

Habits and goals

Focus on one money goal to make more progress

Trying to fix everything at once rarely works. Pick one money goal, break it into small steps, and keep it steady.

5-minute read • Updated October 2026 • Checked against its sources



The short version

- ✓ Several goals at once can stall all of them. In a set of studies, people given one savings goal saved more than people given several.
- ✓ Pick the goal that would make life feel lighter a year from now. Give it a number, a date and a small step for every payday.
- ✓ Make that step automatic, check in every three months, and keep paying at least the minimum on everything else.

From a nonprofit. Every volunteer adviser is a fiduciary, which means they must put your interests first. We never sell your information.

Rather talk it through?

A volunteer financial adviser can help with your situation, one-on-one, for free.



Point your phone's camera at the code, or go to:

go.advisersgiveback.org/start

1

Why one goal works better

You don't need a long list of money goals to make progress. In fact, trying to fix everything at once can make it harder to stick with anything.

One 2011 set of studies supports this. People who were given one savings goal planned to save more, and actually saved more, than people who were given several goals at once. With several goals, people tended to weigh one against another and put off acting. One goal made it easier to move from thinking to doing.¹ The edge shrank when saving was made easy, or when the goals worked together instead of competing.¹

Planning shows the same pattern. Making a specific plan helps people reach a single goal. But a 2012 set of studies found that the benefit usually doesn't carry over to many goals at once. Planning for several goals made people notice how hard it would be to do them all, and that weakened their commitment. ²

So choosing one goal isn't settling for less. It's giving one goal the attention it needs to actually happen.

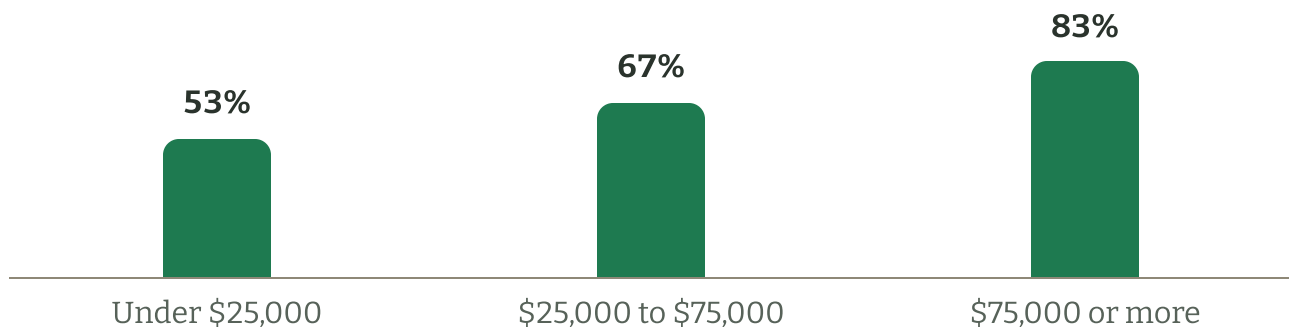
2

You may be more ready than you feel

Most adults feel confident they could reach a money goal they set for themselves: 70% said so in 2024. That confidence isn't spread evenly, though. It's lower when money is tighter. ³

Confidence in reaching a money goal rises with income

Adults who feel very or somewhat confident they could reach a financial goal they set for themselves, by household income, 2024



All adults: 70%.

Source: FINRA Investor Education Foundation, Financial Capability in the United States: Results from the FINRA Foundation's National Financial Capability Study (6th Edition) (July 2025)

If you're in the less sure group, that isn't a flaw. When there's little room for error, every goal feels riskier. It's one more reason to start with a single goal you can actually reach. Reaching it gives you something no plan can: proof that you can follow through.

3

Pick your one goal

Choose the goal that would make your life feel lighter a year from now. For example:

- Save \$1,000 for surprises.
- Pay off one credit card.
- Build an emergency fund that covers one month of essentials.

- Catch up on one past-due bill.

Not sure which one? Ask yourself three questions. What worries you most? What costs you the most in interest or fees? What has a deadline? If a card is charging you high interest, our guide to [choosing a debt payoff plan](#) can help. If one surprise bill could knock you off track, start with [an emergency fund](#).

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/snowball-or-avalanche/

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/not-if-but-when/

You don't have to wait for January, either. Researchers have found that people are more likely to go after their goals right after a fresh start, like the beginning of a new week or month, a birthday or a holiday. ⁴ The first of next month can be your fresh start.



One goal doesn't mean ignoring the rest

Keep paying at least the minimum on every bill and debt while you focus. A late fee or a missed payment can quickly eat into the progress you're making. Your one goal is simply where your extra money and attention go.

The same goes for saving you already do on autopilot, like a retirement plan at work, especially one with an employer match. Think it through before you pause it. A volunteer adviser can help you weigh the trade-off.

4

Make it specific

"Save more" is a wish. "Save \$1,000 within a year" is a goal. Two researchers who summed up 35 years of goal-setting studies found that specific, challenging goals led to better results than simply telling people to do their best. ⁵ A goal that stretches you a little, with a number and a date, gives you something clear to aim at.

Then break it into steps you can see:

1

Name the goal.

Write one sentence: what, how much and by when.

2

Divide it into monthly milestones.

For example, \$1,000 in a year is about \$83 a month. If you're paid twice a month, that's about \$42 a paycheck.

3

Set up a small automatic step.

An automatic transfer or payment on payday keeps progress going, even in busy weeks.

4

Check in every three months.

See what's working, and adjust the amount if you need to.

It also helps to decide exactly when and how you'll act, like "When my paycheck lands, I'll move \$42 to savings." Psychologists call this kind of specific plan an implementation intention. Plans like this have been shown to help people reach a single goal, which is one more reason to keep it to one. ²

If your goal still feels too big to start, break it down further. Our guide to [small goals and big wins](#) shows how.

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/small-goals-big-wins/

**Write your goal in one sentence**

Fill in the blanks: "I will ___ \$___ by ___, by moving \$___ every payday." Put it where you'll see it, like your phone's lock screen or the fridge. Then set up that first automatic step.

5

Check in every three months

You don't need to be perfect. You just need to notice how it's going. Every three months, take a quick look:

- How much closer are you than last time?
- Is your automatic step still the right size? Raise it if you can. Lower it if you must, but keep it going.
- Has anything changed, like a new job, a new bill or a surprise expense?

If you fell behind, pick up where you are. You don't have to start over, and one slow stretch doesn't erase what you've already done. Our guide on [paying attention to your money](#) has more on making check-ins a habit.

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/progress-starts-with-paying-attention/

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When you reach it, pick the next one

When you hit your goal, celebrate it. Then keep your automatic step going and point it at the next goal. The habit you built is the part that lasts.

One clear goal can go a surprisingly long way.

A year from now, you won't just have a better number. You'll have proof that you can follow through. And if you're not sure which goal should come first, that's a great question to bring to a volunteer adviser, one-on-one and at no cost.

Questions to bring to your adviser

A volunteer adviser is ready when you are.

A volunteer adviser can look at your numbers with you and help you decide what to do first.

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Sources

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