

Senior Lifestyles

Penn State expert says grandparents can help ease economic turmoil

UNIVERSITY PARK — With thousands of job layoffs and recession news dominating daily headlines, many young people understandably are fearful about their future. But an intergenerational specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences says grandparents can offer unique support for youth entering college or the job market.

"We are going through economic circumstances that younger generations have never experienced before," notes Matthew Kaplan, associate professor of agricultural and extension education and extension specialist for intergenerational programs and aging. "These are trying times for young people trying to figure out their careers or get started on their own. Grandparents and great grandparents can offer experience and wisdom that parents can't.

"Many older family members have lived through economic hardship and dealt with a lot of

uncertainty, so they know how to survive. They have figured out how to be frugal when it is necessary and how to finance a lifestyle."

For example, Kaplan says, those who lived through World War II likely will remember how war ration books and tokens were issued to each American family, dictating how much gasoline, tires, sugar, meat, silk, shoes, nylon and other items any one person could buy.

"People were proactive and creative in finding ways to survive and thrive," he explains. "Folks grew 'Victory Gardens' to help feed their own families and take pressure off of public food supply. The same idea can help resource-strapped families to produce their own food today. The historic experience of living through financial hardship has relevance to surviving today.

"There is value to having a strong sense of thrift — for example, re-using things, stretching

resources and not living beyond one's means. There is also value to being self-reliant, such as in growing one's own food."

Young people can gain an intellectual understanding of what happens during economically tough times from history classes in school, Kaplan notes. However, this does not necessarily prepare them for the emotional side of dealing with the loss and uncertainty that comes with personal financial hardship.

"To help fortify a young person's emotional bearings for encountering economically tough times, it is useful for them to hear real stories about how their elderly relatives not only survived, but thrived in ways that kept their families together and value systems intact," Kaplan explains. "Older adults' lives provide instructive examples on everything from food to finance. Lifelong practices that have had positive or nega-

tive consequences can help to guide younger generations in the right direction."

On the other hand, many older adults are struggling themselves and may need support from younger family members, Kaplan states.

"Nobody is immune to being negatively affected by the deteriorating economic environment that we now find ourselves in," he says. "Many older adults who have retired or are near retirement are losing significant portions of their retirement savings, and many older adults are falling victim to scams.

"Perhaps the only way we can survive this current economic downturn is to come together in ways that utilize each generation's knowledge, fortitude and compassion for helping others. However, it's clear that older adults have much to teach and contribute to younger generations, especially during trying times such as these," Kaplan said.