Simple Secrets to Becoming a Saving Whiz

Stop Feeling Overwhelmed, Take Control of Your Money, and Create the Lifestyle You Want

Gina Zakaria

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Baba (Dad)—with all my heart, this one's for you.

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Introduction

Fixing your finances can feel overwhelming and stressful. And if you've ever attempted to fix your finances on your own, you may have come across terms or concepts that added more confusion. Since money is a universal concept, it's important that it's universally understood. This book intends to simplify your money journey by breaking down the complicated concepts into easy-to-understand nuggets of knowledge so you can confidently take steps forward and make progress.

There are five major parts to this book. The first two parts ("Unlearn" and "Assess and Address") aim to help you recognize where you are, how you got there, and what to do to move forward with your finances. The last three parts ("Grocery Savings," "Bill Savings," and "Budget Better") offer practical approaches that help you sidestep common pitfalls and methods that can help you reach your financial goals with more ease. Each part has chapters that are intended to provide a deeper understanding of the overarching theme of that part.

It's important to mention a few things that make this book a bit different from your average personal finance book. First and foremost, while I do have a background in finance, I wrote this book from the point of view of an ordinary mom who wanted to fix her finances without sacrificing her lifestyle in the process. This book is very much a conversation from one friend to another about all the freedom that was discovered in keeping things simple. So you won't find me teaching you accounting techniques or financial formulas that require charts and spreadsheets to learn. Instead, I show you financial concepts and approaches that make your financial journey just a little bit easier and a lot less overwhelming.

Second, your personal finance journey is personal. This book is not meant to encompass every possible scenario or rare situations that require certain actions to be resolved but instead focuses on teaching thought-provoking principles that aim to shift your perspective and help transform your mindset over time. Whether you are a single mom with a high school diploma or a high-income singleton with a PhD, the principles and approaches highlighted in this book provide structure with the freedom to adapt the methods in a way that supports your personal money goals.

Third, this book is for educational purposes and is not to be taken as financial advice. Its intended purpose is to foster new perspective, shift your mindset, help you build healthier financial habits, and empower you to take charge of your financial health and life.

Are you ready to begin your journey to an easier, simpler life of financial freedom? Great! Let's get started.

Part I

Unlearn

Chapter 1
Big Goals Don’t Budge

One message was crystal clear when I was a kid: big always meant better. I was always told to think big, dream big, and do big things. I didn't realize it at the time, but every interaction I had growing up pointed to the same underlying message: Success starts with a plan. A big plan. After all, big means better, doesn't it?

By the time I was in junior high school, I was expected to make big decisions too, like planning my future career path. And one night, as my mom and I were watching TV, I decided to share my big plan. I told her that I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up. You see, being raised in an Egyptian home meant that there were essentially three acceptable career options to choose from: lawyer, doctor, or engineer. And to my excitement, my career choice landed right inside the parameters of what was acceptable. I'll never forget my mom's response when I shared my plan with her. It wasn't necessarily what she said that stuck with me as much as the message that the words carried. She said lovingly, "You'll be more than a lawyer; one day, you'll be a judge."

I'm certain that those words were meant to give me confidence and show my mom's support, more than anything. And while her words were motivating, it was the underlying message that subtly made its way into shaping my mindset. That day, I realized that my goals and plans were not big enough. They needed to be bigger. A goal had to feel scary for it to be worthwhile.

Fast-forward to college graduation; I earned a Bachelor of Science in business and never became a judge or even a lawyer for that matter. Along the way, I realized that the law field wasn't for me, but somehow, a part of me felt like I took the easy way out. Even though I graduated with honors in a field I loved, it still felt like I failed because a Bachelor of Science degree had nowhere near the prestige of a Juris Doctorate. My accomplishment didn't feel big enough. I shake my head as I think of this moment now, but back then, that "fail" shook my confidence.

I continued to carry the "big goal" mentality into adulthood until I found myself as an all-or-nothing type of doer. It affected every part of my life. I either cleaned the entire house from top to bottom, reorganizing every drawer and closet, or left the dishes in the sink and my socks on the floor for days.

Inevitably, this mindset made its way into my financial life as well. With every major money goal I created, failure would be lurking around the corner, just waiting for me. And with every failure came another big swing to knock down my self-confidence. My big goals began to feel more like a burden and less like the admirable ambition I once thought they were, until they eventually became a stumbling block that stopped me from getting ahead.

But things really came to a head when my husband and I had just purchased our first house and almost immediately decided to renovate it because how else would we make this house "our home"? We were big fans of home renovation shows at the time and believed that for our space to feel like us, we had to knock down walls, paint every corner, and buy new pieces to decorate the space. So we did just that and found ourselves in a whopping $106,000 of high-interest debt in a matter of months!

Fully Committing to the Big Goal Mindset

Feeling overwhelmed, I settled deeper into my comfort zone mindset and put my "big goals" cap on. Surely, I thought, this time would be different, and I had so many reasons to believe it would be. At this point, I was older, wiser, and had more drive to make it work. I convinced myself that it wasn't the "big goal" mindset that was the problem, but that I just had not been disciplined enough to make it work before. But now I was determined to get out of debt, so I decided to commit to sticking to the plan, and we'd become debt free in no time.

The big goal I created seemed to be quite simple, at least on the surface. Our goal was to pay off our debt by halting all our spending except to pay bills and necessities. My logic was that this would create a ton of savings, and all those savings would go toward paying off our debt. Sounds straightforward, right? What could possibly go wrong?

So my husband and I tried this plan out for a few months. But every month, without missing a beat, we'd fail. And you'd think that this would be a sign for me to reassess, but nope! In my stubborn determination to succeed this time, I kept trying again and again. I'd restart each month the same way, convinced that this month I would be more disciplined and focused to make it work. After all, I was certain that the problem was not in my goal but rather in my lack of discipline.

This went on for months until one morning, I was on the very edge of losing all my patience. That morning, I was up at 4:30 a.m. and started my 45-minute commute to work before the sun came out. As I was driving, I felt frustrated and resentful. Here I am driving to work, already in a bad mood and on payday for that matter! My frustration came from the utter exhaustion I'd felt up until this point. Every extra dollar from our paychecks was going toward our debt payments, yet it felt like we were progressing at a snail's pace. Every dollar that paid debt should have felt motivating, but instead it felt depleting. Looking at our total debt, it seemed like we were not making much progress, even though we were sacrificing so much and gave ourselves no room for any fun. No takeout, no outings, no breaks. It was exhausting and draining, and it wasn't realistic for us to continue carrying on this way. There was no way we could sustain this plan long term, and I was ready to give up. But in that moment of frustration and hopelessness, I had a moment of clarity. "This plan sucks," I thought. "It's not *me* who's failing the plan; *the plan* is failing me!"

Shifting the Perspective to Achieve the Goal

My plan had failed, and I was frustrated. Why was my big goal so hard to accomplish? Why did big goals continue to stunt my progress? From where I was standing, it seemed like everyone else had the ability to reach their big goals. So what did they know that I didn't? As I dug deeper trying to find answers, I discovered a major flaw in big goals that changed my perspective.

If your eyes are solely on the big goal, it will always feel like you're not making progress. Imagine you're on a road trip and you need to travel past some mountains in the distance. If you focus your gaze on the mountains, no matter how much you drive, they still seem far away, and you have the illusion that you're not moving toward them.

But if you keep your foot on the gas and focus on the road in front of you instead of the mountains, you'll start to keep track of every mile driven, noticing your progress when you've driven five miles, then ten, and then fifty. Then, when you periodically take your eyes off the road and look back up at the mountains, you'll realize how much closer you are. Those miles seem like small steps when you're driving, yet they make all the difference in your journey to reach the mountains.