

# Financial apps can help keep your spending in check

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Joshua Levinson was about to splurge on some exercise equipment, but a personal finance app on his smartphone gave him a friendly reminder: He'd just recently dropped \$150 for Valentine's Day.

"When I looked at that, I was like 'OK, this has been an expensive week,'" said the 22-year-old college student in Tallahassee, Florida.

That notification, flashed by the Mint Personal Finance app, prompted Levinson to hold off on the \$40 purchase. He credits the app, which he's been using for about a year and a half, with helping him become more aware of where his money goes. He estimates it saves him from \$50 to \$100 a month.

Keeping tabs on your spending is essential to getting your finances under control, but this can be a tedious process. As a result, many people don't do it. A smartphone or tablet can help you see where your dollars are going, as a first step toward making a change.

Apps for budgeting, expense tracking, paying down debt and other personal financial uses abound these days on Apple's App Store on iTunes or on Google's Play Store. Many bank accounts also now come with apps that let you see your balance, [deposit checks](#) by taking a photo and view your transactions.

You'll want to try out a few to find out which one is the best fit for your needs. Some require users to enter spending data themselves, while

others can siphon those details automatically from your checking and credit card accounts, but require you to divulge information to access your accounts online.

What's important is to have something that you will stick with and that's generally simple.

## TRACKING ACCOUNTS & SPENDING

One of the most-downloaded [personal-finance](#) apps is Mint Personal Finance, from Intuit.

Mint requires little daily input from users. The app will automatically pull 90-days of transactions from [bank accounts](#), [credit cards](#), auto loans, and other accounts.

Credit card transactions often will have a category already assigned, based on the merchant. You can change that or add tags to help sort expenses. Users who like to pay for purchases in cash will have to enter those charges by hand, however.

To make it work, though, users have to provide Mint with their username and passwords to those accounts. If that makes you uneasy, Mint notes that it uses the same encryption and security measures as major banking institutions.

"We're also verified and monitored by third-party experts such as TRUSTe, VeriSign and other stalwarts of online security," said Holly Perez, a Mint spokeswoman. Despite a surge in high-profile cyberattacks on banks and retailers in the past year, Mint said its app continues to see year-over-year growth in downloads. The app continues to add features, most recently rolling out an option to receive free credit scores that requires users to divulge their full name and Social Security number.

Mint is free, but you'll have to get used to seeing ads mixed in with the information you actually want.

Similar apps: Pocket Expense Personal Finance, Money Manager Expense & Budget

Just interested in tracking your spending without linking your checking and [credit card accounts](#)? Try Spendee and One Touch Expenser. Both make it easy to quickly enter an expense on the go, among other features.

## CRAFTING A BUDGET

Although Mint and similar apps have tools to track where your money goes, You Need A Budget (YNAB) puts more emphasis on crafting a budget and keeping tabs on how closely you're sticking with it.

YNAB uses a budgeting feature that mirrors the "envelope" system of money management, which involves assigning budget items like groceries or clothing an envelope with a set amount of money every month. If you overspend on groceries, for example, you can shift some of the funds in one of your other budget categories to cover the excess spending, keeping you within your overall budget limits.

YNAB creates virtual envelopes you can track on your smartphone or PC. The app isn't free and only works in conjunction with a \$60 software you install on your personal computer.

Users can link up their bank account to YNAB, but the app doesn't automatically pull in spending data. Users have to enter each transaction manually.

"That one is a little harder to maintain if you're not in a heavy change-

my-life budget mode," said Katie Brewer, a certified financial planner in the Dallas area. "It forces you to focus on it."

Similar budgeting apps: Goodbudget, Mvelopes

## PAYING DOWN DEBT

You may be juggling post-holiday credit-card balances. Some apps can help you develop a strategy to minimize interest charges.

Among them is Easy Debt Free, which lets users set up payment plans based on the avalanche method, making debts with the highest interest rate the first priority, or the snowball approach, which involves paying off what you owe on the smallest accounts first.

Similar apps: Debt Payoff Assistant, Debt Payoff Planner

## CUSTOMIZING IS KEY

When sizing up financial apps, look for those that provide users plenty of options to customize spending categories.

Seeing a detailed breakdown showing, say, just how much of one's paycheck is going toward dining out can help add extra motivation to rein in spending, Brewer said.

"I want people to be able to see what they have been spending money on, not as a guilt exercise," said Brewer. "There's always this big question mark: 'I don't really know where the money goes.' That's one thing a budgeting app can help with. You can look at the hard numbers."

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