

Everyone progresses through their financial journey at a different pace. Financial Prudence Phases provide a framework for understanding where you are and what to focus on next. There is no set timeline. What matters is moving forward with intention.

## Phase 1: Getting Your House in Order

### Everyone Begins Somewhere

Phase 1 is about putting the essential building blocks in place. The goal is not to do everything at once. It is to get the right things started so you have a foundation to build on.

#### Step 1: Create Positive Cash Flow

The first priority is making sure more money is coming in than going out each month. Positive cash flow creates the breathing room needed to make progress on everything else.

- Review income and monthly expenses to understand where you stand
- Identify spending that can be reduced or eliminated
- Even a small monthly surplus opens the door to saving and debt reduction

#### Step 3: Start Emergency Savings

Even a small emergency fund can prevent an unexpected expense from derailing your progress. Getting started, even in a modest way, matters more than waiting until it feels easier.

- Any amount saved is better than none
- Automate a small contribution so it happens consistently
- Keep it separate from your everyday spending account

#### Insurance Awareness

Review your basic insurance coverage to make sure it reflects your current situation and needs.

**Phase 1 is not about perfection. It is about getting the right things started.**

## Phase 2: Building Structure

### Building on What You Have Started

Phase 2 begins once the essentials are in place. With a foundation under you, the focus shifts to strengthening and expanding what you have built. This is where financial habits begin to take shape.

#### Expand Emergency Savings

In Phase 1, the goal was simply to start. In Phase 2, the target grows. Work toward building emergency savings to cover roughly six months of living expenses.

- Six months of expenses provides a meaningful buffer against larger disruptions
- Increase automatic contributions as income grows
- Resist the urge to use this fund unless it is a true emergency

#### Step 2: Eliminate High-Interest Debt

High-interest debt is one of the biggest obstacles to financial progress. Prioritizing these balances reduces costs over time and frees up more of your income.

- Focus extra payments on the highest-rate debt first
- Make minimum payments on all others while doing so
- As each balance is paid off, redirect those payments to the next

#### Step 4: Capture the Employer Match

If it does not stretch your budget or cause you to take on debt, at this stage, the goal is to contribute at least enough to your retirement plan to receive any employer match. This is effectively part of your compensation. Not taking it means leaving money on the table.

- Check your plan documents for your employer match details
- Contribute at least enough to receive the full match

#### Increase Retirement Contributions

With high-interest debt increasingly behind you, more of your income can go toward the future. This is a good time to increase retirement contributions beyond the minimum.

- Increase contributions by 1 percent at a time as income allows
- Work toward the 10 to 15 percent savings rate range over time
- Consider adding a Roth IRA to complement your 401(k)

## Target 10 to 15 Percent Savings

A common long-term savings goal is between 10 and 15 percent of income. Phase 2 is often where people begin moving meaningfully toward that range.

## Review Insurance Coverage

As your financial situation evolves, your insurance needs may change. Review your coverage to make sure it still aligns with where you are today.

**Phase 2 is about building on your foundation and adding structure that supports long-term progress.**

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## Phase 3: Taking Your Finances to the Next Level

### Optimization: Making the Most of What You Have Built

Phase 3 is where the habits and decisions made in earlier phases begin to pay off. With a strong foundation in place, the focus shifts to efficiency, growth, and strategic planning.

#### Maximize Retirement Contributions

The goal at this stage is to contribute as much as possible to retirement accounts. Taking full advantage of available contribution limits helps accelerate long-term growth.

- Contribute up to the annual IRS limit in your 401(k)
- Max out an IRA if eligible
- Take advantage of catch-up contributions if you are 50 or older

#### Think About Tax Efficiency

How and where your money is saved affects how much you keep over time. Phase 3 involves thinking more intentionally about tax-advantaged strategies across different account types.

- Balance pre-tax and Roth contributions based on your expected future tax rate
- Consider which accounts to draw from first in retirement to manage taxes
- A financial advisor can help model the most efficient strategy for your situation

#### Build Taxable Investment Accounts

Beyond retirement accounts, taxable investment accounts provide flexibility and additional growth potential. These become increasingly valuable as other financial priorities are well covered.

- No contribution limits or withdrawal restrictions
- Useful for mid-term goals and wealth building beyond retirement limits

#### Insurance and Strategic Spending

As your assets grow, your reliance on certain types of insurance may change. With strong savings in place, large purchases can be funded strategically rather than through debt.

**Phase 3 is the reward for the work done in earlier phases. It is where financial confidence and flexibility become real.**

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## Questions to Ask Yourself

- Which phase best describes where I am right now?
- Do I have positive cash flow each month?
- Have I started emergency savings, even in a small way?
- Am I capturing my full employer match?
- What is the next step I can take to move into the next phase?

## Take Action

- Identify which phase you are currently in
- Write down the one or two steps most relevant to your phase
- Set a specific, small goal you can act on this month
- Revisit your progress in 90 days and adjust as needed

**Everyone progresses at a different pace. What matters is that you keep moving forward.**