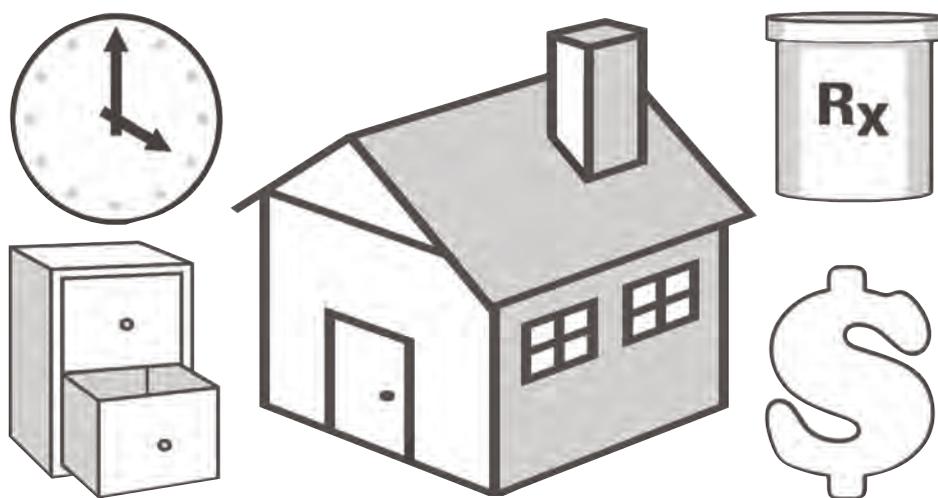


# 73 ADHD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life Now



From the ***ADDitude*** Experts

**ADDITUDE**

LIVING WELL WITH **ATTENTION DEFICIT**

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# ADDITUDE

LIVING WELL WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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# Order in the House

40 neat tricks for staying on task  
and on time.

**M**ICHAEL LASKOFF IS A TYPICAL ADDER. “I’ve always struggled with organization,” he says. “Back in my student days, school provided me with structure and clear deadlines to keep me on the straight and narrow. When I started working at a job, however, many of those signposts disappeared. I had to develop my own system for getting things done.”

ADHD experts, like Laskoff—CEO of Abilto ([abilto.com](http://abilto.com)), which offers online coaching and therapy for those with the disability—struggle with the same symptoms that challenge us all. They lose stuff, they miss appointments, and they live with clutter. What makes them experts is that they figure out tricks to help them overcome the problems.

“I have books written by expert organizers that I never got around to reading,” says Laskoff, who, before starting Abilto, founded The Branded Asset Management Group and worked in senior marketing roles at McKinsey, Bertelsmann, and CompUSA. “I purchased organizational systems, many of which I lost, and I installed get-organized software programs—all of which I studiously ignored.”

What works for Laskoff? The KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) approach. For him, less is more, and basic is best. *ADDitude* asked Laskoff and seven other ADHD experts for their simplest, most effective organizational tips.

→ **On the Web** Get hundreds of additional organization ideas to simplify your life on [ADDitudeMag.com](http://ADDitudeMag.com).

## Michael Laskoff

CEO of [abilto.com](http://abilto.com) and author of *Landing on the Right Side of Your Ass*

**1. Buy bright and shiny objects.** When it comes to personal effects—keys, wallet, pens, notebooks, umbrella—I avoid black. Black objects are easy to overlook and lose. I own a red wallet and orange notebooks; my phone is encased in a green color that does not exist in nature.

**2. Know what you will forget.** I forget the names of business acquaintances or a meeting time almost as soon as someone tells me. Knowing that, I make an appointment only when I can write it down on my calendar. I also record vital information on a person's business card on the day it's given to me. If possible, I attach a picture of the person next to the entry. Most important, I synch and back up everything.

**3. Dress the night before.** I'm not a morning person, so I make the first decisions of the day on the previous evening. I lay out my clothes and the critical items that I'll need for the next day. As a result, I'm more

likely to be out of the house and where I need to be on time.

tiple “alarms”—setting a clock, programming a cell phone, asking people to call me—to remind me of things. In theory, any one of these should suffice. In reality, I ignore single reminders, but almost always pay attention to several of them.

## Sandy Maynard

ADHD coach

**6. Make it eye-catching.** I paste logos of companies on file folders, rather than writing names on them. The colorful logo of Citigroup or Geico is easier to find than a folder with “banking” or “insurance” written in black or red ink.

**7. Make it digital.** I use a smart phone to hold all my contact information (backed up on my computer automatically with MobileMe). And I enter new phone numbers or changes of address immediately. No scraps of paper or business cards that inevitably get stuck to other scraps of paper that eventually get thrown out.

**8. 10-9-8-7...** I create a launchpad for items that are entering or leaving the house. I put my keys, purse, and cell phone charger in a basket by the front door. Items

new piece of clothing that I purchase, I get rid of one old item. That means socks with holes in them, too...I don't save them for dusting!

## Ben Glenn

Founder of [simpleadhdexpert.com](http://simpleadhdexpert.com) and blogger on [ADDitudeMag.com](http://ADDitudeMag.com)

**11. Be a people person.** Because my ADHD brain races all the time, I find it hard to organize my priorities. I have a “sympathetic encourager”—a special person I trust, who understands the struggles of ADHD—to help me separate my wants from my needs and focus on what's important now.

**12. Track time.** Tasks that I think will take an hour often take three or four hours. The Time Timer helps me track time's passage by showing me how much of it has lapsed. Since I've used the Time Timer, my daughter hasn't spent the evening at day care because Daddy forgot to pick her up.

**13. Meeting place.** I often lose my phone, keys, and wallet, and, after hours of looking, I find them in the strangest places (the freezer). To avoid such time-consuming disasters, I created my “essentials” spot, a place that I have trained myself to put all the things I need to have in hand before I leave the house. I use the top of the fridge—hey, I'm 6'4”—when at home and the top of the TV when staying in a hotel.

**14. Go smaller.** After losing a set of rental-car keys in the depths of my backpack, I decided to downsize to a messenger bag. It has pouches and pockets like a backpack, but, at half the size, it limits what I can keep in there. Its smaller size forces me to ask, “What do I absolutely need to bring with me?”

**15. Click on organization.** The iPad has organized my life.

I no longer have to keep track of my laptop, two iPods, and a PSP. E-mail, blogs, games, movies, music, and calendar are on one device.

**16. Write it down—and forget it for now.** A small spiral notebook that fits in my jacket pocket acts as an external hard drive for my brain. I have a lot of ideas—some good, some bad, and some great—and they often pop into my head when I am in the middle of doing something else. I keep the notebook close at all times and write down my thoughts, without fear of getting off track.

## Beth Main

ADHD coach

**17. Easy access.** I keep items that are used together near each other. For example, the cutting board lives next to the knives. It minimizes running back and forth to get the things I need to do a job. Similarly, I keep stuff that I use regularly (like exercise equipment) easily accessible.

**18. Pounce on paper.** When new paperwork comes into the house (from the mailman, the school, the doctor), I immediately sort it into Action Required, Might Act On Someday, Reference/Cold Storage, or Trash. The Action Required items go into a bin, and also get entered on my to-do list.

**19. Take the pressure off.** I maintain a master to-do list, with everything I intend to do someday, in Microsoft Outlook. (The “Tasks” feature lets me categorize, assign due dates, and reorder things according to priority.) A master to-do list keeps me from forgetting important things, and frees up mental bandwidth, since I don't have to store things in my head.

**20. Buzz me.** I use Google Calendar to track appointments and time-sensitive tasks. I pro-

Focus on the time you need to leave for an appointment, not the time of the appointment itself.

**4. Downsize your desk.** Give me a flat surface, and I will pile paper on it. I can't help myself. And since I can't stop piling, I opted for a small desk. It limits my potential to create paper-based chaos.

**5. Be redundant.** I use mul-

that need to be returned to the store or taken with me are placed in plain view next to the launchpad.

**9. Nip clutter in the bud.** I collect and sort my mail daily over a recycling wastebasket, so that junk mail doesn't make it to my desk.

**10. Closet control.** For every

gram it to send a text message to my phone to remind me of an appointment. I set up different calendars for different parts of my life: coaching appointments, personal stuff, project milestones. Each is color-coded, and I can display or suppress the calendars individually, depending on what I need to know.

**21. Solving problems.** Mind maps (aka graphic organizers) create some semblance of order in my head. They help with making decisions, solving problems, ruminating, or getting started on a writing project. I draw circles and write a few words representing an idea in each one, then connect the circles that are related. I am not a linear thinker, so this technique works well for me.

## Ned Hallowell

Founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health and best-selling author

**22. Create a chore file.** I write down chores on index cards—one per card—and place them in a card file. I meet once a week with my wife to coordinate the priorities for next week, and to figure out who will be doing what. The system helps me do only those chores that my wife and I think are most important, and provides a single location to go to when trying to remember what to do next.

**23. Schedule sex.** Disorganization, distraction, and busy lives mean we aren't organized enough for one of the most important activities in our relationship. Set specific dates for sex, then put a reminder (or two!) in your phone or calendar, so you don't forget. What's less romantic: scheduling sex or never having it?!

**24. Chart tough decisions.** Feelings of overwhelm and lack of mental organization get in

the way of making important decisions, so I create a decisions chart. On a big piece of lined paper, I write the problem at the top and create three columns: Reasons to do, Reasons not to do, Creative ideas. Then, I fill in the three columns with my wife. The chart organizes our thoughts, and increases the likelihood of finding a good solution, because it forces us to work as a team.

**25. Hire an office organizer.** At least once a year, I hire a temporary secretary to do all my filing. I provide a basic overview, and I let the organizer go to it.

**26. Create “capture” areas.** I create capture spaces for “grabbing” stuff where it enters. Examples: a large mail bin near the front door, along with a key hanger; hat, mitten, and boot boxes in the mudroom; sports equipment cubbies near the back door.

## Nancy A. Ratey

Master Certified Coach and author of *The Disorganized Mind*

**27. Meal prep.** I set the table the night before for breakfast, prepare any ingredients ahead of time, and place them in plastic bags. All I have to do the next day is throw them in the pot, pan, or microwave.

**28. Key trick.** I attach my car keys to (or place them near) one of the items that I take with me when running errands—letters, to-do list, clothes for dry cleaning—so I don't forget them. Before taking a walk, I place the house keys in my shoes.

**29. Go digital.** Two words: online banking. It cuts down on paper to file, and eliminates the need to write down everything I've debited or charged to my account.

**30. Document recall.** Because I tend to forget things, no matter how important they are,

Have a “sympathetic encourager”—a person you trust—to help you figure out what's important now.

I always tell a close friend where I've hidden a spare key or put a document. I also photocopy the contents of my wallet in case I lose it—and I probably will.

**31. Don't sweat the small stuff.** I file related papers together rather than filing each one alphabetically in its own folder. The Office Equipment folder, for instance, contains the owner's manuals for my printer, computer, and fax machine, along with warranties, repair bills, notices of anti-virus upgrades, and so on.

**32. Keep it portable.** I keep only active projects on my desk, in either wire baskets or expandable file folders, so I can carry them around with me when I get bored of working at my desk.

## Terry Matlen

Author of *Survival Tips for Women with AD/HD* and director of [momswithadd.com](http://momswithadd.com)

**33. Stuff goes here.** I use one spiral notebook for brain dumps—notes, plans, phone numbers, reminders—instead of scraps of paper that I will lose. I date each page, so I can find important information quickly. Once the book is filled, I date the cover and store it for future reference.

**34. Time trick.** When heading out for appointments, I focus on the time I need to leave in order to get to my destination on time, not the time of the appointment. Example: I tell myself I have to leave at 1:45 P.M. (for

a two o'clock appointment), instead of focusing on 2 P.M.

**35. Plastic for paper.** I keep a small plastic baggy in my purse for receipts and one in my glove compartment for directions.

**36. Memory trick.** When ADHD meds are running low, I turn the bottles upside down in the cabinet as a reminder that I need to call soon for refills.

## Michele Novotni

ADHD coach and therapist

**37. So there's no mystery.** I label storage containers in the attic, basement, or garage, so I can find them later. I tape an index card, listing all the items in the box, on the side, and update it as needed. I also try to keep like items—say, kitchen stuff—together in the same area.

**38. Recipe recall.** I use MasterCook software to store and organize my recipes, so I can quickly browse them by title, category, or ingredients. Having recipes on my computer makes it easy to send them to my friends and family.

**39. Two to-do lists.** I have an Action List of up to three items to do now, and a Parking Lot of things I want to/need to do. When I finish the Action items, I pull items or parts of items off the Parking Lot list. This keeps my highest-priority items on the front burner.

**40. The college try.** I hire college kids to file papers and scan documents regularly to help keep papers organized. They love the flexible hours, and I love not having to do it. 

# Get Your Life Under Control

Thirty-three chaos-busting strategies from master organizer Judith Kolberg

**G**etting your life in order is a key step toward reaching your goals. No secret there.

So why do we put up with chronic disorder at home, at work, and in our personal lives?

Judith Kolberg suggests it's a matter of perfectionism: We're unable to do what it takes to get even a bit more organized because we worry that we won't become perfectly organized. And as Kolberg, author of *Conquering Chronic Disorganization*, points out, there is no such thing as perfect organization. Life is capricious, and get-it-done strategies that work well today may prove useless tomorrow.

The good news, says Kolberg, who's now president of FileHeads Professional Organizers ([www.fileheads.net](http://www.fileheads.net)), is that seemingly small changes can bring big improvements in your life—less clutter, fewer hassles, and greater tranquility.

## THE BIG PICTURE

**1 Set time limits for decision-making.** ADDers can spend days agonizing over decisions that others make in minutes. Speed the process by setting a time frame or a budget cap.

If you're choosing a summer camp for your child, for example, set a deadline, and make the best choice you can by that date. If you're deciding which new cell phone to buy, pick a price cap and ignore more costly phones.

Always identify the most important factor to consider in making any decision, whether it's price, convenience, aesthetics, practicality, or something else. Focus solely on that factor when considering your decision.



**2 Fight the tendency to over-commit.** For each new commitment you make, give up an old one. If you agree to join the school fund-raising committee, for instance, give up the neighborhood watch committee. ADDers tend to spread themselves too thin.

**3 Keep your to-do lists brief.** Using big, bold letters, make a list of no more than five tasks on an index card. (List any additional items on the back of the card.) Once you have done those five things, refer to the back of the card to create a new to-do list—and discard the old one. You'll accomplish more, feel less frustrated, and manage your time better. (For a high-tech approach to to-do lists, turn to page 27.)

**4 Fight hyperfocus.** Set an alarm clock, kitchen timer, or computer alert—or arrange for someone reliable to call you at a specified time or times. If you tend to lose yourself on eBay for hours at a time, you need this kind of help.

**5 Use a “body double.”** This is a friend or family member who sits with you as you tackle mundane chores, like balancing a checkbook, filling out a job application, or reviewing financial statements. Your body double will create a productive atmosphere by sitting quietly and doing an unobtrusive task, like affixing stamps to envelopes or clipping recipes from a magazine.

## PERSONAL CARE

**6 Keep extra medication on hand.** Each time you fill a prescription, write in your planner the date on which you'll need to renew it (or set your computer to issue an alert or generate an e-mail reminder on that date). Ask your pharmacist if he can call to remind you when it's time to refill. Your "renew date" should be at least one week before the date on which you'll run out of medication.

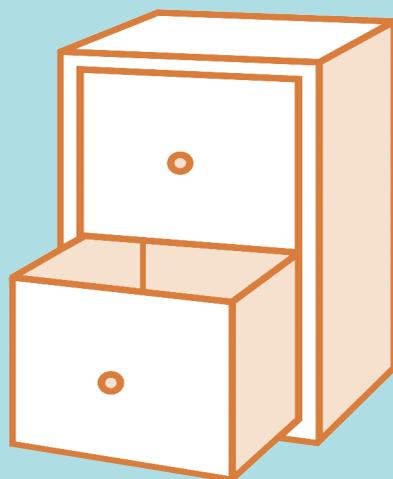
**7 Build socializing into your schedule.** That way, your desires to meet new people, have interesting conversations, and keep up with friends are taken care of automatically. Take a class, join a book club or a lecture series, or start a dinner club.

**8 Join an ADD support group.** Support groups provide more than emotional support. For example, the members can get together online when it's time to tackle boring tasks, like filling out tax returns or filing: One at a time, each person leaves the computer, dedicates 15 minutes to the task at hand, then returns to instant messaging—to joke, commiserate, and congratulate one another.

Find out more about online and in-person support groups at [www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org).

**9 Carry a colorful wallet.** It's harder to misplace a red wallet than an ordinary black or brown one. The same goes for your checkbook.

**10 Buy experiences, not objects.** There's nothing wrong with a little "retail therapy" to reward yourself for your accomplishments. But think twice before buying some new object (which may become just another bit of clutter in your home). Instead, use your money to buy a pleasant experience, such as a massage or a night out with friends.



## CLUTTER CONTROL

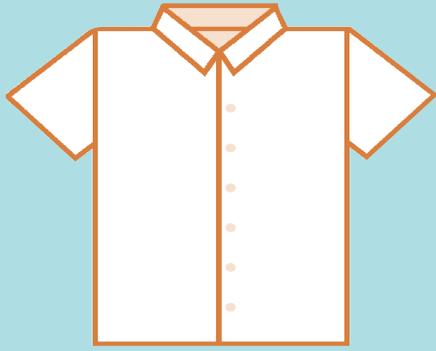
**11 Stop agonizing over insignificant items.** What to do with greeting cards you've received, batteries of dubious power, unidentified CDs and cassette tapes, orphaned screws, and so on? Toss them into a "ripening drawer." Once the drawer is full, quickly sort through it. Use what you can, and discard the rest. Then start the process anew.

**12 Get a "clutter companion."** This is a (nonjudgmental) friend or family member who will help you get rid of all the stuff that's cluttering up your house. A few times a year, you and your companion should sort your clutter into four piles: "keep," "toss," "donate," and "age." Discard the "toss" items at once—before you have a chance to change your mind. Place "donate" items in heavy-duty garbage bags, and drive them to the nearest donation bin. Place "age" items in a cardboard box marked with a date three months hence. In your calendar, mark the same date as the time to "review age items." When that date rolls around, give those items another look. If you feel comfortable discarding them, do so. If not, renew the date for another three months.

**13 Fight financial-statement overload.** Do you really need to keep monthly account statements? Ask your accountant if you can get by with keeping only quarterly or annual statements—and toss the rest.

**14 Don't let unread magazines pile up.** If the next issue arrives before you've read the last one, place the last one in a small basket (measuring no more than six inches high and two magazine-widths across). Once the basket fills up, sift through the magazines. Read what you can, and discard or recycle the rest. (You might drop off the best magazines at a hospital or women's shelter.)

If you are habitually unable to keep up with the issues of a particular magazine, cancel the subscription.



## YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

**15 Make use of “wasted” minutes.** Don’t wait to find long blocks of uninterrupted time to tackle organizational chores. In one minute, you can sort mail, remove lint from the dryer, or water the plants. In five minutes, you can empty the dishwasher or write an e-mail. While you wait for your laundry to dry, you can mate socks and gather clothes for dry cleaning.

**16 Create a “launch pad” near the front door.** This is the place to stash things that family members need each time they leave the house—umbrellas, school backpacks, briefcases, pocketbooks, keys, scarves, and so on. The launch pad might have cubbies, pegs, hooks, containers—anything that makes it easy to find and grab things as you head out the door.

**17 Ditch those receipts.** Each evening, empty your pockets, wallet, purse, and briefcase of all ATM slips and receipts. Put them in with your stack of bills to be paid and financial statements to review.

Too much loose change? If coins pile up on your dresser, get a jar to put them in. At the end of the month, you’ll have an extra \$15 or so to spend—a reward for keeping your pockets free of clutter.

**18 Simplify your wardrobe.** The more clothes you have, the harder it is to decide what to wear each morning. So continually winnow out extra clothing. If you get a new shirt, for instance, consider getting rid of an old one. In spring and summer, coordinate all your clothing around only two colors, plus white. In fall and winter, coordinate all your clothing around two other colors, plus black. You’ll feel liberated by having fewer outfits to choose from—and you’ll save money on clothes.

**19 Pre-assemble your clothes into complete outfits.** Hang them on sturdy hangers in your closet. You’ll get dressed faster each morning, with less confusion and second-guessing. This strategy works for men and women alike, and is especially helpful for organizing business attire. Women can slip a baggie with matching jewelry onto the hanger. For items to help organize children’s clothes and toys, take a look at [www.organize-everything.com/kiddailor.html](http://www.organize-everything.com/kiddailor.html).

## AROUND THE HOUSE

**20 Take it one project at a time.** Having to tackle several big projects at once is stressful for people with ADD. Set one priority, and get it done, tying up all loose ends before moving on to a new project. For instance, get new eyeglasses before cleaning your gutters. Or take your car in for maintenance before revising your résumé.

**21 Use sticky notes to stay on track.** If you’re often sidetracked by interruptions, make it easy to return to the task at hand once the interruption is over. How? Keep a supply of sticky notes with you, and jot down where to pick up again. For instance, if you must take a phone call while reading, post a note on the text that says, “resume reading here.” When the call is over, you’ll know exactly what to do.

**22 Double up on tasks.** If you can make it a habit to do two small things in concert, you’ll get more done. For example, you might reset your clocks and change the batteries in your smoke detectors upon the end of Daylight Saving Time each autumn. You could change your oil and balance your investments on the same day. Or reorganize your pocketbook each time you water the plants.

**23 Organize your garage like a professional.** That means separating your stuff into “zones” of the sort you see at home-improvement stores: “tools,” “painting supplies,” “gardening supplies,” “sports equipment,” “automotive,” and so on. If this job is too big to tackle on your own, don’t be reluctant to ask for help.





## THE PAPER TRAIL

**24 Rethink your filing system.** ADDers often have trouble with filing because they create too many categories. Better to keep your categories broad, and use subfolders where necessary. For instance, you might label one folder “insurance,” and fill it with subcategory folders for life insurance, car insurance, and health insurance.

Online retailer [www.addconsults.com](http://www.addconsults.com) offers a variety of terrific organizing products, including one designed specifically for keeping track of owner’s manuals, product warranties, insurance policies, and the like.

**25 Create a document “hot spot.”** This is a red, see-through folder for important, time-sensitive documents. In this folder, which should be kept on your desk, you should place papers representing up to five different tasks that must be attended to within the next 24 hours—an overdue bill, a client file, a phone message to return, and so on.

Clear out your hot spot daily. Active papers that aren’t yet urgent should be kept in transparent file folders arranged vertically in a file holder.

A hot spot is a great tool for dealing with the “out of sight is out of mind” problem.

**26 Stanch the flow of junk mail.** Add your name to the “do not send” list maintained by the Direct Mail Association. Go to [www.the-dma.org](http://www.the-dma.org) for more information.

**27 Process the mail every day.** That will keep you from feeling overwhelmed. Throw out junk mail immediately. The rest of the mail should be kept in one place, with a wastebasket nearby. Bills to be paid should be placed inside your checkbook or—if you use online banking—on the desktop beside the computer. Stick everyone else’s mail into nearby cubbyholes, slots, or shelves with their names on them.

## MONEY MATTERS

**28 Schedule a quarterly review of investments—with yourself.** Write the date and time to review these on your calendar or in your planner, and go over your bank accounts, investment accounts, and retirement plans.

**29 Switch to online banking.** How much time do you spend each month writing checks, addressing envelopes, and affixing postage (not to mention mailing the checks)? It’s faster to do your banking online—especially since you can set up recurring bills to be paid automatically—and you won’t have to pay for postage.

If you’re intimidated by the sometimes-complicated computer work required to open an online account, ask a computer-savvy friend or family member to help.

**30 Use a single checking account.** Keep your checkbook in your purse or briefcase and return it there immediately after using it. Keep your check register and a few emergency checks (but not another checkbook!) in another location, in case you lose your checkbook.

**31 Keep plastic to a minimum.** The more credit cards you have, the more statements and receipts you’ll have to contend with. Better to stick with one or two major cards and avoid the high-interest store and gas cards. Consider new card offers only if the terms of the card are clearly superior to the terms of your current cards.

**32 Get a debit card.** Keep it in your wallet, and use it instead of a personal check whenever possible. Each time you use the card, make an entry in your check register as if you had written a check. That way, your checking account stays balanced.

**33 Keep some extra cash on hand.** Put several hundred dollars in a waterproof plastic bag and place it someplace safe but easy to locate (maybe your freezer). That way, you won’t be caught empty-handed if a storm, power outage, or some other natural or man-made disaster makes it impossible to use ATMs.

For more on preparing for a disaster, go to [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).



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