

Build a Simple Monthly Budget

A budget helps you see what comes in, what goes out, and what is left. Start with estimates and adjust them as you learn. If income does not cover essentials, asking for support is a useful next step.

1. Pull it together.

Gather your bills, pay records, and receipts. Write the month at the top.

2. Add your income

In Planned, enter the cash you expect to receive. Use take-home pay. For self-employment, allow for business costs and money reserved for taxes. List cash benefits and other income once. Keep restricted benefits such as SNAP separate.

3. Add expenses and savings

Estimate what you will pay for each category this month. Include only the groceries you pay for with cash. Use Other expenses for anything missing, or rename a category. Include savings only when money is available. Avoid counting costs already deducted from take-home pay.

4. Check what is left

Total income minus total expenses and savings equals money left. A positive amount is available to assign. Zero means all income has a job. A negative amount, shown in parentheses in Excel, means a shortfall. Complete all relevant entries before relying on totals.

5. Record actual amounts

As the month goes on, enter what you really receive and pay in Actual. Compare it with Planned. Review at month end and use what you learned to plan the next month.

Using Excel or paper

In Excel, fill the yellow boxes; totals calculate automatically. On paper, write your amounts and add each section yourself. Enter 0 when there is no amount. Blank boxes may mean something is still unknown. Save a separate copy for each month.

When money falls short

Start with essential needs and upcoming due dates. Ask providers about payment options or assistance. Count each expense once. Avoid counting both a credit card payment and the purchases it covers.

Visit the Support & Resources page and search for help in your own community. Use local food banks, church assistance, and free meal programs when available. These resources can help you meet immediate needs while you work toward a more stable budget.

Consider ways to bring in additional income, such as temporary work, a part-time job, or short-term paid tasks. Check when you will actually be paid and avoid opportunities that require upfront fees.

Reduce spending where you can. Cutting back on sweets, soda, and snack foods may free up money for essentials. Look for low-cost meals using ingredients you already have. When you need clothing or household items, compare secondhand and thrift-store options. Selling unused items through a local marketplace may also bring in extra money.

You do not have to solve everything at once. Choose one practical step you can take today and build from there.

