I live for lists. Rather, I have a better life because I have lists to keep me on track. Most of us have standard lists we create. We make lists for groceries, errands, or bills to pay.   I have even been known to keep paper by the bed so that I can make a list of the tasks I keep thinking about that are keeping me awake at night. Did you notice that I said we "create" lists and "make" lists while omitting the word "use" in my introduction about lists?

The reason we create lists is typically because we have too much to do and have too little time to get it done. It is frustrating to get a "late notice" because we forgot to drop a check in the mail or because we neglected to take care of it through online bill paying. The service charges tacked on for late payments can add up fast!

None of us have time to stare at the grocery store shelf trying to remember what else we were supposed to pick up. (Okay, I am guilty of this on more than one occasion!) It is even more frustrating to begin making a meal only to realize that you didn't buy the key ingredient you went to the store to purchase.

I would guess there are a few of you nodding your heads because you have had similar experiences. The trick to creating a list as a way to get organized is in making sure the list is helpful, accessible and user-friendly. Here are some ideas on how to do just that:

<u>Organize your list.</u> If you are creating a list of bills that need paid, list them in order of when they are due. If you really want to get on top of bill paying, you can create a printable spreadsheet that has each bill listed by company name, address, payment amount, and account number. Use this as a guide each month as you pay your bills. You can even put a digital checkmark next to it with the date it was paid, if you want to go paperless. Don't laugh – trust me, it works!

If you are creating a grocery list, there are many different ways you can organize your list. You can create a generic list that follows the floor plan of the store you most commonly shop at.   There are also generic grocery lists that provide a list of basic foods so you can highlight or circle the ones you want to purchase. My colleagues at Iowa State University Extension have developed a variety of grocery lists you can print off to use: http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ then use their search option to find "How to Make Your Master Lists."

You can even create a "health focus" list to make sure your purchases are in line you're your dietary restrictions. The American Heart Association has an excellent tool that will help you create a certified heart-healthy shopping list. Celebrate American Heart Month this February and check out their grocery list tool at http://checkmark.heart.org/

<u>Keep your list(s) accessible.</u> As I mentioned above, I keep a spreadsheet list of my monthly bills. Not only do I have this saved on my computer's hard drive, I keep a printed copy with my checkbook register so that I have ready access to it when I am paying bills. Keep the list secure, though. You don't want to leave it out where someone might accidently throw it away or misplace it for you.

<u>Lists need to be user-friendly</u>. I really tried to keep a grocery list on my iPod, but it just didn't work for me. I like to write or write on my lists and the iPod doesn't work that way. For grocery lists, I would rather sketch out what meals I plan to prepare for the week and create a list on a small spiral notebook I use for a variety of lists. For the list I keep by my bed, I usually write those tasks on a square sticky note so that I can put it in my purse as I am leaving for work. You will need to find a system that works for you. Each list has its own purpose and you will find that the design and accessibility of the list will need to be developed around that purpose.

<u>Keep seasonal lists in a central location.</u> Not all tasks are tackled weekly or monthly. Some tasks are seasonal such as winterizing the home or planning your garden. March 20th is the first day of spring and it won't be long before you can get your spring home maintenance list out for spring cleaning! There is an excellent home maintenance list available through University of Illinois Extension http://urbanext.illinois.edu/housing/tables/06.html which includes items for all four seasons. Storing these lists in the same location each season will make them more accessible. You can keep them in a file folder in your home office or in a notebook that you label for that purpose.

Keeping ourselves and our lives organized requires intentional planning and routines. Creating and using lists is one way we can achieve both. They can reduce stress and increase efficiency. If you want more information on creating *and using* lists for grocery shopping, home maintenance, bill paying or other living routines, contact me at the Geary County Extension office (785)238-4161. Until next time, keep Living Resourcefully!