

Money and mindset

What's your money script? Spot the beliefs behind your choices

The money beliefs you picked up growing up can still steer your choices. Here's how to spot one and rewrite it.

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



The short version

- ✓ Money scripts, an idea from Brad and Ted Klontz, are beliefs about money, often learned in childhood, that can quietly steer what you do as an adult.
- ✓ A 2011 study found four patterns: avoidance, worship, status and vigilance. A larger 2025 study didn't confirm them, so use them as prompts, not labels.
- ✓ You can rewrite a script: notice it, ask where it came from, and swap in a belief that helps you act.

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1

The background music of your money life

We all carry beliefs about money. Some help us. Some hold us back. They show up in how we save, how we spend, and whether we check our bank app or avoid it. Think of them as the background music of your money life, even if you never chose the playlist.

Brad Klontz and Ted Klontz call these beliefs money scripts. They proposed that money scripts usually start in childhood, are often passed down in families and tend to work without our noticing, and that they drive much of what we do with money.¹ It's a useful idea, and it's still being tested.

The good news is that a belief you can see is a belief you can start to change. This guide will help you spot one of yours.

2

Where money beliefs come from

Most of us learned about money long before we had money of our own. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) describes how this happens as children grow: ³

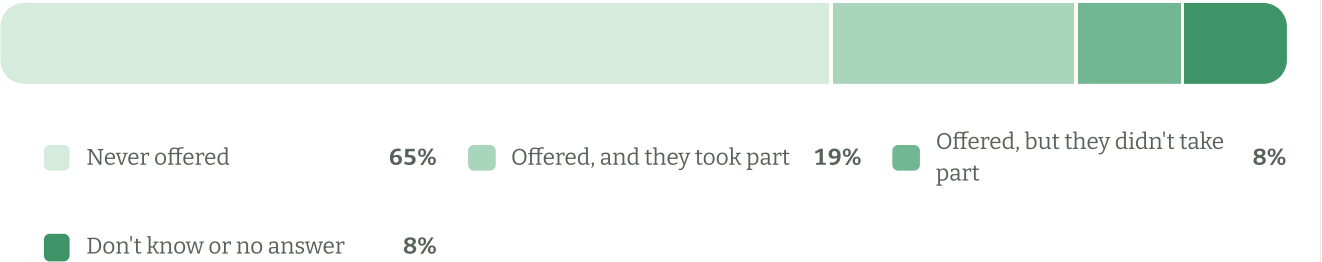
- **Ages 3 to 5.** Early values and norms about money begin to form, along with the planning and self-control skills that support good money habits later.
- **Ages 6 to 12.** Money habits and norms take shape, mostly by watching and interacting with parents and caregivers.
- **Ages 13 to 21.** Money knowledge and decision-making skills matter more, as teens start to earn money, make purchases and open accounts.

Parents’ influence can be strong. In a survey of 2,098 first-year college students, what students learned from their parents was tied to their money attitudes and habits much more than their work experience and high school financial education combined. ⁴

And most adults were never offered a money class at school or work. In 2024, 65% said no school, college or workplace they’d been part of had offered them financial education. ⁵

Most adults were never offered a money class at school or work

Adults asked whether a school, college or workplace ever offered them financial education, 2024



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)

So most of us learned about money the way kids learn most things: by watching. Maybe bills caused tension at home. Maybe saving was celebrated. Maybe nobody talked about money at all. Those early lessons can turn into automatic habits later on.

3

Four patterns in one study

In a 2011 study, Klontz and colleagues asked 422 adults how much they agreed with 72 beliefs about money. The beliefs came from more than a decade of work with clients in financial therapy. Their answers grouped into four patterns: ¹

- **Money avoidance.** Money is bad, or you don't deserve it. Rich people seem greedy, and having more than you need feels wrong.
- **Money worship.** More money would solve your problems and make you happier, but there's never enough.
- **Money status.** Your worth as a person is tied to your net worth, and only the best is worth buying.
- **Money vigilance.** Saving comes first, and money is private. You don't talk about what you have or earn.

In that study, people who leaned toward the first three patterns tended to have lower incomes. Money worship was also linked with carrying credit card balances from month to month. Money vigilance was linked with not carrying card debt. ¹

The researchers were careful about what this means. They couldn't tell whether the beliefs led to people's money situations or the other way around. And the people in the study weren't a random sample of Americans: most were white, highly educated, middle-aged or older, and women. ¹

A later study raises more questions. In 2025, other researchers tested a shorter version of the same questionnaire with 2,686 U.S. adults from several racial and ethnic groups. The four patterns didn't fit their answers well, and the questions didn't measure the same things across racial and ethnic groups. ⁶ So use the four patterns as a way to start noticing your own beliefs, not as a label or a diagnosis.

Even a helpful script can go too far. The authors note that vigilance can encourage saving, but too much worry about money can keep you from enjoying the security it can bring. ¹

4

The lines we tell ourselves

Scripts often sound like everyday sayings. Here are a few common ones, next to a rewrite that might serve you better:

The old script

- "I'm just bad with money."
- "Money is evil."
- "If I ignore it, it'll sort itself out."
- "I'll start being responsible next month."
- "We don't talk about money."

A rewrite

- "I'm still learning, and I can learn this."
- "Money is a tool. I decide what it's for."
- "A quick look now saves me stress later."
- "I can do one small thing today."
- "Talking about money helps me make better choices."

These lines feel familiar because so many people carry them. Notice that the rewrites aren't wildly cheerful. They're realistic, and each one points toward an action.

5

Rewrite one script

The researchers behind the money script studies say that once scripts are identified, they can be challenged and changed, though they add that more research is needed.² You don't need a quiz to start. Try these steps with one belief:

1

Catch it.

Notice a thought about money that comes up often, especially one that stops you from acting.

2

Say it out loud or write it down.

Scripts often sound more dramatic outside your head. It's okay to laugh a little.

3

Ask where it came from.

Whose voice is it? Was it true for them? Is it true for you now?

4

Rewrite it.

Keep what's useful and change what isn't. Make the new line something you can act on.

5

Act on it once.

One small action, like checking a balance or moving \$10 to savings, makes the new script feel real.

☐

Try it this week

Finish these three sentences quickly, without stopping to edit: "Money is..." "People with money are..." "In my family, we never..." Read your answers back. Is there one belief you want to keep, and one you want to rewrite?

Noticing a money script is the first step to changing it.

6Talk it through

Money scripts are often easier to see with someone else’s help. If you share money with a partner or family, your scripts may not match. The researchers suggest that spotting different scripts can help couples work through money conflicts.¹ Our guide to [money talks with chosen family](#) has ideas for starting that conversation.

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/money-talks-with-chosen-family/

If comparing yourself to others is part of your script, our guide to [the comparison trap](#) is a good next read.

Online: advisersgiveback.org/resources/the-comparison-trap/

A volunteer adviser can help too. Seeing your numbers next to your beliefs can show where an old script is steering your plan. And if a money habit ever feels out of your control, a counselor can help alongside an adviser.

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.

go.advisersgiveback.org/start



Sources

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