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Dear Client and Friend,

If you prefer, you may view this newsletter in PDF format on my website. The address is being provided below. Simply go to the newsletter heading on the website for the link. I trust you will find the information helpful.

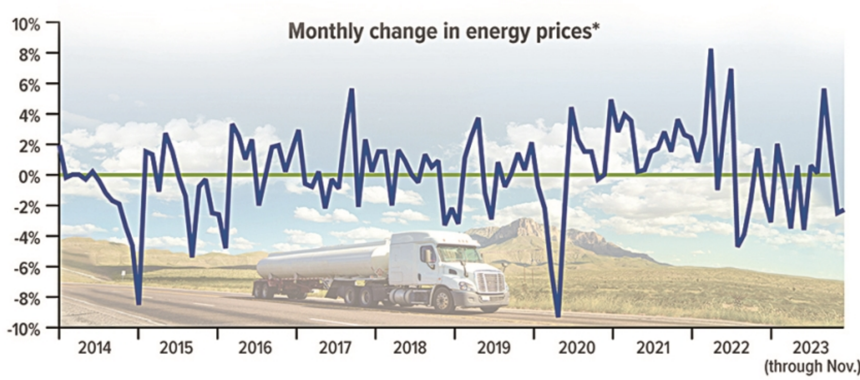
Sincerely,

Keith Swift

Two Ways That Volatile Energy Costs Fuel Inflation

Energy prices can fluctuate dramatically based on changes in supply or demand. According to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), energy prices across the economy fell 2.5% in October and 2.3% in November, following a surge of 7.2% over the previous two months. Gasoline prices fell 5.0% in October and 6.0% in November, providing relief after a painful summer spike of 14.3%. In fact, rapid swings in gasoline prices were often a key contributor to the monthly changes in CPI in 2023.

When energy costs are high, it can also impact inflation indirectly, as many businesses that rely on energy to produce and transport goods, or to provide services, may have to raise the prices they charge consumers.



***The CPI-U energy index tracks prices for motor fuels such as gasoline and diesel; fuel oil and propane (used for residential heating); and utilities, including natural gas and electricity.**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023

Key Retirement and Tax Numbers for 2024

Every year, the Internal Revenue Service announces cost-of-living adjustments that affect contribution limits for retirement plans and various tax deduction, exclusion, exemption, and threshold amounts. Here are a few of the key adjustments for 2024.

Estate, gift, and generation-skipping transfer tax

- The annual gift tax exclusion (and annual generation-skipping transfer tax exclusion) for 2024 is $18,000, up from $17,000 in 2023.
- The gift and estate tax basic exclusion amount (and generation-skipping transfer tax exemption) for 2024 is $13,610,000, up from $12,920,000 in 2023.

Standard deduction

A taxpayer can generally choose to itemize certain deductions or claim a standard deduction on the federal income tax return. In 2024, the standard deduction is:

- $14,600 (up from $13,850 in 2023) for single filers or married individuals filing separate returns
- $29,200 (up from $27,700 in 2023) for married joint filers
- $21,900 (up from $20,800 in 2023) for heads of households

The additional standard deduction amount for the blind and those age 65 or older in 2024 is:

- $1,950 (up from $1,850 in 2023) for single filers and heads of households
- $1,550 (up from $1,500 in 2023) for all other filing statuses

Special rules apply for an individual who can be claimed as a dependent by another taxpayer.

IRAs

The combined annual limit on contributions to traditional and Roth IRAs is $7,000 in 2024 (up from $6,500 in 2023), with individuals age 50 or older able to contribute an additional $1,000. The limit on contributions to a Roth IRA phases out for certain modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) ranges *(see table).* For individuals who are active participants in an employer-sponsored retirement plan, the deduction for contributions to a traditional IRA also phases out for certain MAGI ranges *(see table).* The limit on nondeductible contributions to a traditional IRA is not subject to phaseout based on MAGI.

MAGI Ranges: Contributions to a Roth IRA

	2023	2024
Single/Head of household	$138,000–$153,000	$146,000–$161,000
Married filing jointly	$218,000–$228,000	$230,000–$240,000
Married filing separately	$0–$10,000	$0–$10,000

MAGI Ranges: Deductible Contributions to a Traditional IRA

	2023	2024
Single/Head of household	$73,000–$83,000	$77,000–$87,000
Married filing jointly	$116,000–$136,000	$123,000–$143,000

Note: The 2024 phaseout range is $230,000–$240,000 (up from $218,000–$228,000 in 2023) when the individual making the IRA contribution is not covered by a workplace retirement plan but is filing jointly with a spouse who is covered. The phaseout range is $0–$10,000 when the individual is married filing separately and either spouse is covered by a workplace plan.

Employer-sponsored retirement plans

- Employees who participate in 401(k), 403(b), and most 457 plans can defer up to $23,000 in compensation in 2024 (up from $22,500 in 2023); employees age 50 or older can defer up to an additional $7,500 in 2024 (the same as in 2023).
- Employees participating in a SIMPLE retirement plan can defer up to $16,000 in 2024 (up from $15,500 in 2023), and employees age 50 or older can defer up to an additional $3,500 in 2024 (the same as in 2023).

Kiddie tax: child's unearned income

Under the kiddie tax, a child's unearned income above $2,600 in 2024 (up from $2,500 in 2023) is taxed using the parents' tax rates.

How Savers and Spenders Can Meet in the Middle

Couples who have opposite philosophies regarding saving and spending often have trouble finding common ground, and money arguments frequently erupt. But you can learn to work with — and even appreciate — your financial differences.

Money habits run deep

If you're a saver, you prioritize having money in the bank and investing in your future. You probably hate credit card debt and spend money cautiously. Your spender spouse may seem impulsive, prompting you to think, "Don't you care about our future?" But you may come across as controlling or miserly to your spouse who thinks, "Just for once, can't you loosen up? We need some things!"

Such different outlooks can lead to mistrust and resentment. But are your characterizations fair? Money habits run deep, and have a lot to do with how you were raised and your personal experience. Instead of assigning blame, focus on finding out how each partner's financial outlook evolved.

Saving and spending actually go hand in hand. Whether you're saving for a vacation, a car, college, or retirement, your money will eventually be spent on something. You just need to decide together how and when to spend it.

Talk through your differences

Sometimes couples avoid talking about money because they are afraid to argue. But scheduling regular money meetings could give you more insight into your finances and provide a forum for handling disagreements, helping you avoid future conflicts.

You might not have an equal understanding of your finances, so start with the basics. How much money is coming in and how much is going out? Next, work on discovering what's important to each of you.

To help ensure a productive discussion, establish some ground rules. For example, you might set a time limit, insist that both of you come prepared, and take a break if the discussion becomes too heated. Communication and compromise are key. Don't just assume you know what your spouse is thinking — ask, and keep an open mind.

Here are some questions to get started.

- What does money represent to you? Security? Freedom? The opportunity to help others?
- What are your short-term and long-term savings goals? Why are these important to you?
- How comfortable are you with debt? This could include mortgage debt, credit card debt, and loans.
- Who should you spend money on? Do you agree on how much to give to your children or spend on gifts to family members, friends, or charities?
- What rules would you like to apply to purchases? For example, you might set a limit on how much one spouse can spend without consulting the other.
- Would you like to set aside some discretionary money for each of you? That could help you feel more free to save or spend those dollars without having to justify your decision.

What's Your Money Style?

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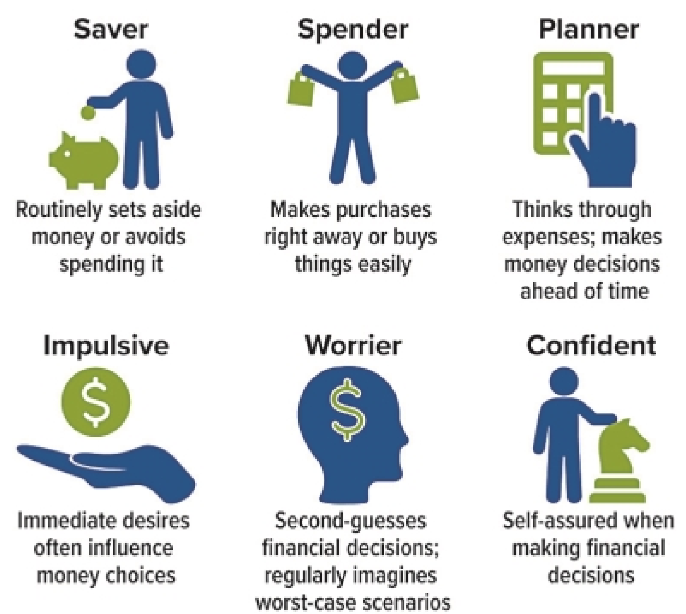

Source: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

Agree on a plan

Once you've explored what's important to you, create a concrete budget or spending plan that will help keep you on the same page. For example, to account for both perspectives, you could make savings an "expense" and also include a "just for fun" category. If a formal budget doesn't work for you, find other ways to blend your styles, such as automating your savings or bill paying, prioritizing an emergency account, or agreeing to put specific percentages of your income toward wants, needs, and savings.

And track your progress. Scheduling money dates to go over your finances will give you a chance to celebrate your successes or identify what needs to improve. Be willing to make adjustments if necessary. It's hard to break out of patterns, but with consistent effort and good communication, you'll have a strong chance of finding the middle ground.

SoSEPPs Allow Penalty-Free Access to Retirement Savings at Any Age

You're probably aware that a 10% penalty tax generally applies to distributions from qualified retirement plan accounts prior to age 59½, unless an exception applies; however, you may not be aware of the exception that allows retirement account holders to access their savings at any age, penalty-free.[1] Specifically, this exception allows distributions through a series of substantially equal periodic payments (SoSEPPs). Also known as the 72(t) strategy, SoSEPPs are subject to strict and complicated rules, so it may be best to proceed with caution.

SoSEPPs explained

Under the SoSEPP rule, you can take distributions from IRAs and most work-based plan accounts in a series of regular payments calculated using a specific method over a certain period of time. The payments must be taken at least annually and continue for a minimum of five years or until you reach age 59½, whichever is later. You may also be allowed to establish an installment arrangement — quarterly or monthly, for example — that totals the required payment each year. With respect to work-based plans, SoSEPPs can be used only after you separate from service from the employer maintaining the plan.

You may use one of three methods for calculating the payment — the required minimum distribution (RMD) method, the fixed amortization method, or the fixed annuitization method. Distribution amounts are based on your life expectancy or that of you and your beneficiary. To calculate the correct amount, you'll need to determine which method to use and then choose a life expectancy table (found in IRS Publication 590-B), interest rate (for the amortization or annuitization methods only), and account valuation date.

The IRS permits a one-time change from either the amortization or annuitization method to the RMD method. Otherwise, if you change from one distribution method to another or fail to take the required amount in any given year, the 10% penalty (plus interest) will generally apply to not only the current year's distribution(s) but to all prior SoSEPP distributions.[2]

Note that you cannot make additional contributions to the account nor take payments other than the SoSEPPs during the required period. Additionally, if the account balance reaches zero before the required time period is up, no penalty will apply.

Although it may be comforting to know you can access your retirement account penalty-free at any age, calculating and managing SoSEPPs is a complex process. Mistakes can be costly. For these reasons, you may want to seek the guidance of a qualified tax professional before making any decisions.

1) There is a 25% penalty for distributions from SIMPLE IRAs taken within the first two years of participation.

2) The 10% penalty, plus interest, does not apply if the change was due to death, disability, or another IRS-approved reason.