

Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act and Debt Cancellation FAQ's

If you owe a debt to someone else and they cancel or forgive that debt, the canceled amount may be taxable.

The Mortgage Debt Relief Act of 2007 generally allows taxpayers to exclude income from the discharge of debt on their principal residence. Debt reduced through mortgage restructuring, as well as mortgage debt forgiven in connection with a foreclosure, qualifies for the relief.

This provision applies to debt forgiven in calendar years 2007 through 2012. Up to \$2 million of forgiven debt is eligible for this exclusion (\$1 million if married filing separately). The exclusion does not apply if the discharge is due to services performed for the lender or any other reason not directly related to a decline in the home's value or the taxpayer's financial condition.

More information, including detailed examples can be found in *Publication 4681, Canceled Debts, Foreclosures, Repossessions, and Abandonments*. Also see IRS news release *IR-2008-17*. The following are the most commonly asked questions and answers about The Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act and debt cancellation:

What is Cancellation of Debt?

If you borrow money from a commercial lender and the lender later cancels or forgives the debt, you may have to include the cancelled amount in income for tax purposes, depending on the circumstances. When you borrowed the money you were not required to include the loan proceeds in income because you had an obligation to repay the lender. When that obligation is subsequently forgiven, the amount you received as loan proceeds is normally reportable as income because you no longer have an obligation to repay the lender. The lender is usually required to report the amount of the canceled debt to you and the IRS on a Form 1099-C, Cancellation of Debt.

Here's a very simplified example. You borrow \$10,000 and default on the loan after paying back \$2,000. If the lender is unable to collect the remaining debt from you, there is a cancellation of debt of \$8,000, which generally is taxable income to you.

Is Cancellation of Debt income always taxable?

Not always. There are some exceptions. The most common situations when cancellation of debt income is not taxable involve:

Qualified principal residence indebtedness: This is the exception created by the Mortgage Debt Relief Act of 2007 and applies to most homeowners.

Bankruptcy: Debts discharged through bankruptcy are not considered taxable income.

cancelled debt may not be taxable to you. You are insolvent when your total debts are more than the fair market value of your total assets.

Certain farm debts: If you incurred the debt directly in operation of a farm, more than half your income from the prior three years was from farming, and the loan was owed to a person or agency regularly engaged in lending, your cancelled debt is generally not considered taxable income.

Non-recourse loans: A non-recourse loan is a loan for which the lender's only remedy in case of default is to repossess the property being financed or used as collateral. That is, the lender cannot pursue you personally in case of default. Forgiveness of a non-recourse loan resulting from a foreclosure does not result in cancellation of debt income. However, it may result in other tax consequences.

These exceptions are discussed in detail in *Publication 4681*.

What is the Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act of 2007?

The Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act of 2007 was enacted on December 20, 2007 (see News Release IR-2008-17). Generally, the Act allows exclusion of income realized as a result of modification of the terms of the mortgage, or foreclosure on your principal residence.

What does exclusion of income mean?

Normally, debt that is forgiven or cancelled by a lender must be included as income on your tax return and is taxable. But the Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act allows you to exclude certain cancelled debt on your principal residence from income. Debt reduced through mortgage restructuring, as well as mortgage debt forgiven in connection with a foreclosure, qualifies for the relief.

Does the Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act apply to all forgiven or cancelled debts?

No. The Act applies only to forgiven or cancelled debt used to buy, build or substantially improve your principal residence, or to refinance debt incurred for those purposes. In addition, the debt must be secured by the home. This is known as qualified principal residence indebtedness. The maximum amount you can treat as qualified principal residence indebtedness is \$2 million or \$1 million if married filing separately.

Does the Mortgage Forgiveness Debt Relief Act apply to debt incurred to refinance a home?

Debt used to refinance your home qualifies for this exclusion, but only to the extent that the principal balance of the old mortgage, immediately before the refinancing, would have qualified. For more information, including an example, see *Publication 4681*.

How long is this special relief in effect?

It applies to qualified principal residence indebtedness forgiven in calendar years 2007 through 2012.

Are there other conditions I should know about to exclude the cancellation of student debt?

Yes, your student loan must have been made by:

- (a) the federal government, or a state or local government or subdivision;
- (b) a tax-exempt public benefit corporation which has control of a state, county or municipal hospital where the employees are considered public employees; or
- (c) a school which has a program to encourage students to work in underserved occupations or areas, and has an agreement with one of the above to fund the program, under the direction of a governmental unit or a charitable or educational organization.

Can I exclude cancellation of credit card debt?

In some cases, yes. Non business credit card debt cancellation can be excluded from income if the cancellation occurred in a title 11 bankruptcy case, or to the extent you were insolvent just before the cancellation. See the examples in *Publication 4681*.

How do I know if I was insolvent?

You are insolvent when your total debts exceed the total fair market value of all of your assets. Assets include everything you own, e.g., your car, house, condominium, furniture, life insurance policies, stocks, other investments, or your pension and other retirement accounts.

How should I report the information and items needed to prove insolvency?

Use Form 982, Reduction of Tax Attributes Due to Discharge of Indebtedness (and Section 1082 Basis Adjustment) to exclude canceled debt from income to the extent you were insolvent immediately before the cancellation. You were insolvent to the extent that your liabilities exceeded the fair market value of your assets immediately before the cancellation.

To claim this exclusion, you must attach Form 982 to your federal income tax return. Check box 1b on Form 982, and, on line 2, include the smaller of the amount of the debt canceled or the amount by which you were insolvent immediately prior to the cancellation. You must also reduce your tax attributes in Part II of Form 982.

My car was repossessed and I received a 1099-C; can I exclude this amount on my tax return?

Only if the cancellation happened in a title 11 bankruptcy case, or to the extent you were insolvent just before the cancellation. See *Publication 4681* for examples.

Are there any publications I can read for more information?

Yes.

- (1) *Publication 4681*, Canceled Debts, Foreclosures, Repossessions, and Abandonments (for Individuals) is new and addresses in a single document the tax consequences of cancellation of debt issues.
- (2) See the IRS news release *IR-2008-17* with additional questions and answers on IRS.gov.