
- Consumers' inflation expectations ticked up to 5.3% from 5.2% in February.
- The board said confidence among consumers 55 years old and older improved, but deteriorated for those under 55. Respondents earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 reported lower confidence while other income groups broadly felt more confident.
- Over the last six months, confidence has been moving sideways with no real trend to the upside or downside either by income or age group.

**The Present Situation Index**—based on consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions—increased to 151 from 147.6 the previous month.

**Expectations Index**—based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business and labor market conditions—fell to 73.8 from 76.3 in February.

# How to Get into Trouble with the IRS

An audit occurs when the IRS chooses to review a taxpayer's accounts and financial information to ensure they reported all required income and followed all tax laws.

According to a recent report from Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, the IRS audited 3.8 out of every 1,000 returns, or 0.38%, during the fiscal year 2022, down from 0.41% in 2021. But many taxpayers still live in fear of a letter from the bureau questioning items on their returns.

"Taxpayers worried about the possibility of facing an IRS audit may hesitate to claim all the tax breaks they are entitled to claim," Kathy Pickering, chief tax officer at H&R Block, says. "When they do this, they are leaving their money on the table."

The IRS generally has up to three years after the filing deadline to initiate an audit, or up to six years if it finds a substantial error.

"If you are entitled to deductions or losses and you have adequate documentation to support these expenses, a taxpayer shouldn't fear an audit, even though it might be stressful," Mitchell Freedman, certified public accountant in Westlake Village, California, says.

Keep reading discover nine red flags that can trigger a tax audit and what you can do to avoid problems with the IRS.



## You Didn't Report All of Your Income

You're not the only one who receives W-2 forms and 1099s reporting your income; the IRS gets copies, too. If the numbers are different, expect to hear from the IRS.

"It is almost automatic that the IRS will do a cross-check to make sure all of the income reported on Form 1099 is also reported on the appropriate lines of the tax return," Freedman says. "If you haven't reported income from the various forms, 1099s, W-2s or K-1s, you will likely be audited."

"The surest way for a taxpayer to get a letter from the IRS is to omit any amount of income from your return," Pickering says. "The IRS can easily check income reported on tax returns against what employers, banks, brokers and others report. This is an honest mistake for many who have taken up second short-term part-time jobs or side hustles."

Keep these records even longer than usual. Remember the IRS has up to six years to initiate an audit if it finds a substantial error.

Also, don't forget about any income you report on Form K-1. "Forms K-1 are used to report income and other items from S-corporations, partnerships, LLCs, and trusts and estates," Freedman says. "Each year more taxpayers are receiving these forms, and they are also provided to the IRS."

## You Took the Home Office Deduction

Many people are afraid to take the home office deduction because they worry the write-off will lead to an audit. This can be a valuable break to help cover the costs to set up and maintain an office in your home, but not everyone who works from home is eligible. You can take the home office deduction only if you are self-employed or an independent contractor.

To qualify, you must use part of your home "regularly and exclusively" for business. Your office doesn't need to be in a separate room but it has to be in an area of your home where you don't do anything else. The space must also be your principal place of business or a place where you meet regularly with clients or patients.

You can deduct your actual expenses, including a portion of your mortgage interest, renters or homeowners insurance and utilities based on the area of your home that you use as an office. Keep records of all those expenses.

Or you can use the simplified option: Just deduct \$5 per square foot of your home office (up to 300 square feet) for a maximum deduction of \$1,500. If you did freelance work or were self-employed for a few months, you may be able to take a partial-year home office deduction.

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**CONTINUED****You Had Unusually Large Business Expenses**

You may hear from the IRS if your business expenses are much larger than other similar types of businesses. “The IRS compares deductions taken by taxpayers in the same income bracket or business type to find inconsistencies,” Pickering says.

Keep detailed records of your business expenses for at least three years after the filing deadline and at least six years if you’re receiving income from a variety of sources, especially for years during which you have large expenses.

Take steps to separate your business and personal expenses. “Maintain a separate bank account if you are self-employed, and make sure all income is deposited and expenses are paid through the business account,” Pickering says.

“That way, you have a clear financial record. Keep records such as logs and calendars documenting the work you’ve done as well as receipts, so you can show the business purpose of your expenses. If you pay expenses through a credit card, it’s a good idea to have a separate card for your business,” she says.

Another audit red flag is claiming you use your car 100% for business instead of allocating between business and personal use, Freedman says. Keep a mileage log so you can calculate the portion of the time you use the car for business – and to help defend your case if you’re audited.

**You Didn’t Report All Your Stock Trades**

Stock trades are taxable when you sell the shares unless the investments are in a tax-deferred retirement account. The brokerage firm sends a copy of Form 1099-B to you and the IRS and you need to report the capital gains and losses on Schedule D when you file your income tax return.

Investments you’ve held for less than a year are considered short-term capital gains and are taxed at your income tax rate. Investments you’ve held for longer than a year are generally taxed at the lower capital gains tax rate, which is currently 0%, 15% or 20%, depending on your bracket. Forgetting to report capital gains income could lead to an audit.

**You Didn’t Answer the Question About Digital Assets**

The IRS has asked about virtual currency transactions on the front page of Form 1040 since 2020, and it expanded the question and guidance about the types of taxable transactions for 2022 returns.

The 2022 Form 1040 asked, “At any time during 2022 did you receive as a reward, award or payment for property or services, or sell, exchange, gift or otherwise dispose of a digital asset (or a financial interest in a digital asset)?”

“Taxpayers must answer the question yes or no, and omitting it would certainly slow up the return – if not trigger an audit,” Pickering says.

If you receive cryptocurrency or other digital assets as income or have a profit or loss from selling digital assets you usually need report it. For federal income tax purposes, digital assets are taxed like any other kind of property, and if you sell cryptocurrency or other digital assets you must recognize any capital gain or loss.

**You Made Large Charitable Contributions or Didn’t Include Documentation for Them**

Charitable contributions can be tax-deductible if you itemize, so it’s important to keep detailed records when you donate.

“If someone donated cash or noncash items to a charity in the amount of \$250 or more and itemizes deductions, they can only claim that deduction if they have the required contemporaneous written documentation from the charity,” Nellen says. “It is the donor’s responsibility to get the proper letter.”

That means you can’t just get a letter from the charity years later if you’re audited: You need to have the documentation by the time you file your income tax return claiming the deduction.

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There are additional record-keeping requirements to substantiate large noncash donations, such as clothing, household supplies and vehicles, Pickering says. For example, you must have a qualified appraisal for noncash contributions in excess of \$5,000 – in addition to written acknowledgment from the charity.

You may also trigger an audit if you forget to attach required documentation for noncash charitable contributions, Brad Sprong, national tax leader, KPMG Private Enterprise, says. For example, if you donate property worth more than \$500 – whether it's a single item or a group of similar items – you must attach Form 8283 when you file your return.

**You Earned a Lot of Money or Very Little**

According to government [data](#), the IRS in recent years has audited taxpayers with incomes below \$25,000 and above \$500,000 at higher-than-average rates.

It pays to be extra careful when reporting your income and substantiating your expenses and other deductions at higher and lower income levels. It's a good idea to work with a CPA or enrolled agent who knows the rules and record-keeping requirements. They can help if you're audited and also come up with a plan to help minimize your tax liability in the future.

You may also be at a greater risk of being audited if your income is volatile from year to year, Sprong says.

**You Made Errors**

The IRS also audits returns that contain basic mistakes such as incorrect Social Security numbers and math errors. You may face extra scrutiny if you rounded the numbers for your expenses instead of reporting the specific dollar amounts.

"Numbers entered on the return which appear to be estimates, rather than actual numbers – like amounts entered to the nearest \$100 or \$1,000 – appear to be pulled out of the air," Freedman says. Check your work before you submit your return.

**What Happens if You're Audited?**

"Many audits start with a simple notification letter sent to the taxpayer," according to Timothy Stiles, national practice leader of KPMG's tax exempt practice and global chair of KPMG's International Development Assistance Services practice.

"This may be automatically generated by the tax authorities, for example, when a 1099 was reported by a payer, such as a bank, but the individual doesn't show any income from the bank on a tax return. Another example is a large transaction reported in a single year, perhaps from the sale of a home or business. The IRS typically identifies the issue and asks for a response," he says.

As soon as you get the letter, gather your records and make your case.

"A good recommendation is to send clear, concise documentation with a simple explanation in response," Stiles says. In many cases, that may be all you need to do.

Pickering adds that most audits are conducted by mail and resolved by sending supporting documents with an explanation. "If a face-to-face meeting is required, having a tax professional represent them could make some taxpayers feel more comfortable, prepared and knowledgeable about what to expect."

If you worked with an enrolled agent or CPA, let them know about the audit. They should be able to help and can represent you. If you filed your tax return through a tax preparer or software service, they may be able to help, too.

## *Uptick in Norovirus Cases This Spring*



This common infection can cause several days of misery, and it's extremely contagious. Norovirus gets a lot of attention for making swaths of passengers and crew members sick on cruise ships, but you can contract the virus anywhere. If you've ever been hit with a few days of intense nausea and vomiting, there's a good chance that the culprit was a bug called norovirus, which sickens between 19 and 21 million people in the U.S. every year.

Sometimes mistakenly called the stomach flu, this virus—which can also cause diarrhea, stomach pain, fever, and headache or body aches—gets a lot of attention for making swaths of tourists and workers sick on cruise ships. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that norovirus caused outbreaks on 13 cruise lines in 2023, sickening nearly 2,000 people. So far in 2024, there's been a confirmed outbreak on one cruise ship, which sickened 100 people.

But you don't have to embark on a Caribbean vacation to catch norovirus. The bug is ubiquitous, says Amesh Adalja, MD, an infectious-disease physician and senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security and a spokesperson for the Infectious Diseases Society of America. It can spread quickly in any spot where a lot of people congregate, such as a convention, or in restaurants, healthcare settings such as nursing homes, and schools and daycares.

You can get norovirus anywhere, and the majority of virus is not on cruise ships. In fact, cruises account for only 1 percent of norovirus outbreaks worldwide, according to the CDC. Outbreaks are most common from November to April, but you can contract it at any time, and national trends show that the virus is currently on the rise.

While most people recover in a few days, the vomiting and diarrhea can cause more serious problems. "The major danger is dehydration," says Karen Kotloff, MD, professor of pediatrics and medicine and head of the division of infectious disease and tropical pediatrics at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore. Young children, older adults, and people with other chronic conditions, such as kidney disease or diabetes, are more likely to become dehydrated.

### **How Norovirus Spreads**

Norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States. Contamination often occurs during food preparation, says Juan Leon, PhD, MPH, associate professor of global health at Emory University in Atlanta.

Here's how: Food handlers at restaurants or cafeterias may have the virus on their hands—probably because of improper hand-washing after using the bathroom—and transfer it to food. The same thing can happen when people prepare food at home.

But you can also catch norovirus in other ways. The virus, experts say, is extremely hardy, meaning it can persist in the environment for long periods of time. It can live on surfaces such as doorknobs and handrails for weeks, where you can unwittingly pick it up.

And it may last even longer in water. One study, published in the journal *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, employed 13 brave volunteers who drank samples of norovirus-contaminated water that sat for various periods of time.

The two volunteers who drank water that had been spiked with norovirus 61 days beforehand both got sick, which meant the virus remained active and infectious in water for at least two months.

Additionally, it takes only a tiny amount of the virus to make you sick. So even trace amounts of contamination can cause an infection.

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### How to Prevent Norovirus

There's no vaccine against norovirus, though researchers are working on developing one. It's a challenge, Kotloff says, because norovirus, like influenza, mutates frequently—so any vaccine would need to continue protecting against the virus even as it changes.

Right now, diligent hand-washing, with soap and water, is the most effective way to prevent norovirus. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer alone won't protect you because alcohol won't kill norovirus.

In the kitchen, use proper food safety practices, such as thoroughly washing produce and cooking foods adequately. Shellfish is a common source of norovirus outbreaks, so it's best not to eat it raw. And Leon advises peeling produce when possible, rather than eating it with the skin on.

If you or someone in your family has just had norovirus, take care to keep common spaces clean. Opt for bleach-based cleaning products, or a bleach solution of 5 to 25 tablespoons of household bleach in 1 gallon of water, according to the CDC. Use it to swab areas where food is being prepared, and to clean the bathroom and any other spots where someone vomited recently.

And ban anyone who has norovirus, or is recovering from it, from food-preparation areas. The CDC recommends that people wait at least two days after their symptoms resolve before making food for anyone else.

### How to Handle a Norovirus Infection

Because there's no treatment for norovirus—antibiotics won't work against it—your main goal should be to stay hydrated.

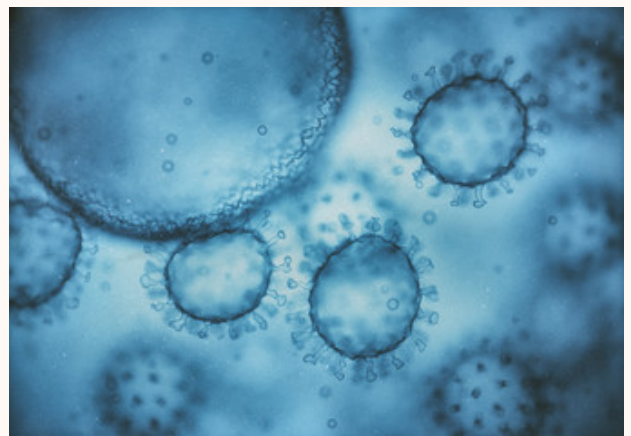
That can be tricky because you may be vomiting—and losing fluid—frequently, Kotloff says. Rather than drinking a lot at one time, she recommends smaller, frequent sips of fluid, which may allow your body to absorb the liquid before you can throw it up. Sports drinks and broths are good options.

Eat when you feel like it. Small meals are less likely to trigger vomiting than large ones, and opt for bland, easily digested foods such as saltine crackers, soups, potatoes, rice, bananas, and cooked vegetables. Avoid foods that are fatty or spicy, Kotloff says. For young children, oral rehydration products, such as Pedialyte, are better choices than sugary drinks.

People who are at risk for dehydration may want to call their doctors when they first get sick, to ask about a prescription for an anti-nausea and vomiting medication, such as ondansetron (Zofran and generic), Adalja says. That can help you keep food and fluids down.

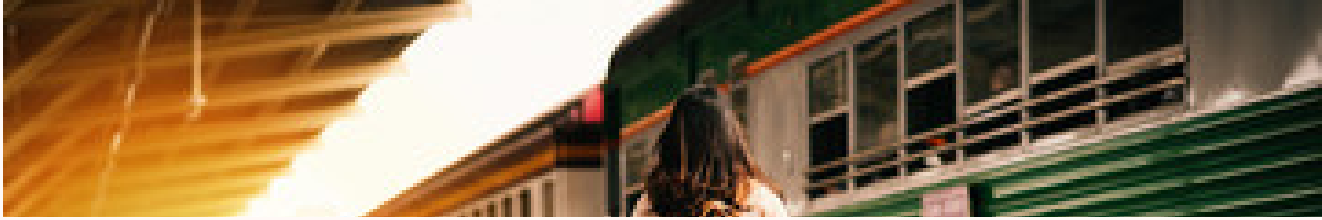
And be on the lookout for signs of severe dehydration. In very young children, these can include decreased urination, crying without any tears, dry mouth, sunken eyes, cool or clammy hands and feet, and listlessness or fussiness. In adults, signs of an emergency can include not urinating or dark-colored urine, irritability, confusion, dizziness, lightheadedness, rapid heartbeat or breathing, sunken eyes, listlessness, unconsciousness, or delirium.

If you suspect severe dehydration in yourself or your child, get to an emergency room. There, you can get fluids through an IV, rather than orally.





## *Traveling By Train is the Best Way to Travel*



It's often said that it's not the destination, it's the journey that matters, and perhaps there's no better example of that than train travel. In an era of hyper-productivity, we often find ourselves scurrying from one must-see landmark to another, ignoring all the in-betweens. But with the rise in slow travel, taking vacations by train is starting to emerge as one of the most popular ways to see the world.

In recent years, train journeys have even become a trendy way to travel for the ultimate jet setters: celebrities. "All I want to do is live on a train," Margot Robbie told *Vogue* in 2023, admitting she often spends her free time browsing train sites around the world to plan her next great rail journey. "You literally wake up and you open the window and it looks like 'The Sound of Music.'"

Robbie has already taken the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express and British Pullman, both part of the luxurious Belmond Trains, as well as the Seven Stars, which goes across the Japanese island of Kyushu. And she's not the only one: Victoria and David Beckham took a family trip on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express the summer of 2022, and Maria Sharapova shared views from her stunning 2021 ride on the Royal Scotsman, also a Belmond Train.

"When you travel by train, your vacation gets off to a magical and immediate start that you can't get by air or road," Trainline travel expert Hollie Conway tells *PS*. "Not only do you set off in one city and arrive somewhere magical with no effort, you get to experience the beauty of the surroundings along the way uninterrupted."

Conway also finds it to be far more reliable, especially in Europe, and far more sustainable, as trains produce up to 75 percent less carbon emissions than by car or plane, per findings published in *Travel Weekly*.

With train travel, there are all sorts of price points and ways to turn the journey into the experience. Here's what to know before planning your first great rail vacation.

### **What's a Good Train Trip For a First-Timer?**

With so many itineraries out there, the choices can be overwhelming, but it's best to go with your instincts. For a advisor Thomas Spears says the Belmond's Royal Scotsman or Golden Eagle are both solid introductions to train travel, since they entail a "short journey through fantastic scenery, with a local-inspired luxury." Spears likens it to staying in a "five-star hotel that changes cities each morning when you wake up."

Nature lovers may also enjoy Rocky Mountaineer, Spears recommends, which journeys through "some of the most beautiful and untouched nature." The rail booking company Vacations By Rail says that train is one of its most popular, best known for its trips between Vancouver and the Canadian Rockies, though they also have one between Denver and Moab. "It is a luxury train experience with glass-domed ceilings in the train cars, so it is easy to soak in all of the views on the leisurely, daylight-only route," a rep for the company says.

If you're looking to tiptoe into overnight trail travel — on a budget — For a advisor Chloe Kletsa points to the Madrid to Lisbon trip. "It is just one overnight so you can test the waters and see if a longer journey would suit you," she says, suggesting a single or double occupancy cabin. "When sleeping on a train for the first time, it takes a bit of getting used to, lying down feels different to sitting on a seat. You may not sleep that well that first night as you get used to the movement and the noise."

But if budget is not an issue, Kletsa recommends going for the gold standard on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express route from London to Venice, which she calls "a must" since it's also a "short one-night journey which gives you a taste of what a true luxury train experience can be."

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**CONTINUED****What Are Some Other Popular Train Trips?**

When we asked experts to name some of their other favorite and trending train journeys, the list hopped around the world. Dan Reisig of Railbookers says one of his favorites is through Rome, Florence and Cinque Terre, saying it's "an unbelievable combination of history and natural beauty."

Conway is also a fan of Italy, but from Rome to the Amalfi Coast via Naples. "The landscape is very special, and you even have the ability to hop off the train to visit the archaeological site of Pompeii and walk up Vesuvius on the way," she says.

Kletsa has her eyes set on the Belmond Andean Explorer, saying "I believe the landscapes you ride past, plus the level of luxury and comfort that these trains provide, will make it a true once-in-a-lifetime experience." But she says the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express connecting Paris and Istanbul is a popular pick, as is the new Paris to Portofino launch.

Also fun: the Nordland Railway between Trondheim and Bodo, which Kletsa calls a "gorgeous, scenic 10-hour ride that resembles the Polar Express during the winter months, and in the summer the sun never sets so one can enjoy a full 10 hours of sightseeing from their seats."

Spears adds that Eastern & Oriental Express in Southeast Asia "seems to be gaining in popularity" while countries like Laos and Vietnam are starting their "mid-tier luxury trains." He's also seen an "uptick" in requests about the Maharajas' Express in India.

**What's It Like on Board a Train?**

Like cruises, hotels, and planes, there are varying accommodation levels for every kind of traveler. "Trust me when I say, your first long-haul trip will not disappoint," Conway says. For European trips, there's a good deal of comfort and hospitality, from easy check-in to the dedicated space for relaxation, and even the food and drinks, which Conway says is "100 percent better than airline food." But above all, she says it's the scenic views along the way that make every step of the journey an experience.

For those traveling in an overnight sleeper train, the cabins can range from shared rooms with bunk-like beds to spacious suites similar to hotel rooms. Across the board, expect everything to be smaller and "leverage clever design to provide the same functions and amenities," Spears says. He also points out that some cabins will be converted between day and night to accommodate sitting-up and then laying down for bed.

The main difference compared to air travel is that you're not confined to your seat. "You can get up, walk around, get something to eat or drink (or bring your own!), and the train journey will become one of the most memorable parts of your entire vacation," Reisig says.

Spears compares it to a cruise ship, with many of the more high-end journeys having activities on board and stops with excursions. But he notes that dining options can be limited — after all, train kitchens are naturally smaller than those on a ship — so plan ahead, especially if you have dietary restrictions. "There's nothing worse than boarding a seven-day train trip and finding that you don't like or can't eat the meals," he says.

**What Are Train Travel Prices Like?**

In general, train travel is "very competitively priced and oftentimes can cost the same or less than air," Reisig says.

Kletsa adds that trips like those on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express are "comparable to a transatlantic business ticket for one night, or first class for longer journeys." The one-night trip from London to Venice on that Belmond train starts at around \$4,941, while a one-nighter on the Rocky Mountaineer starts at \$1,720, as of press time. Budget options are also available, which will help shave costs off of hotels and air.

Booking ahead can sometimes make a difference, like the Eurostar can be expensive if not booked well ahead of time. For instance a last-minute fare between London and Paris is now \$290 but can start as low as \$52. European sleeper trains generally have the same pricing, no matter when you book.





**CONTINUED****What Are Some Mistakes First-Time Train Travelers Make?**

While trains don't have the same tight space restrictions as planes, the Vacations by Rail team still advises first-timers to not overpack. "Each train is different, but some have limited space for luggage so avoid packing any non-essential items," the company's spokesperson says. Also, make sure you can handle your own suitcases on and off the train, unless you've booked an escorted trip with baggage handling.

Cultural cues may also be different depending on where you're going. For example, in some European countries, passengers don't usually talk on their phones on board. Conway adds, "People love taking their pets on the train so don't be surprised if you spot a dog, cat or even a bird."

But most of all, use the time intentionally. Vacations By Rail suggests studying up on your next destination, journaling about the last one, or even just napping: "After all, what better way to prepare for the thrills to come than being well-rested?"

**How Do I Book a Train Trip?**

The booking process will be different depending on the train operators and specifics of the journey. If your trip involves segments on a local train, it can be challenging to navigate booking sites in other languages. But trains do sell out, so it's important to book early.

First timers may benefit from using a company like Trainline, a platform that helps you search, compare, and buy tickets all across Europe; Vacations By Rail, which offers rail vacation packages worldwide; or Railbookers, an independent train vacation booking company that customizes everything to your needs and budgets.



## *April is Financial Literacy Month*



April is financial literacy month. You knew that, right? I didn't think so. It is not on my calendar and I doubt it is on yours. For one month a year, financial literacy comes to the forefront ... sort of.

So what's the big deal? Financial illiteracy is one of our most pressing social problems.

Research by the National Endowment for Financial Education reveals that a large percentage of people of all ages, incomes and education levels lack the basic financial knowledge and skill to ensure long-term stability for themselves and their families, and that inappropriate financial decisions can have long-term negative effects and national consequences. A Standard & Poor's study of 140 countries indicates that two-thirds of adults do not have even the most basic financial knowledge. Numerous other studies have reached similar conclusions.

Financial illiteracy is rampant. We are living in a crisis, yet so few seem concerned. Far too many individuals and families are spending more than they bring in, living in houses and driving cars they cannot pay for, and getting so deep into credit card debt that they can't dig themselves out. Others are losing their retirement savings in investments they don't understand, taking risks they don't even know exist. And speaking of retirement, far too many are retiring far too early with far too little. With life expectancies much higher today than when Social Security was created in the 1930s; working to at least age 70 should be the norm. Adjust from there as health and finances require.

So, if financial illiteracy is so catastrophic, why is so little being done about it? Actually, the U.S. Treasury Department did recommend that all college students be required to take a personal finance class a few years back. But that hasn't happened and likely never will. There is room for only so many classes in a college curriculum and financial literacy, frankly, isn't as sexy or politically expedient as other social causes. Of course, there are the occasional campus seminars and workshops, but these are merely drops on parched desert sand.

Sadly, this is going to have to be a do-it-yourself project, so here are some recommendations:

- 1.** No amount of expertise is more expedient and beneficial than spending less than you earn. Track your spending for a full month. Write down every penny. This will be rather tedious, but you need to know where you are before you can make adjustments.
- 2.** There are many good books on the subject. I recommend "I Will Teach You To Be Rich" by Ramit Sethi, especially for those on the younger end of the age spectrum. Those closer to retirement will find Suze Orman's "The Ultimate Retirement Guide for 50+" enlightening. For investment help, nothing beats Burton Malkiel's classic, "A Random Walk Down Wall Street." "The Investment Answer," by Dan Goldie and Gordon Murray, is also a good choice. And absolutely everybody should read "The Millionaire Next Door," by Thomas Stanley and William Danko. The numbers are outdated but the findings and conclusions are as relevant and powerful as ever. Read while you track your spending.
- 3.** Start now. Happy April.

With a little bit of foresight, insight, and educating yourself, you can become financially literate.

## Top Signs Someone May Not Be a Good Friend



No matter how long you've known someone, the quantity will never outweigh the quality. Friendships — especially the close, long-term kind — can be privy to ups and downs. But sometimes, a rough patch (or several) can mean more than a temporary blip in the relationship, according to top psychologists. Mental health professionals shared that your friendships are closely tied to your personal growth as well as your overall health and even professional success. Not feeling connected, understood, or even safe around a friend you see all the time can have detrimental effects on your life.

But being honest about how a friend makes you feel is easier said than done. Many people struggle with even asking themselves this question, let alone answering it honestly.

Here are the top signs to be on the lookout for regarding someone in your life not being that great of a friend:

### **They take way more than they give back**

One of the most important aspects of friendships is a "sense of balance or equality." We don't want to feel though we're score-keeping or counting the minutes, but there should be this spirit that each person is able to contribute as much as they want to. A friend might communicate by talking more, for example, but you should still feel like they ask you questions and are interested in your life. A friend who feels like more of an energy vampire can make you feel drained and used, because one-sided friendships tend to build resentment over time.

### **They use "brutal honesty" to criticize you**

There's a fine line between that and constant critique. It's one thing for a friend to worry about your attachment to an abusive ex; it's another for them to comment on how you talk, your mannerisms, or your hobbies.

People feel the truest sense of belonging and connection when they feel seen, heard, and appreciated for who they actually are. If you constantly get told you're doing something wrong, it can end up feeling like that friendship is conditional on our willingness or ability to mold ourselves into who they want us to be.

Whether they're jabbing out of potential jealousy or sending you long therapy-speak texts about your faults, they're not helping you grow — they're cutting you down.

### **They don't respond well to feedback**

Another really important part of a solid friendship is their ability to take feedback. When you share that something makes you uncomfortable that they said, are they receptive to that? Are they willing to take accountability or just you hear you out in a way that allows for constructive conversations?

If you notice that your friend is reactive to feedback no matter how politely and diplomatically it's presented, it sends the signal that you have to put up with their behavior or risk explosive conflict, neither of which is healthy.

### **They rarely initiate communication**

Tying back to reciprocity, Psychologists say it's quite crucial for close friends to feel equal in making time for and prioritizing each other. There's a general balance between reaching out to each other or initiating plans, even if one person is a little busier or going through a major life change. That consistency is important for keeping our friendships thriving.

CONTINUED ON P.12



**CONTINUED****They don't take "no" for an answer**

Friends respect your boundaries. Period. If you say no to talking about a vulnerable topic, do they step back or keep prodding? If you don't want to go out on a weeknight, do they listen or start shaming you?

If someone is not respecting the word "no", it is a huge red flag in all relationships — and, ironically, can push you away from a friend even more.

**They gossip in a way that tears people down**

Not all gossip is bad, nor does it always mean someone who talks about others will talk about you. Sometimes, our friends are gossiping as a need to secure support or to set out our perspectives and experiences. It can be a way to work through a problem or grow closer via shared values.

That being said, there's a difference between healthy gossip and a friend frequently putting other friends down to make themselves feel better. In general, she said a solid friendship should present other ways of connecting besides what you don't like about other people.

However, if you get a pit in your stomach about all the small things your friend rips other people apart over, it might be a sign that they'd speak just as badly about you, too.

**They're not interested in your growth**

If you've known each other for a while, you'll inevitably experience some changes in your careers, interests, relationships, health, or general outlooks on life. Know that it's a great sign if your friend asks questions and actively wants to keep learning about you, and that you aren't only repeating the same conversations that you've had for years on end.

If a friend is only invested in a past version of you — and actively rejects the newer updates in your life — it can be a sign that you're outgrowing each other.



## Welcome one of our credit union partners!

As a nonprofit consumer education organization, ACC has developed partnerships with credit unions across the country. These partnerships allow ACC members eligibility with our credit unions. If approved, our members gain access to a member-owned financial institution, with products and services designed to make banking more affordable, simple and convenient, and to offer additional resources that can help our members identify and achieve their financial dreams.

CommonWealth One FCU  
4875 Eisenhower Avenue, Suite 100  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
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**What makes CommonWealth One Federal Credit Union different? To start, we're always focused on you, our member.**

A legacy of people helping people  
From our original inception in 1944, as Army Air Force Annex #1 Federal Credit Union at Gravelly Point in Washington, D.C., CommonWealth One has grown to serve over 38,000 members and hold over \$550 million in assets with branches in Alexandria, VA, Washington, D.C., and Harrisonburg, VA.

Through the decades, the one that thing that remains the same is our commitment to putting our members at the heart of everything we do; today and for life. Our principles are rooted in forming lasting relationships that improve the lives of our members and community.

We are forward thinking but understand our roots and how we make a difference in our members' financial goals and their path to a better way of life. Our first priority is your financial wellness, offering a fresh and creative take on delivering financial products and services, wherever and whenever needed by you.

### **Our Commitment to You**

For You, For Life. Its more than a slogan. It's our culture of service and promise to our members, today and wherever their paths take them. We are your financial ally and expert, and we are there for our members every step of the way.

### **Strategies to help you reach your financial goals**

Let's go beyond accounts and dig into the details of money management. It's never too early to get a clearer idea of what you want to do with your finances and a better understanding of money-related topics. We're committed to increasing financial literacy and providing educational resources for everyone through our seminars, workshops, online resources and more. It's all designed to improve your financial well-being.

### **Here to help, here for you**

We figure you're tired of the financial institutions you've dealt with in the past. That's why you're reading this page. Well, there is a better way of managing your money, and we're here to provide it.

As a not-for-profit credit union, we answer to members (soon to include you, we hope), not shareholders. Those aren't just words. We turn them into action:

- Great rates on loans and higher dividends on savings
- Lower fees and service charges
- Excellent service
- Commitment to your financial education

Members own and operate CommonWealth One. And we offer everything you'd find at a bigger, less personal institution. Here you do business with people who live in your community and share your interest in making life better for all of us. We give you the tools to manage your money, and we give you a different perspective as people who really care about your financial well-being.

If you're as eager to join us as we are to welcome you, first take a look at our membership eligibility requirements. Then you can join by opening a savings account online to claim your ownership share in our credit union.

Once you become a member, tell your friends and family about us and spread the love. You'll stay a member for life, no matter where life takes you, as long as you maintain a \$5 balance in your savings account.

Let's partner to help you each achieve your financial goals.

For more information, visit our website at [www.cofcu.org](http://www.cofcu.org) or call us toll-free at 1(800) 424-3334.

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America First FCU  
718 Central Ave  
Charlotte, NC 28204  
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### Our “why” is you – and has been since 1939.

Since America First Credit Union was founded in 1939, we’ve cared the most about your success, community, and family’s financial security. Because it’s not enough to simply be another credit union—we want to help you reach your financial goals and live the life you want.

### Mission Statement

Our mission is to provide personal financial services of a superior quality to the members/owners; our chief concern being their financial well-being. We desire to be the primary financial institution of our members. We will use automation and technology to support a highly trained group of volunteers and staff.

Professional managers will be accountable for the quality of service and will be given sufficient flexibility in implementing policy to ensure that the member perceives the highest degree of excellence in every contact.

Professional marketing will provide aggressive programs to sustain and increase growth. We will seek our growth both from new members and by serving the financial needs of present members in a more complete manner. We will not sacrifice quality of present services to seek growth.

In order to provide quality member services, the credit union must remain financially sound and secure. Adequate operating controls, capital reserves and liquidity will be maintained at all times.

We will be sales oriented in our approach to members, and traditional credit union philosophy will remain our guiding principle. Among financial institutions, this credit union is a unique organization with deep and abiding human values. Our goal is to maintain those qualities.

13 August 1985



### Retirement advice that doesn’t get old

Times are getting more challenging, but retiring might be easier than you think.

It’s never too soon to begin saving for retirement. Let our experts guide you through the process.

### Member Deals and Discounts

Whether you’re looking for an affordable date night or you need a fun outing with the whole family, America First has you covered with exclusive deals & discounts. It’s just another way we’re saying thanks for your membership.

### America First Charitable Foundation Scholarships

The mission of the America First Charitable Foundation is to encourage and administer contributions for educational scholarships. These are awarded based on a student’s commitment to community service as well as leadership and academic potential.

For more information, visit our website at [www.americafirst.com](http://www.americafirst.com) or call us toll-free at 1(800)999-3961.



# ACC Wrap Up

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



## Green C Certification

If your company or organization would like to increase its credibility with consumers, you should consider applying for ACC's **"Green C" Certification**.

*Application for the Spring cycle are being accepted through June 1st, 2024.*

It's a proven fact that consumers prefer to do business with eco-friendly companies, implement green initiatives and that practice Corporate Social Responsibility. The process is straight-forward, and all applicants are recognized by the ACC and the Green USA Institute.

All applicants should review the criteria, then complete and submit their applications to ACC's Green Consumer Council for review, assessment and feedback. Program details and the Green C Certification criteria can be viewed online at

[www.AmericanConsumerCouncil.org/education](http://www.AmericanConsumerCouncil.org/education).

For more information, call 1-800-544-0414 or visit ACC's website.

## Friend of the Consumer

Is your business consumer-friendly?

Does your business deserve greater recognition for its service to consumers?

If so, you should apply for the American Consumer Council's Friend of the Consumer Award.



Each year, ACC awards numerous "Friend of the Consumer" awards to deserving manufacturers, retailers, and other businesses that produce or sell products in the United States, and which meet or exceed federally mandated standards, and have "demonstrated a commitment to American consumers by providing products or services that foster consumer confidence and market acceptance."

To apply, complete the online application at: [www.americanconsumercouncil.org/awards.asp](http://www.americanconsumercouncil.org/awards.asp) and return it to ACC with the application fee.

Applicants will be notified within five days of receipt of their application. Thereafter, a panel of independent judges will review your application and make a formal recommendation within 20 days of your submission.



## Financial Education

ACC is pleased to have a partnership with Nicole Middendorf. Nicole is a money maven, a knowledge junkie, and a born coach. She is an entrepreneur who left Morgan Stanley in 2003 to run her own wealth management firm. Nicole is the author of five books, a world traveler, philanthropist, and an accomplished public speaker.

As a Wealth Advisor and Certified Divorce Financial Analyst with Prosperwell Financial, her main focus is to help people create wealth from the inside out. She is able to accomplish this through one-on-one client meetings, writing books, presenting at conferences, and appearing on TV, radio, and other media.

Nicole shares financial advice and a real-life perspective on saving, planning, and investing with audiences across the country. Her primary goal is to take complicated subjects and make them easy to understand. She works hard to empower her audience to make crucial and positive changes in their own lives. Nicole's books have received local and national press coverage, where she has become known for her thoughtful concise quotes, relaxed on-air presence, and articulate delivery.

ACC is committed to promoting and providing financial education to the public. Nicole Middendorf has collaborated with us to create a new 6-part video series that promotes financial literacy for youth. Check it out here: <https://qcashfinancial.com/are-we-failing-our-kids-in-financial-literacy/>

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**ACC**  
**PO Box 503016**  
**San Diego, CA 92150-3016.**  
**[Info@americanconsumercouncil.org](mailto:Info@americanconsumercouncil.org)**