THE POWER OF PENNY PINCHING

Learn to budget, save, and pinch those pennies

by
Single Mama, One Income
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What is pinching pennies?

penny pinching

*n. Informal*

The practice of being extremely frugal in giving or spending money.

penny pincher *n.*

pen′ny-pinching (-pĭn′chĭng) *adj.*

According to the free online dictionary, it is just being frugal. I’m NOT cheap mind you, I have my dedications and items that I cannot live without, who doesn’t? But overall I would say that I am very frugal. This all started when my son was born in early 2003. I know this sounds cliché and it’s the typical story of an unwed mother. But seriously, like most I was a single mother without a damn clue! I worked my whole pregnancy, but then was laid off when he turned 5 months old. I was unemployed and struggling. I applied for public assistance which was a joke. While it is meant to assist those in getting on their feet, the area I lived in didn’t agree. They told me flat out that I was grown, fully capable, and able bodied. All I asked for was food stamps and I was immediately shunned. At least it felt like it. I remember standing outside the building in tears, on Main Street, in a not so nice part of the city, looking down at my son who just innocently smiled at me as if he was saying “its ok mum”. At that moment, I swear something crawled up my ass and got it moving! NO ONE would make me feel less again. The fire was lit.

Moving forward to 2009, my new family and I made a trek across country. My husband, my son, our dog Max, We moved from Massachusetts to Texas. Near the end of 2010, we were having marital issues and I knew in my gut it wouldn’t last. I started making small changes going back into survival mode preparing my uncertain future little by little. I fought HARD for my husband. I loved him deeply. You can read more of that story in my blog. I would say the biggest change I made was renewing my faith in God. I needed Him. I needed someone. I had no family in the great big state of Texas and I felt like a puny ant. I was miserable, invisible, lifeless, unhappy, basically a petite 5 ft. live version of a zombie. At church, I was someone. I volunteered every change I got, got my then almost 7 year old involved and we simply kept busy. Forward to December 2012, my husband decided to leave us. I have never been so devastated in all my life over a human being. I felt abandoned, tossed aside, and thrown away like trash. I threw myself into work getting as many hours as I could to prevent myself from breaking. I had a son to worry about and I had to be strong for him and his wellbeing. By devoting my time, my spirit, and my son to God, I made the decision to baptize my son and myself during Easter 2013. We were starting over.

Since that blessed day, I am renewed. My soul refreshed, my heart is cleansed, and my mind clear!
Now in 2015, God gave me my second husband. A lot of things happening and it feels like life is on warp speed. We had a beautiful Great Gatsby Roaring Twenties wedding in early October, we have found a beautiful home, and are trying to conceive a child together. I lived most of my adult life struggling trying to make ends meet with a husband who gave nothing to our family except ridicule and his paycheck. From 2012-2014, as a single mother once again, I lived so frugally that I refused to turn on the air conditioning in the Texas heat until my son absolutely couldn’t stand it which was around July. I lived like I was poor yet lived like I was married. Always home, always in a routine, and always catering to my family who now only consisted of two people. Everyone has a different story. There are no two situations that are exactly alike. I shared my personal story with you to show you that I have a story. As you have a story. There is a valid reason why I am frugal. Frugality isn’t something you just come up with one day. It is a lifestyle. You are often forced to become frugal or in a situation where being frugal could make the situation better. The outcome of each story is specific to the frugality of a person. If you fell flat on your face, lived in temporary housing, and often went without food then your ways of pinching pennies would greatly differ from that of let’s say myself. Each and every one of you holds different keys to frugality. What’s your story? Look back and really think about that for a moment. What was your biggest hurdle? Was it food? Was it your utilities kept getting shut off? Was it you couldn’t afford housing? Just like we all learned in good ole science class, every action has a direct effect on its reaction. How are you reacting to your circumstances? Toss your oh woe is me attitude out the damn window, put your big girl panties on and get creative. No one owes you a damn thing. Not your ex-boyfriend, ex-husband, current spouse, your parents, your kids, no one. Repeat that. No one owes you anything…but you.

This e-book is based upon my own circumstances, life experiences, pitfalls, stumbles, and pitfalls. The contents of these pages contain my own personal views and blunt opinions. I’m not at all a professional. I sugar coat nothing and I will tell you like it is. Feel free to take bits and pieces of my own testimony and revamp it to fit your own unique situation! You got this!

**HERE WE GO!**
Penny Pinching in an Apartment

I lived in an apartment all of my adult life, since I was 19. Looking back, I’ve moved 6 times between two states and each and every time I minimalized and saved where I could. Since coming to Texas, my penny pinching has grown by leaps and bounds. What started off by simply buying whatever is the cheapest has grown to incorporating frugality into my family’s lifestyle on a daily basis. It is now second nature and yet I learn something new each and every day. Being frugal or living on a budget comes with trial and error. Something may work this year that won’t work the next or something will work in this home but not in the next. While you can’t necessarily negotiate your rent especially in a complex, you can make it a hell of a lot easier on your wallet.

• Choose Wisely
  o **Type:**
    ▪ If you are like I was, single with a child then try opting for a 1 bedroom with a den over a two bedroom apartment. Why? Your young child won’t care in the least that he/she doesn’t have a closet. That is the only difference. Are you willing to pay a few hundred dollars more for a closet? In my complex at the time my 1 bedroom with a den ran me $1100/month versus a two bedroom starting at $1495/month. By law, all a child needs is a room of their own.
  o **Floor Level:**
    ▪ If you are living in a two story apartment, get the first floor! It will cut your air conditioning costs down, but it is offset by the heating bill depending on your geographic location. In Massachusetts, I would get the second floor because our winters are harsh. Knowing that heat rises, this will give me some of the first floors heat which in turn lowers my bill. In New England, people often leave doors and windows open so air
conditioning isn’t an issue. However, in Texas and southern states air conditioning is the bulk of your annual electricity bill. Getting a first floor apartment which is cooler and often with a concrete floor under the carpet is a God send! Also, you won’t have to deal with the heat rising issue in the winter.

- **Always Ask Questions**
  - Every year upon lease renewal, most complexes give you ample notice to renew. During this time it is your opportunity to ask questions.
    - *Do they need help?* Would they consider creating a welcoming committee for new residents? You can develop a committee to hold events for the tenants in the clubhouse or by the pool for a small fee off your rent. We had one at our apartment that welcomed new tenants upon move in with coupons they’ve gathered from neighboring businesses, information about the community, and offered a small candle as a welcome gift. It was quite a shock and yet made me smile when they welcomed me at my door.
    - *Ask about perks.* My complex gave one free rug shampoo each year upon renewal. This serves a dual purpose. They protect their investment and you get a fresh shampooed rug!

- **Turn down your water heater thermostat** (see more on this in the utilities section)

- **Conserve water by using water displacement** (see more on this in the utilities section)

- **Use community resources**
  - *Laundry Room:*
    - If your apartment has a laundry room or area, think about your situation before making a decision. If you are like me and do multiple loads a few days a week and have more than two people then having your own washer and dryer is beneficial. I had the luxury of having hookups in my apartment. You can also utilize this space for added storage if your family is smaller and you don’t wash clothes that often. If this is the case then I would use the laundry room. Spending a few dollars a month on laundry does more good to your bottom line than paying a higher water and electric bill. You have to do math to justify bills and savings.
**DO NOT RENT!** Use the available resources around you and look for a used washer/dryer. You can get some really good deals off Craigslist, second hand appliance stores, or in outlet stores like Sears Outlet. Renting these units will cost you on average $50/month when a *brand new* set on the low-end side will cost you $500 total. This doesn’t include delivery fees; install fees, late fees, or any other fees they dish out. This is bare minimum. Let’s do the math shall we?

12 month lease x $50/per month rental = $600

- **Utilize the pool!**
  - Instead of cranking up your thermostat, cool off in the pool. I know many friends who simply took repetitive cold showers. Oh hell no! Go jump in the FREE pool with FREE water!

- **Get involved**
  - Community events are a great way to engage in your local community and meet new people around you. Befriending your neighbors has its drawbacks but more often perks. At these events there is food or drink. I had an apartment that had social cocktail hour and offered free wine, another who held simple dinners in the clubhouse like tacos or breakfast socials. Free food for the family will drop your food budget even if by a few dollars. Use this on other things saving you money, time, and let’s face it....energy.

- **Close unused rooms**
  - By closing I mean prepare them to be uninhabited. I had two bathrooms in my apartments. I had no choice, but I made the best of it by making it work FOR me. I used the second bathroom as storage! I closed the vents in the ceiling so the air would redistribute to other areas and we didn’t use double the water and double the electricity. It also saved me time and effort because I didn’t have to clean it and that made mommie very happy 😊. You can use this concept with spare bedrooms. Close the air vents so you’re not heating and cooling an empty room. Also, shut all doors and roll up towels to sit on the window sills to block drafts.
Penny Pinching in a Home

I am no expert by any means. This is my first house! But I’ve incorporated the same principles and concepts that I used in an apartment setting with a few tweaks and minor adjustments. I went from 890 sq ft. to 2500 sq ft. and it was an eye opener let me tell ya girl! We’ve reacted well to the first month’s bills as higher bills were anticipated, but after that first month I got a grip on our usage, made changes and alterations, and reduced our bottom line. Our total utility bill which includes gas, water, sewer, and electricity is less than $200 and has been pretty consistently. Here is how I do it.

• **Turn down your water heater thermostat** (see more on this in the utilities section)

• **Conserve water by using water displacement** (see more on this in the utilities section)

• **Let the sun shine!!**
  
  o We do have blinds on every single window which happen to be white thank goodness! In each window I’ve chosen to reuse the curtains from my apartment and in some cases simply use them a different way. For example:
    - All of my curtains with the exception to the master bedroom are sheer or see through. This gives enough privacy while still allowing the natural light to shine through. This prevents you from turning up the heat in the winter or turning on a light in the summer. The down side to this, it heats up the house during the summer months. Be sure to close the blinds in this case to block the light.
    - I swagged my living room curtains on the rod to bring even more natural light in the main living area. Because my kitchen, living room, dining room and entry way are all like one big open concept, this enhances the brightness in the large space. No need for lights until its pitch black outside!

• **Use what you have**
  
  o It may be old, worn, and used, but get creative and use things in a different way.
    - I had an old small standalone book shelf my son used in his room which mostly collected crap. I repainted it using $3 spray paint and used it as a decorative end table, catch-all, plant holder thingie in my outdoor patio
I revamped my washer and dryer area because now it’s off the kitchen and can be seen by anyone who walks in. I chose not to keep this door closed as it’s a constant reminder for me to stay on top of the laundry because if the door is open then people can see it. No Bueno! I bleached the outside of each machine and I put colorful baskets from the Dollar Tree on top of the dryer to hold my dryer sheet boxes and detergent. I put the baskets on top of a long piece of drawer liner so they didn’t slide or shift when the dryer was running. I then added a cheap $4 lamp from Ikea and VOILA! A cute, functional, clean laundry room rather than buying a new washer dryer combo simply for esthetics just because we now had a house. It DOES happen more than you think.

Put things in a different setting. In most of my apartments I had a ficus tree in my living room. Now it is in my dining room. I always had one piece of art work in my dining room and now it’s in my bedroom. Shift things around and use them differently, creating a unique aura for that item making it feel new when it isn’t.

• Anchor your large oversized spaces
  o My kitchen is HUGE! About the same size if not a little bigger than my living room. To anchor this huge empty space we got a large rug that was a dark chocolate brown so it brought the space down instead of your eyes going up everywhere thinking “this is way too big”. Most would add shelving, an expensive island, or spend more money filling the space than choosing a simple cheap option. By keeping the window treatment simple, using large objects like a rug, and incorporating live plants on the bar counter to separate the rooms; I’ve created two spaces instead of one giant massive room of nothingness. GO ME!

• Less is more
  o Minimalize to its fullest extent! Get rid of your stuff. It is the most freeing feeling you will ever experience. Most often, people are burdened by the stuff they keep. It causes clutter, chaos, arguments; it drains you of energy, and closes in your space. When you only keep what you truly need, it eliminates what you DON’T need. This allows you room for growth, making room for change, and making room for you to breathe. Once you get rid of your stuff, I guarantee the feeling will be so strong that you will think twice next time you want to fill it back up again. It will cause you to focus on what you have and
think twice about things you think you want, but don’t need. Your $1 will become more valuable.

- **Keep it clean**
  - When you take pride in your home, you spend less to maintain it. Clean spaces are life changing. Once you rid yourself of an accumulation of crap you start to breathe better. There is less weight on your shoulders. You stand up straighter; your eyes start to love what they see. You start to clean and clean a little more. After a while your home becomes your sanctuary. It’s a refuge at the end of your day. Your happy place and happy space. By keeping a clean home, you will be less apt to spend. It will give you such a sense of contentment that shopping or spending more than you have too becomes a no no. You worked damn hard for that sanctuary chica! Don’t let money hungry commercial industries take your hard earned, well deserved cash. Control it!

**Control Your Utilities**

The utility companies make a killing off those who are ignorant. What do I mean by ignorant? They charge you for your electricity usage at a set rate most of the time, but some companies have fluctuating rates depending on season, time of day, or day of the week. You use it, you demand it, they provide it, they charge you, and you pay for it. It is a vicious cycle that never ends. Meanwhile, you struggle to pay it. NOT IN MY HOUSE!

- **Gas**
  - Gas is used by some water heaters depending on the type you have as well as gas stoves and some fireplaces. In my case, we have just a water heater and stove. I cook on my stove strategically. I do not turn it on until I’m absolutely ready to put oil in the pan and put ingredients in it. I don’t “pre-heat” the pan and walk away. We are mom’s we get sidetracked! Every second that burner is lit, you are burning money.
• **Water Heater**
  
  - Our water heater is run by electricity and gas. I turned down the water heater to 125 degrees. Most often, especially in apartments, the maintenance crew sets them at the industry standard between 150-160 degrees. This is scorching HOT. It will severely burn any child if turned up without you realizing it. It also allows for longer showers because the water stays hotter longer. All that money is being literally washed down the drain. Mine is always between 115-125 degrees even in an apartment. This makes the water hot still, but the hotness will only last about 20 minutes and it’s definitely not hot enough to truly burn someone. By doing this, it uses less electricity to heat the water which in turn forces you to use less water.

    - *DIY Way:* To turn down your water heater read your owner’s manual. If no manual is available you can google one online by entering the make and model. If all else fails, **now I’m using my experience with my water heater as a reference only as I am not at all knowledgeable here**, take off the front panel that looks like a 5x7 square of some sort. Once the cover is off you will see a dial. Clockwise is turning the temperature up and counterclockwise is turning it down. Use a screwdriver to turn the dial.

    - **Call Maintenance:** Maintenance would be more than happy to assist you as they’d rather help then chance you messing something up.

  - **Turn Your Heater Off:** If you are going away for more than a day, turn the water heater OFF. That’s right OFF. By turning it off, you are not constantly heating the reserves of water inside your tank. How do you think your water comes out hot so quick? There are reserves my friend and those reserves you pay for. It does take a teensie bit of time to heat back up again once you return, but you’re not paying to keep it heated when you aren’t home to use it.

• **Electricity**
  
  - Regulate and take control of your thermostat! If you don’t, it will cost you hundreds each month and put stress on your budget.

    - I maintain a range of 76-78 degrees in our home in summer months and around 65-68 in the winter months. By doing this, I am controlling the temperature and keeping it steady so the air conditioner or heater doesn’t have to struggle and work so hard to accommodate the drastic raise in temperature. In Texas, our outside temps are often 100 degrees or higher in the summer. 78 degrees inside your home is going to feel mighty good! While it’s not the kind of temperature that you could be fully dressed in your work clothes and be a little chilly as you would in publicly air conditioned areas, it is rather comfortable. The temperature
is set to 78 when we sleep and when we are not home and set to 76 when we get home until we go to bed. A 2 degree difference really does make a difference. We have a ceiling fan in every room so with the fans on low constantly circulating the air; it creates a tiny breeze making the air much cooler. When you jack up the temp to say 70 and leave it there even if you are working, you are constantly paying for “unused” air conditioning. WHY! You are throwing money away. What I’ve also seen is people setting their thermostat to say 78 when they are not home and jacking it up to 68-70 when they get home. This forces the air conditioner to work extremely hard to decrease the temperature when the outside is blazing hot. This “work” means $ signs. MAINTENANCE is the way to save!

- No More Heated Dry: Dishwashers are amazing!! I cannot live without one. But there are functions that are simply not necessary. Instead of paying to heat dry my dishes I opt for the free version. I start my dishwasher after dinner and before I go to bed I open it up and pull out each rack staggering them. They will dry for free overnight and save me money. Who needs a blow dryer for your dishes?
- Moisture Control: Dryers have a magnitude of functions to choose from. One in particular is moisture control. This function allows me to dry clothes until all the moisture is eliminated. You save money this way because it shuts off after the moisture is not detected rather than drying on a normal timed cycle and continuously drying when they are already dry. This ages your clothes and can potentially damage the fibers.

- **Water**
  - Water is soooo easy to rack up. The city runs your water and handles all of the bills to each resident. How much do you think the “city” is going to work with you on your bill? NONE! So it is up to the consumer to have control of that bill.
    - *Water Displacement:* is so easy and effective. Simple get one clean brick for each bathroom. Open the top of the toilet tank and flush the toilet. When the water level in the tank drops, place the brick inside. As it fills up, the brick takes up space allowing the amount of water to be forced in to the tank to be less. Now, every time you flush you will use less water saving you on your water bill.
    - *Low Flow Shower Heads:* These offer the same shower experience except they use a ton less water. I’m talking the difference is 7 gallons wasted with an old head versus 2-3 gallons with a low flow head. They are
expensive for more decorative models, but the basic simple ones are pretty reasonable.

- **Control Sprinklers:** Outdoor sprinkler systems are often set for longer times than are truly needed. Mine when I moved in was set for each quadrant of the lot for 30 minute durations. Helllllo!!! That is 120 minutes of COSTLY watering. I don’t need my yard to be a giant puddle to effectively water my lawn. I have it on 5 minutes each quadrant only. The flower beds and garden I water by hand.

- **Turn Water Off:** the old saying “turn the faucet off when you are not using it”

- **Turn Off Rinse Cycle:** The rinse cycle on most washing machines is set to rinse twice. Why? If I know that I adequately filled the washer correctly and added the right amount of good soap, then why do I have to rinse twice? Ladies, if you load your washer leaving ample room and are not stuffing it full then you don’t need the extra rinse. Now if you put two loads into one then maybe I would agree but this does nothing for getting your clothes clean. So if you like half cleaned clothes then continue using the extra rinse cycle! If you are like me and load properly, it really isn’t needed and its water you pay for.

- **Jiggle the Handle:** Often when you flush the water seems to make noises forever! Those noises are affecting your wallet. It’s constantly pumping water in/out of your toilet and racking up your bill. Make sure you push the handle upwards to stop the flow of water.

- **Internet**
  - Internet nowadays is a necessity and often affects other bills. What do I mean by this?
    - **Cell Phones:** The new Apple phones charge an arm and two legs for data plans. By simply utilizing your home WiFi you are using fixed rate data rather than creating a soaring cell phone bill for going over what your plan allows.
    - **Gaming:** Systems now use WiFi to play certain games and interact while playing.
    - **Online TV:** Netflix and Hulu are just two of the many available options out there to replace cable. This is what my own family uses and I haven’t had cable in over three years.
    - **Research Prices**
      - Research multiple companies to get the best bang for your buck.
• Always shop around. I shop each quarter by comparing my current provider to others. I then go back to my provider and ask if there is any way to lower my bill, packages I may qualify for, and if they will match a competitor versus potentially losing me as a customer. This has worked on numerous occasions. If they offer you free options for a limited time, there is a catch! Watch for it. By opting in for these freebies you run the risk and assume all liabilities for any charges later. If they give you free high speed let’s say for 3 months, after that 3 months unless you cancel the increase in speed, guess what!!! You will be charged.

Mobile Phones

They are in my honest opinion, the devil. Remember when we could go all day with no mobile phone, stay up late on the kitchen floor with our feet on the wall talking to girlfriends, or when you had to “stop by” to see what others were up too? Yeah, ancient history and frankly I hate it. I give in to temptation as much as the next person. So much at your finger tips, so much gossip, so much drama, and you don’t have to pick up a phone, visit someone, or even make effort to hold a conversation to find out what people are up to. It is truly sad. But if you must have a mobile phone like my family, be smart.

• Shop, Shop, Shop
  o Always do your research. I will tell you another story. We had AT&T which I think are absolutely terrible, but I will not gripe about providers. AT&T held a family plan for our three phones. My son had a MetroPCS phone because he can’t remember things and often loses them. Aside from this, we had three phones and all together each month we paid at least $240 or more.

Because I was added to his current existing plan when we met, I didn’t shop so much. I went from a MetroPCS phone to his plan. But after a while, the price didn’t sit well with me and we were finding ourselves at times not being able to pay the bill.
• **Take Advantage of Savings**
  o Do the math and do the research. We are now with T-Mobile. They offered to buy back our phones, give us a credit towards a new phone, pay off the early termination fees with AT&T, and offer a lower all-inclusive plan with no data limit. It fit our budget and got us out of our contract with AT&T because they paid for it.

• **Dig for Answers**
  o Don’t just take what people say, dig. What do I mean? Let me explain. When we signed up for T-Mobile we were elated. Once my husband left for work and went out to the oil wells, his service stayed in Dallas. He had no service and if he did it was patchy. We had to call each other back what seemed like every 5 minutes making for a stressful phone call. I contacted T-Mobile within the first month we had them and asked why he wasn’t getting service when we checked and verified with the reps at the retail store. Do you want to know what their answer was?

  Are you sure?

  “We have the lowest plans out of anyone. So if he gets a pre-paid phone at some place like Walmart he will have a phone with service and all together we are still cheaper than any other plan”

  SERIOUSLY!!!! I do not pay you almost $200 a month to be forced to get a third phone because your signals are inadequate!! Be sure if you have a special circumstance such as us with needing phone signals outside of a major city that you ask VERY specific questions. I stated we needed signals near Odessa/Midland area of Texas. Wrong answer. Odessa is a major city and all the wells my husband was working is outside city limits. They checked Odessa, but not the zip codes of neighboring cities. Needless to say, I was not impressed and even more irate that I am just one of many and they could care less if I’m a customer or not. SO knowing how loyal they are to their customers, we are shopping around for more affordable pre-paid plans that will work where I am and where my husbands works.

• **Try Pre-paid**
  o Pre-paid in my honest opinion is the way to go!!! I have had pre-paid phones forever and I’m kicking myself that I didn’t talk my husband into it. It wasn’t so much that he had to be talked into, but due to the locations of the job sites, he couldn’t go to a rinky dink service provider. He needed a provider with more
national stance. Which I understood. Pre-paid plans in my eyes are great because of a few things.

- They need you. Unlike a large provider like AT&T or Verizon, pre-paid providers have 30 days each month to earn your business and earn your trust. Larger providers hold you hostage in a contract keeping you against your will or they will kill you financially with fees and early termination charges. They don’t care if you don’t use their service because ultimately someone else will. Pre-paid providers also ala carte services such as mobile hotspot, extra storage, GPS, etc. So rather than larger providers making features included with my plan/phone which increases the price of the plan/phone, you are able to add features to a pre-paid plan as needed for only what you need. If you don’t need it, don’t add it, and don’t pay for it. It’s that simple.

- The monthly prices are really, really affordable. MetroPCS for example is $30/$40/$50/$60 per month depending on the speed you need. The $30 plan comes and goes but they mostly keep the plans $40-$60. This is inclusive of all taxes.

- **Watch your Bill**
  - Pay close attention to your bill each month. I have a number from one part of North Texas while I live in another. On my bill after I moved, I noticed that there were two sets of taxes. One for the city my number is from and the other for the city I lived in. I know it’s a hassle to change your number. However, they will charge you taxes for using the towers where your number originates from and also for the towers closest to your home. It’s a small amount around $2-$4 but add this twice and its adding almost on average $4-$8 onto each bill.