

FREE PRINTABLE GUIDE

RAY'S MONEY LADDER TOOLKIT

Find your level on the money ladder. Then take the next step, one step at a time.



5

Make it last

4

Prepare for retirement

3

Get out of debt

2

Build a cushion

1

Stop the leaks

1 SHORT QUIZ

to find your level on the ladder

1 CHECKLIST

the 10-minute bill check

1 WORKSHEET

your monthly money map, by hand

12 pages, about 15 minutes to read. Large print, made to print. Every figure is sourced at the bottom of its page. Nothing to sell inside.

October 2026 edition. Figures checked October 2026.

START HERE

WELCOME. ONE STEP AT A TIME.

This Toolkit puts the steps from the Ray's Money Ladder videos on paper, so you can work with a pen instead of a screen.

Ray is the animated host of the channel. A real person researches and writes every video and every page of this guide.

Money gets easier when you stop trying to fix everything at once. The ladder has five levels, and you only work on one: the lowest level you have not finished yet.



HOW TO USE IT IN 15 MINUTES

- 1 Take the quiz on **page 3**. It takes about 2 minutes.
- 2 Read what your level means on **page 4**, then the page for your level.
- 3 Do the **10-minute bill check** (page 6) the next time a bill comes in.
- 4 Fill in your **money map** (page 11) by hand. A pencil works best.

Have ready: a pencil, last month's bank or card statement, and one bill.

What this guide is not. It does not know your situation, so it gives no personal advice. It never tells you what to buy or where to invest. Your numbers will be different from any example here, so check your own statements. And there is nothing to sell inside.

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QUIZ, ABOUT 2 MINUTES

WHERE ARE YOU ON THE LADDER?



Check Yes or No for each sentence. There is no wrong answer: this only shows you where to start.

LEVEL 1 STOP THE LEAKS

1. I know about how much money goes out each month.

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. In the last 3 months, I checked my statements for repeat charges.

☐ Yes ☐ No

LEVEL 2 BUILD A CUSHION

3. I could pay a surprise \$400 bill without borrowing.

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. I have 3 months of must-pay bills set aside.

☐ Yes ☐ No

LEVEL 3 GET OUT OF DEBT

5. I pay my cards in full each month, or I have none.

☐ Yes ☐ No

6. I know which of my debts has the highest rate.

☐ Yes ☐ No

LEVEL 4 PREPARE FOR RETIREMENT

7. This year, I read my own Social Security estimate.

☐ Yes ☐ No

8. I know when to sign up for Medicare, and the late penalty.

☐ Yes ☐ No

LEVEL 5 MAKE IT LAST

9. I have written down my retirement income, month by month.

☐ Yes ☐ No

10. My beneficiaries are up to date on every account.

☐ Yes ☐ No

Your level: start at level 1 and go up. Your level is the **first one with a No**. All Yes? You are on level 5, and the job is to keep it that way.

My level today: _____ **Date:** _____

YOUR RESULT

YOUR LEVEL, YOUR NEXT STEP

A level is not a grade. A job loss or a health bill can send anyone down a step. Find your level below and do just one thing this month.

1

STOP THE LEAKS

Money leaves every month without you deciding it again.

This month: do the 10-minute bill check on your next bill. Pages 5 and 6.

2

BUILD A CUSHION

A surprise bill would turn into new debt.

This month: add up one month of must-pay bills and write your cushion target. Page 7.

3

GET OUT OF DEBT

Interest takes a bite of your money every month.

This month: list every debt with its rate, and circle the one that costs the most. Page 8.

4

PREPARE FOR RETIREMENT

The rules change after 50: Social Security, Medicare, and your savings accounts.

This month: write down your Social Security estimate at 62, at full retirement age, and at 70. Page 9.

5

MAKE IT LAST

The goal is income that lasts as long as you do.

This month: fill in the money map with your retirement income and spending. Pages 10 and 11.

Whatever your level, the money map on page 11 is worth filling in once a year. It is the picture everything else is built on.



LEVEL 1 OF 5

STOP THE LEAKS

A leak is money that leaves every month on autopilot. One leak looks small. Put together, they can cost more than you would ever agree to pay on purpose.

\$86 vs \$219

In one survey, Americans first guessed they spent about \$86 a month on subscriptions. Going through them one by one, the real average was about \$219.¹

42%

had forgotten a subscription they were still paying for, in the same survey.¹

WHERE LEAKS HIDE

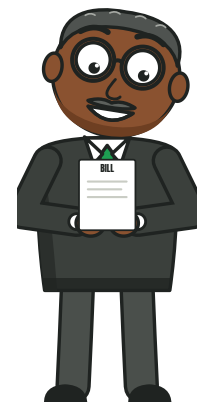
- **Subscriptions and apps** you no longer use: streaming, memberships, cloud storage, "free trials" that renewed.
- **Bank fees.** At large banks, the median overdraft fee was \$35, and the median debit card purchase that caused one was only \$24.²
- **Paid credit monitoring.** A credit freeze is free to place and to lift, and free weekly credit reports from the three bureaus are permanent at AnnualCreditReport.com.³
- **Plans that no longer fit:** phone, internet and TV, insurance.
- **Seasonal bills.** Last winter (November to March), homes heating with natural gas spent about \$702 on average, and homes heating with electricity about \$1,150.⁴

Give the savings a job. The day you lower a bill, move the same amount to savings automatically. Even \$12 a month is \$144 a year.⁵

¹ C+R Research subscription survey (2022), reported by CNBC (a private survey). ² Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, overdraft research (2023) and final rule (December 2024). ³ Federal Trade Commission, consumer.ftc.gov, checked October 2026. ⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, Short-Term Energy Outlook, October 6, 2026, table WF01. ⁵ Example: \$12 x 12 months.

CHECKLIST, LEVEL 1

THE 10-MINUTE BILL CHECK



Do it right before you pay a bill: the one moment you are really looking at it. One bill, ten minutes.

☐ 1. Compare it to last month.

And to the same month last year. Up more than about 10 percent with nothing changed? Read the lines, not just the total: a price increase, an expired promotion, a new fee, a mistake.

☐ 2. Hunt the subscriptions.

Find every charge that repeats on 3 months of statements. For each one: did I use it last month? Would I sign up again today at this price?

☐ 3. Question the plan, not just the price.

If the plan no longer fits your life, ask for one that does. One polite sentence works well:

"I've been a customer for a long time, and I'm comparing prices. What's the best price you can offer me to stay?"

☐ 4. Kill the fees.

Late, ATM, overdraft, monthly account fees. For each one, ask what would make it never happen again: a new due date, a low balance alert, a different account.

☐ 5. Watch the seasonal bills.

Compare this winter's heating bill with last winter's, same month.

☐ 6. Give the savings a job.

Set up an automatic transfer of the amount you saved, the same day.

MY BILL CHECK LOG

BILL	BEFORE	AFTER	SAVED A MONTH

2

LEVEL 2 OF 5

BUILD A CUSHION

A cushion is money set aside for the surprise bill, so the surprise does not become new debt.

63%

of adults would cover a \$400 emergency expense with cash or its equivalent. More than one in three would not.¹

55%

of adults had set aside emergency savings that would cover three months of expenses.¹

WHY THE CUSHION MATTERS MORE AFTER 55

In 2025, people aged 55 to 64 who lost a job stayed unemployed 26.7 weeks on average, compared with 23.0 weeks for all ages.² Regular state unemployment benefits last up to 26 weeks in most states.³

Bank deposits are insured by the FDIC up to \$250,000 per depositor, per insured bank, for each account ownership category. Credit unions have the same limit through the NCUA.⁴

MY CUSHION TARGET

Must-pay bills for one month (housing, utilities, food, insurance, car, minimum debt payments)	\$ _____
x 3 = my first target (example: \$3,000 x 3 = \$9,000) ⁵	\$ _____
x 6 = my full cushion (example: \$3,000 x 6 = \$18,000)	\$ _____
What I already have set aside	\$ _____
Amount I can add each month, automatically	\$ _____

¹ Federal Reserve, Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2025, published May 2026. ² Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, 2025 annual averages, table 31 (October 2025 not collected). ³ U.S. Department of Labor, Extending Unemployment Insurance, issue brief, March 2021. ⁴ FDIC, Understanding Deposit Insurance, and NCUA, checked October 2026. ⁵ Example calculation from the video "The Emergency Fund Rule Changes After 55", not a recommendation.

3

LEVEL 3 OF 5

GET OUT OF DEBT

Debt is not a moral failure. It is a cost, and the most expensive one goes first.

44.7%

of families carried a credit card balance. For them, the median balance was \$3,100.¹

About \$682

of interest in a year on \$3,100 at about 22 percent a year (example).²

THE RATE CHANGES EVERYTHING

Example: \$19,000 of card debt, paying \$500 a month. At 22 percent it takes about 66 months and about \$13,800 of interest. At 18 percent, about 57 months and about \$9,300.²

- 1 Write every debt below, with its rate (APR).
- 2 Pay at least the minimum on all of them, on time, every month.
- 3 Put every extra dollar on the **highest rate**. When that debt is gone, add its payment to the next one.

DEBT	BALANCE	RATE (APR)	MINIMUM	ORDER

Before you co-sign for anyone: a co-signer is equally responsible for the debt, the lender can collect from the co-signer without first trying the borrower, and late payments can show on the co-signer's credit report.³

¹ Federal Reserve, Survey of Consumer Finances 2025, published October 9, 2026. ² Example calculations from two Ray's Money Ladder videos, not forecasts. ³ CFPB and FTC, Cosigning a Loan, checked October 2026.

4

LEVEL 4 OF 5

PREPARE FOR RETIREMENT

After 50, the rules come with birthdays. Here are the dates to know (2026 amounts).

AGE	WHAT CHANGES
50	Catch-up contributions: 401(k) limit \$24,500 plus \$8,000; IRA \$7,500 plus \$1,100. ¹
55	HSA catch-up: \$1,000 on top of \$4,400 (self-only) or \$8,750 (family). ¹
59 1/2	Before this age, 401(k) and IRA withdrawals generally owe a 10 percent additional tax, with some exceptions. ¹
60 to 63	Higher 401(k) catch-up: \$11,250 instead of \$8,000. ¹
62	Earliest Social Security: 70 percent of the full benefit if your full retirement age is 67. ²
65	Medicare generally starts. The sign-up window is 7 months around your 65th birthday. The Part B late penalty adds 10 percent for each full year you could have signed up but didn't, generally for as long as you have Part B. ³
67	Full retirement age for people born in 1960 or later. ²
70	124 percent of the full benefit. No more credits after 70. ²
73 or 75	Required minimum distributions start: 73 for many retirees, 75 if born in 1960 or later. ⁴

Example, not your number: a full benefit of \$2,000 at 67 is about \$1,400 at 62 and \$2,480 at 70.⁵ The average 65-year-old today will live to about 85, and about one in three to at least 90.² Write your own estimates from ssa.gov: at 62 _____ at 67 _____ at 70 _____

¹ IRS, news release IR-2025-111 (November 13, 2025), Publication 969, and Retirement topics: exceptions to tax on early distributions, checked October 2026. ² Social Security Administration, Benefits Planner and Retirement Information for Medicare Beneficiaries (2026 edition), checked October 2026. ³ Medicare.gov, Avoid late enrollment penalties, checked October 2026. ⁴ IRS, Retirement topics: required minimum distributions, checked October 2026. ⁵ Example calculation from the video "Social Security at 62, 67 or 70", today's dollars, not a forecast.



LEVEL 5 OF 5

MAKE IT LAST

At the top of the ladder, the question changes: not "how much do I have?" but "how long will it last?"

\$84,946

average yearly spending at ages 55 to 64. About \$65,354 at 65 to 74, and \$55,834 at 75 and older.¹

14.2%

of spending goes to health care at 75 and older, compared with 7.9 percent at 55 to 64.¹

FOUR THINGS THAT DRAIN SAVINGS LATE

- **Prices.** At 3 percent inflation a year, what costs \$25,000 today costs about \$33,598 in 10 years.²
- **Long-term care.** Someone turning 65 today has almost a 70 percent chance of needing some type of long-term care.³ Medicare generally does not cover long-term custodial care.⁴
- **Missed withdrawals.** Skipping a required minimum distribution can cost a 25 percent excise tax on the amount not taken, 10 percent if corrected within 2 years.⁵
- **Scams.** Older adults reported about \$2.4 billion of fraud losses in 2024, up from about \$600 million in 2020.⁶

Two quiet protections: keep beneficiary forms up to date on retirement accounts and life insurance (they generally come before a will), and name a trusted contact person: brokerage firms must make reasonable efforts to ask you for one.⁷

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey 2024, by age, released December 2025. ² Example calculation, not a forecast. ³ Administration for Community Living, acl.gov, checked October 2026. ⁴ Medicare.gov, checked October 2026. ⁵ IRS, Retirement topics: required minimum distributions, checked October 2026. ⁶ Federal Trade Commission, Protecting Older Consumers 2024-2025, December 1, 2025. ⁷ FINRA Rule 4512, checked October 2026.

YOUR MONTHLY MONEY MAP

Use last month's statements. Round to the nearest dollar. For bills that come once a year, divide by 12.

MONEY IN each month, after tax	
Paychecks	\$ _____
Social Security	\$ _____
Pension	\$ _____
From savings	\$ _____
Other	\$ _____
Total in	\$ _____

FIX FUND things that wear out	
Car	\$ _____
Home repairs	\$ _____
Teeth, eyes, hearing	\$ _____
Total fix	\$ _____

FUN what makes life good	
Eating out	\$ _____
Travel, hobbies	\$ _____
Gifts	\$ _____
Total fun	\$ _____

FLOOR must-pay, every month	
Rent or mortgage	\$ _____
Property tax, home insurance	\$ _____
Utilities, phone, internet	\$ _____
Food at home	\$ _____
Health premiums, medicine	\$ _____
Car, gas, transit	\$ _____
Minimum debt payments	\$ _____
Total floor	\$ _____

NEXT STEP your level's job	
To the cushion	\$ _____
Extra on debt	\$ _____
Retirement savings	\$ _____
Total next step	\$ _____

Total in, minus floor, fix, fun and next step =	_____
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Above zero? Give that money a job on your level. Below zero? The bill check on page 6 is the first place to look. Floor, fix, fun: the three-part budget from the video "The 50-30-20 Budget Is Wrong After 60".

KEEP GOING

FREE OFFICIAL TOOLS

Government and public programs only. No ads, nothing to buy.

ssa.gov/myaccount

Your earnings record and your own Social Security estimate at different ages.

medicare.gov

What Medicare covers, what it costs, and when to sign up.

SHIP: free Medicare counseling

Free, unbiased one-on-one help in every state (shiphelp.org).

irs.gov

Search "Tax Counseling for the Elderly": free tax help at 60 and older.

consumerfinance.gov

Plain guides on credit cards, bank fees and debt collection.

AnnualCreditReport.com

Free credit reports from the three bureaus, every week.

LIHEAP

Federal help with heating and cooling bills, run by each state.

ReportFraud.ftc.gov

Report a scam or a fake call, and get next steps.

IdentityTheft.gov

A step-by-step recovery plan if someone used your personal information.

donotcall.gov

Register your phone numbers to cut down on sales calls.

HOW THIS GUIDE IS MADE

The steps and figures come from the Ray's Money Ladder videos, after each figure was checked against the source cited at the bottom of its page. Nothing in this guide is sponsored. No product, broker, or fund is recommended.

Ray is an animated character. Every video is researched and written by a real person, every figure comes from an official source cited in the description, and the narration uses a synthetic voice. General education, not personal advice.

October 2026 edition. Figures checked October 2026. Amounts and rules change every year: check the official source before you decide.

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