

Money and mindset

The comparison trap: other people's money isn't your business plan

Social feeds show the highlights, not the debt. Here's why we compare, what it can cost, and how to measure progress by your own goals.

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



The short version

- ✓ People have long judged how they're doing by looking at others. Feeds make that easy, but they show highlights, not balances.
- ✓ In late 2025, more than 1 in 4 adults said they were just getting by or finding it hard to get by. You can't see that in a photo.
- ✓ Pause before you spend to keep up. Ask what you want your money to do for you, and measure progress against your own past.

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

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1

Why we compare

Ever scroll through your feed and wonder how everyone else affords the vacations, the new cars or the picture-perfect homes? It's a common feeling, and a tricky one.

Comparing ourselves to others is an old habit with a name: social comparison. In 1954, the psychologist Leon Festinger proposed that people have a drive to judge their own opinions and abilities. When there's no objective yardstick, he suggested, we judge ourselves by comparing with other people. ¹

Money is full of fuzzy yardsticks. How much should you have saved by now? What counts as “doing well”? With no clear answer, it's natural to look sideways. The trouble is what we see when we do.

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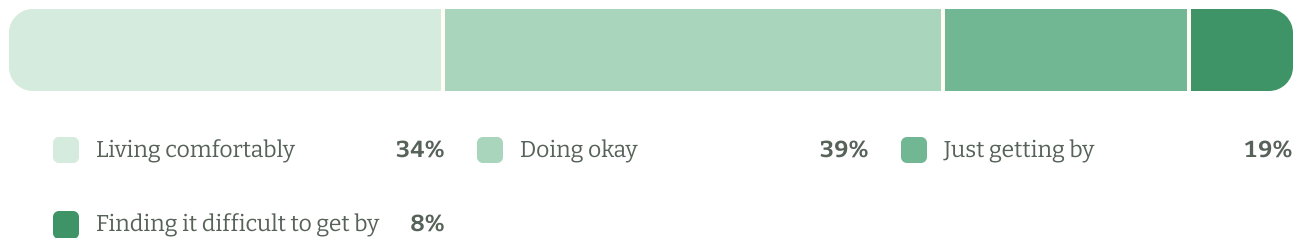
What the feed doesn't show

Social media shows a slice of someone's life, chosen by them. You see the trip, not the credit card statement. You see the new car, not the loan payment or the stress behind it.

The bigger picture looks different. In late 2025, about a third of adults said they were living comfortably, and more said they were doing okay. But 19% said they were just getting by, and 8% said they were finding it difficult to get by.²

More than 1 in 4 adults were just getting by or struggling

How adults said they were doing financially, October 2025



Just getting by (19%) and finding it difficult to get by (8%) add up to 27% of adults.

Source: Federal Reserve Board, Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2025 (May 2026)

Younger adults were more likely to be struggling. In 2025, 63% of adults ages 18 to 29 said they were doing at least okay, compared with 83% of adults 60 and older.² And most people weren't racing ahead: only 23% said they were better off than a year earlier. Nearly half said they were about the same.²

Debt is common, even among people who seem well off. In 2025, 45% of credit card holders carried a balance at least once in the past year. Among card holders with family incomes of \$100,000 or more, 37% did.² You can't tell who they are from a photo.

Other people's money isn't your business plan. Your goals, your values and your timeline are what count.

3

What comparison can cost

Comparing can do more than steal your joy. It can change how you feel and what you spend.

- **It can dent your mood.** In a 2015 study, people who were asked to use Facebook passively, just browsing, saw their mood drop more than people who used it actively. A second study, which followed people in daily life, linked passive use to lower mood through envy.³ Later research has been more mixed: a 2022 review of 40 survey studies found that most didn't back up the idea that passive scrolling lowers well-being while active use raises it.⁴ So notice how your own feed leaves you feeling.
- **It can push spending, and debt.** Researchers studied lottery winners in one Canadian province. The bigger a neighbor's prize, the more bankruptcies there were among the other people in that tiny neighborhood, about a dozen households, in the years after. And the bigger the prize, the more the neighbors who went bankrupt had tied up in things others can see, like houses and cars.⁵
- **It can make your progress feel small.** Measured against someone's highlight reel, real progress, like paying down a card, can feel like nothing at all.

Here are a few signs you might be stuck in the comparison trap:

- A pang of envy when others share money milestones.
- Spending to keep up with friends, even when it strains your budget.
- Feeling that your progress isn't "enough," no matter what it is.

4

Measure against your own goals

The next time comparison creeps in, pause and ask yourself: "What do I actually want my money to do for me?" That question puts you back in the driver's seat, with goals that reflect your life, not someone else's highlight reel.

1**Name what matters to you.**

Pick two or three priorities, like security, time with family, a trip home or getting out of debt.

2**Compare with your past self.**

Look at where you were a year ago. Less debt, a little more saved or bills paid on time all count.

3 Pause “keeping up” purchases.

If you see something online and want it, wait a couple of days. If you still want it and it fits your priorities, go ahead.

4 Shape your feed.

Mute or unfollow accounts that leave you feeling behind. Follow ones that leave you feeling capable.

**Try it this week**

Write down three things you want your money to do for you in the next year. Keep the list on your phone. The next time you feel the pull to keep up, check the purchase against your list.

5**When friends are part of the pressure**

Comparison isn't only online. It shows up in group dinners, weddings, birthday trips and the gifts people expect. Saying no can feel awkward, so it helps to have a few lines ready:

- “I’m saving for something big right now. Can we do something low-key instead?”
- “I’d love to come to the dinner. I’ll probably order light and skip the drinks.”
- “That trip isn’t in my budget, but I’d love to see you when you get back.”

Real friends want your company, not your receipts. And you may not be the only one at the table who’s glad someone said it.

It also helps to decide ahead of time. Set a monthly amount for fun with friends, so you can say yes without guilt until it runs out. When it’s gone, you already know your answer.

6**Find your own pace**

Your finances are shaped by things no feed shows: your income, your costs, your family and where you started. Your timeline gets to be your own.

If more money still feels like not enough, our guide to [lifestyle creep](#) can help. If comparison is part of an older money story, see [what’s your money script?](#) And our guide to [letting gratitude guide your spending](#) offers a gentler way to decide what’s worth it.

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/lifestyle-creep/

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/whats-your-money-script/

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/let-gratitude-guide-your-spending/

A volunteer adviser can help you set goals that fit your life, then track your progress against them. That's a far better measure than anyone else's feed.

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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