The Cost of Life Today

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Executive Summary

Joy Under Pressure

Americans Are Working Harder to Make Room for What Matters.

Financial well-being is often measured in practical terms: income, spending, savings, debt and the ability to cover essential expenses. But those numbers only tell part of the story.

The cost of life today is also felt through the everyday decisions and emotions that come with managing money: the destination wedding invite turned down, the overpriced coffee and croissant that make a long workday feel a little lighter, or the new team jersey bought in the excitement of a playoff run, then second-guessed when the credit card bill arrives.

These moments reflect the mental calculus people navigate whenever life and finances collide: what feels worth it, what can wait and what joy they are willing to protect when the budget feels tight.

Ally Bank created the Cost of Life Today report to explore a more human side of financial well-being — one that is often overlooked in broader macroeconomic conversations. Money wellness is not only about what consumers earn, spend and save. It is also about whether their financial choices leave room for the life they are living today and working to build for tomorrow.

At the heart of the research is the **Joy Index, a proprietary metric designed to capture consumers' ability to access, prioritize, afford and experience joy within their financial reality.** The Index offers a clear, intuitive way to understand where joy is present, where it is under pressure and how Americans' relationship with money and joy changes over time.

Our inaugural findings reveal a clear tension: **Americans have not abandoned joy. They are working harder to protect it.**

For Ally, financial well-being is about more than helping people prepare for what comes next. It means helping them build the confidence and flexibility to reach their long-term goals while still making room for the life that's happening now.

Joy is still showing up in relationships, rest, laughter, personal growth and everyday moments. But making room for it can require more intention. Consumers are weighing what feels meaningful today against what their money may need to support tomorrow, often navigating tradeoffs, uncertainty and guilt along the way.

Even so, financial pressure does not always push joy out of reach. Many consumers are adapting by finding lower-cost alternatives, spending more intentionally and protecting the people and experiences that matter most.

The report reinforces Ally's broader view of financial well-being: covering the essentials and preparing for tomorrow matter, but so does having enough room — in the budget, the schedule and the mind — to enjoy life today.

Key Findings at a Glance

What the Joy Index Reveals About How Americans Are Balancing Money, Responsibilities and Everyday Joy.

Joy Is Still Showing Up. Affording It Is the Hard Part.

Nearly 4 in 5 consumers experience joy at least monthly and nearly 70% spend on it monthly, yet only 15% say joy is easy to afford.

Go deeper on the Joy Gap on page 7.

Gen Z is Making Room for Joy On Its Own Terms.

About half of Gen Z falls within the two upper Joy Index bands, numerically ahead of millennials and Gen X. Gen Z also earns the highest Experience and Importance scores, spends on joy most frequently and is the generation most likely to maintain a dedicated joy budget — without reporting the highest average spend.

Learn how Gen Z is making room for joy on page 9.

Most Americans Are Trying to Protect Today and Tomorrow.

More than half of consumers, 54%, try to balance long-term financial goals with enjoying life today, even when it means making slower progress. Consumers are over three times as likely to prioritize their future over present-day enjoyment than the reverse.

See how Americans are balancing enjoyment today with longer-term goals on page 14.

Joy Spending Can Trigger Guilt — Even When Consumers Do Not Think They Are Overspending.

More than two-thirds of consumers, 68%, believe they spend the right amount on joy, or close to it, and only 6% believe they spend too much. Separately, 72% feel at least some guilt when spending on joy instead of other financial goals.

That guilt is especially pronounced among women. Three-quarters feel at least some guilt and 25% feel a lot, compared with 68% and 15% of men, respectively.

Explore the tension between joy, spending and guilt on page 16.

When Budgets Tighten, Consumers Protect What Matters Most.

Material purchases and higher-cost discretionary experiences are more likely to be cut, while social time, rest, pets, personal goals and other forms of well-being are comparatively protected.

The experiences consumers say bring them the most joy follow a similar pattern: family, partners, laughter, rest and connection lead, while shopping or splurging ranks last.

See what consumers cut — and what they protect — on page 18.

Money Creates Access. Mindset Shapes the Experience.

Consumers with a joy mindset are nearly twice as likely to experience joy weekly as those without one, and their Experience scores are almost identical across income levels.

Learn more about the joy mindset and its relationship with income on page 21.

Meet the Joy Index

A New Way to Understand How Money Shapes the Joy People Can Afford, Protect and Experience.

Traditional financial measures can show how consumers are spending, saving and feeling about the economy. What they do not always reveal is how those pressures shape everyday life — or how the experience differs across generations, income levels and genders.

How much room do people have to make joy part of their financial lives? Does greater age and earning power always translate to more freedom to prioritize what matters? Does a higher income change how often people experience joy or how easily they can afford and protect it?

To revisit the age-old question: Can money really buy happiness, or does it mostly buy the time, flexibility and breathing room that make joy easier to experience?

The Cost of Life Today report brings those questions into focus, **offering a human, behavior-led complement to traditional economic measures.**

At the center of the report is **the Joy Index, a proprietary metric** designed to capture **consumers' ability to access, prioritize, afford and experience joy** within their financial reality.

The Joy Index is **scored from 0 to 100** and built from the four equally weighted pillars. Each contributes up to **25 points toward the total score.**

The Four Pillars of the Joy Index

1. **Affordability**: Whether consumers feel financially secure, can cover essential expenses, can afford joy-related spending and believe they could continue making room for joy during economic uncertainty.
2. **Importance**: How intentionally consumers prioritize, protect or make room for joy within their financial lives.
3. **Experience**: How often consumers experience joy, gratitude, optimism, appreciation and meaningful moments.
4. **Resiliency**: How financial responsibilities, stress and mental load affect consumers' ability to balance long-term financial goals with enjoying life today.

The National Joy Index

Pillar	Average Score
Affordability	11.8 out of 25
Importance	13.7 out of 25
Experience	16.0 out of 25
Resiliency	12.7 out of 25
Overall Joy Index	**54.2 out of 100**

Experience is the strongest-scoring pillar nationally, suggesting joy is still appearing regularly in consumers' lives.

Affordability is the weakest.

In translation: **Americans are still finding joy, but many feel financially pressed to make room for it easily, confidently or consistently.**

Meet the Joy Index

The average U.S. adult scored

54.2

out of 100

on the Joy Index

How to Read the Joy Index

A higher Joy Index score reflects greater financial stability and resilience, stronger prioritization of meaningful experiences and more frequent experiences of joy.

The average U.S. adult scored 54.2 out of 100, placing consumers in **Joy Pressured** territory — a sign that joy is present, but financial pressure can make it harder to consistently access, afford and sustain. The full index score is interpreted across four bands:

Joy Index Band	Score Range	What It Means
Joy Stretched	0-40.0	Consumers face the greatest constraints and have fewer resources to support financial stability and meaningful experiences.
Joy Pressured	>40.1-54.7	Consumers have some capacity for joy, but ongoing financial pressure makes it harder to access, afford and sustain.
Joy Protected	>54.8-68.8	Consumers have greater stability and more opportunity to prioritize the experiences, relationships and moments that bring joy.
Joy Flourishing	>68.9-100	Consumers have strong financial capacity, flexibility and the ability to consistently prioritize what matters most.

What We Mean by Joy

In this report, joy refers to the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the everyday experiences and spontaneous moments that make life feel meaningful, enjoyable or restorative, from time with family and friends to laughter, hobbies, milestones, pets or a quiet moment to recharge.

It is not the same as constant happiness or pretending financial pressure does not exist. The Joy Index measures whether people have the capacity and opportunity to make room for what matters — and how often those moments show up in their lives.

The Joy Gap

Joy Still Matters. Affording It Is the Hard Part.

People are Continuing to Prioritize Joy, Even as Financial Pressure Makes It Harder to Sustain.

The feel-good news? **Americans are still finding joy — and continuing to make it part of their everyday lives.**

But for many, making room for those moments still requires careful choices.

Only 15% say the purchases and experiences that bring them joy are easy to afford. Just 20% say it is easy to cover essential expenses and only 15% are confident they could continue affording joy during an economic downturn.

Spending Happens More Often Than Planning

The Joy Gap also shows up in how consumers plan for joy.

Although most respondents report spending on joy every month, only 39% have a dedicated budget for it. Just 27% say intentionally setting aside money for joy is very or extremely important.

Without a defined place in the budget, joy spending can become an in-the-moment decision, which becomes far easier to question, delay or cut when another expense arises.

Enter the Joy Gap:

The tension between the role people want joy to play in their lives and the financial flexibility they have to support it comfortably.

Keeping joy in the picture can require more planning, tradeoffs and second-guessing than many would like.

Only 15%

say the purchases and experiences that bring them joy are easy to afford.

The Joy Gap

Joy Is Showing Up — Alongside Pressure

Joy remains part of everyday life:

- **79%** generally experience something that brings them joy at least monthly.
- **68%** spend on joy at least monthly.
- **68%** experienced genuine joy within the past month.
- **77%** consciously pause and celebrate joy at least monthly.

At the same time, emotional and financial pressures remain part of the picture:

- **77%** reduce, delay or avoid joy spending at least occasionally because of the financial pressure or other priorities.
- **70%** feel stressed at least monthly about balancing financial responsibilities with enjoying life.
- **69%** feel overwhelmed by financial responsibilities at least monthly.

Only 20% believe they are managing the financial pressures in their lives very or extremely well.

Ally Money Wellness Tip

Money wellness is not only about saying no to spending. It is just as much about planning for the yeses that really matter. A dedicated "joy fund" bucket in an Ally Bank Savings Account can give meaningful experiences a place alongside other financial goals — and make it easier to spend with intention when the moment arrives.

"We had to cut back on Christmas. It's going to be really sad, I'm not going to lie. When you don't have money for Christmas or to go and do fun things, it severely impacts your level of joy."

Woman, 28, Gen Z
$50K–$100K household income

Gen Z Is Making Room for Joy

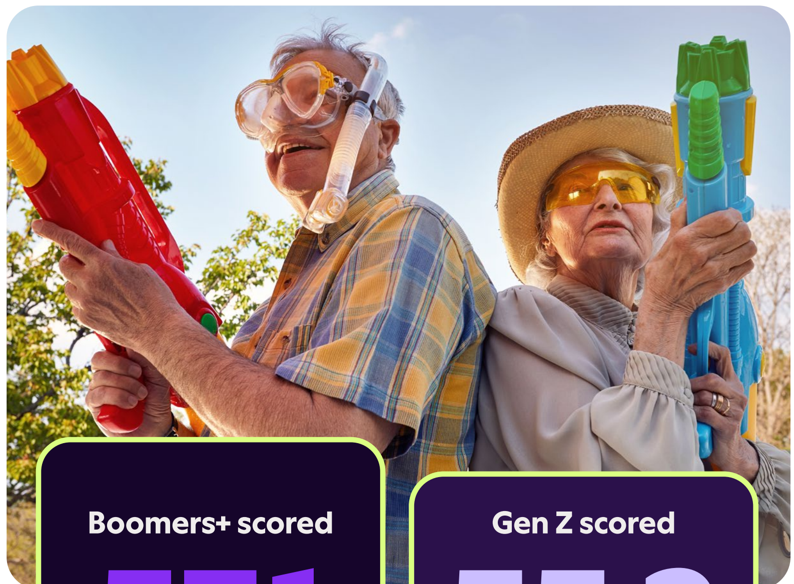
Half of Gen Z Falls in the Two Upper Joy Index Bands — Numerically Ahead of Millennials and Gen X.

Boomers+ have the highest overall Joy Index score, at **57.1,** and the largest share of consumers in **Joy Flourishing** at 33%.

Yet the full picture across generations tells a more nuanced story — particularly for Gen Z.

Gen Z earns the second-highest overall Index score, at 55.2, placing the generation in Joy Protected territory. It also earns the highest Experience and Importance scores of any generation.

Gen Z also records the second-lowest Resiliency score, narrowly ahead of millennials. Its high Experience and Importance scores sit alongside comparatively lower Resiliency, showing that strength in one dimension of the Joy Index does not necessarily extend across every pillar.



Boomers+ scored **57.1** on the Joy Index

Gen Z scored **55.2** on the Joy Index

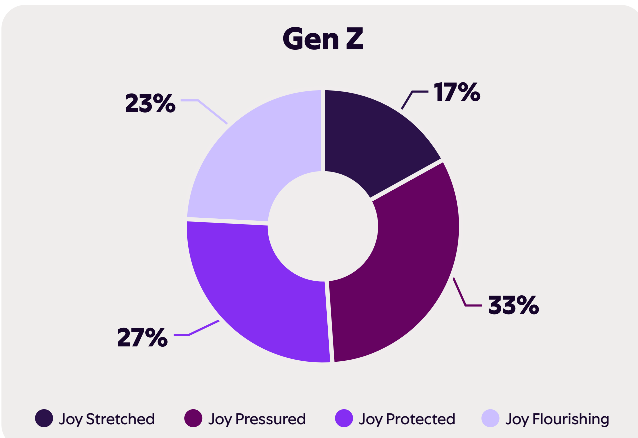
Generation	Joy Index	Band	Affordability	Importance	Experience	Resiliency
Gen Z	55.2	Joy Protected	12.3	15.4	17.6	9.9
Millennials	52.0	Joy Pressured	11.3	15.3	15.8	9.7
Gen X	50.5	Joy Pressured	10.5	13.1	15.1	11.9
Boomers+	57.1	Joy Protected	12.5	12.2	16.2	16.2

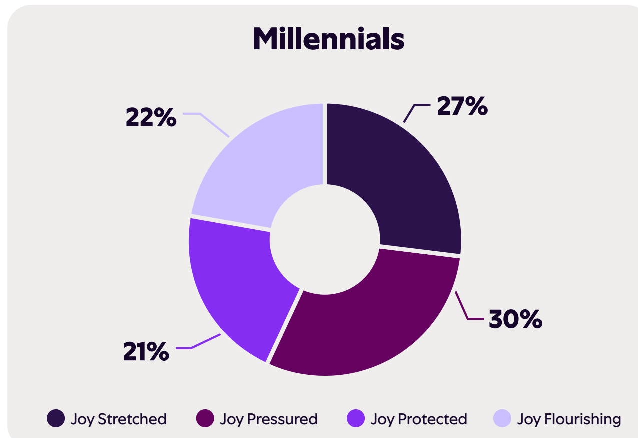
Gen Z Is Making Room for Joy

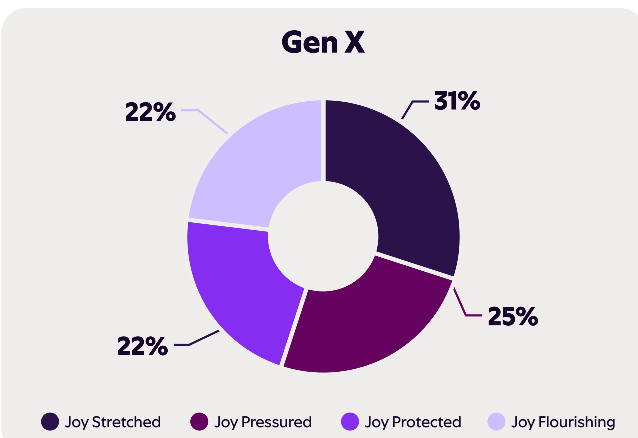
How Joy Is Distributed Across Generations

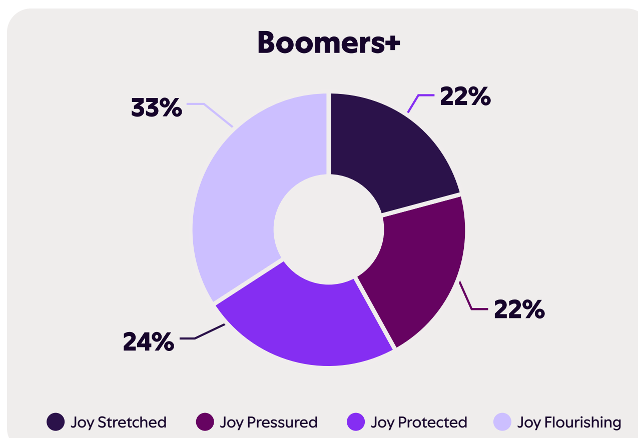
The four bands reflect a continuum, from Joy Stretched, where financial constraints are greatest, to Joy Flourishing, where consumers have the strongest capacity to consistently prioritize what matters.

Half of Gen Z falls within the two upper bands — Joy Protected or Joy Flourishing. That is numerically ahead of millennials, at 43%, and Gen X, at 44%.









Gen Z's distribution is distinct. The generation has the smallest Joy Stretched share and the largest Joy Protected share, while nearly one-third remains Joy Pressured — underscoring how varied the Gen Z experience is across the Index.

Boomers+ have the largest combined upper-band share, at 57%, driven in part by their higher concentration in Joy Flourishing.

*Percentages may not exactly total 100% due to rounding.

Gen Z Is Making Room for Joy

Gen Z Spends on Joy Most Often — and Actively Budgets for It

Gen Z is the generation **most likely to spend on joy** at least monthly, at 76%, and at least weekly, at 28%.

Gen Z is also the generation most likely to have a dedicated budget for joy, at 56%. That compares with 46% of millennials, 32% of Gen X and 29% of Boomers+.

Average monthly spending is relatively consistent across generations. Gen Z reports spending an average of $295 per month on joy, just below Boomers+ at $298 and compared with an average of $286 across all generations.

Millennials report spending an average of $287 per month on joy, coming in above Gen X, who reports spending the least at $259.

Across these measures, **Gen Z reports the highest joy-spending frequency and budgeting rate** without reporting the highest average spend.

When Breathing Room Feels Like A Luxury

Extra Money, Extra Time and Fewer Financial Worries Can Feel Like Signs of Abundance.

For many Americans, luxury is not defined only by extravagant products or exclusive experiences.

It can also look like having enough breathing room — in a budget, schedule or state of mind — to make everyday choices with greater ease.

For more than half of Americans, taking a vacation feels like a luxury. Roughly half say the same about having money left after paying bills, being able to save while still enjoying life or eating out without worrying about the bill.

Aspiration lives in the ordinary. Having free time, investing in a hobby, choosing higher-quality groceries or bringing friends and family together can all reflect something deeply valuable: **greater freedom over how time and money are spent.**

What Feels Like a Luxury Today

Taking a vacation	56%
Having money left after paying bills	50%
Being able to save and still enjoy life	47%
Eating out without worrying about the bill	47%
Having free time	37%
Spending money on hobbies or personal interests	35%
Buying higher-quality groceries or specialty foods	32%
Taking care of a pet without financial stress	25%
Hosting or celebrating with friends and family	25%

When Breathing Room Feels Like A Luxury

The findings paint a broader view of how consumers define luxury. It is not solely about what Americans can buy, but the freedom, flexibility and peace of mind their money can help create.

Money left after bills can create choice. Free time can create space to recharge. A meal out can feel different when it does not trigger an immediate calculation about what may need to be sacrificed later.

> "When I get paid for my next project, I'm going to use it to pay off a good chunk of my car payment instead of going on vacation."
>
> **Man, 39, Millennial**
> $40K–$60K household income

The Balancing Act

Living for Today While Protecting Tomorrow

Most Consumers Are Trying to Enjoy Life Now Without Losing Sight of What They Are Building for the Future.

Financial responsibility is too often framed as an either-or choice: spend and enjoy life today, or stay disciplined and save for the future.

But a money mindset built entirely around restriction can quickly start to feel like punishment. When every "yes" feels irresponsible, frustration can build, making a financial plan harder to stick to and potentially contributing to a cycle of restriction and rebound spending.

A more realistic financial plan leaves room for both progress and enjoyment. Encouragingly, most Americans appear to be aiming for that balance.

More than half, **54%, say they try to balance long-term financial goals with enjoying life today**, even when that means making slower progress.

By comparison, **27% prioritize long-term financial goals** even when it means saying no to enjoyment today. Only **8% prioritize present-day experiences** when doing so could delay their longer-term goals.

"Tradeoffs mean working more, cutting back on things like eating out and hoping my kids don't notice, or not buying the new clothes I need. I'm delaying savings and retirement contributions. I take on credit card debt. And I work more."

Woman, 45, Gen X
$200K+ household income

The Balancing Act

Consumers are more than three times as likely to prioritize their future over enjoyment today than to prioritize enjoyment at the expense of their financial goals.

The balanced approach leads across every generation.

Millennials are numerically the most likely to say they balance long-term goals with enjoying life today, at 57%, followed by Gen Z at 54%, Boomers+ at 52% and Gen X at 50%.

Women and men land in a similar place:
54% of women and 53% of men are trying to protect tomorrow while still leaving room for today.

Approach to Today and Tomorrow

Balance long-term goals and enjoying life today, even if it means slower progress

Women	54%
Men	53%
Overall	54%

Prioritize long-term financial goals, even if it means saying no to enjoyment today

Women	26%
Men	28%
Overall	27%

Prioritize enjoyment today, even if it delays long-term goals

Women	8%
Men	9%
Overall	8%

Not sure

Women	13%
Men	10%
Overall	11%

*Percentages may not exactly total 100% due to rounding.

When Joy Comes with a Side of Guilt

When Every Dollar Has Several Jobs, Even Manageable Spending Can Trigger Guilt.

Trying to balance today and tomorrow can come with an emotional cost.

A fashion splurge may fit within the budget but still invite buyer's remorse later. A mother-daughter getaway can create lasting memories alongside a lingering question about whether the money should have gone toward retirement. Even a small pick-me-up treat can feel less enjoyable when it is mentally measured against an emergency fund, debt payment or family need.

For many consumers, the question is not simply: can I afford this?

Rather, it is: I can afford this, but is it really a responsible financial choice?

More than 7 in 10 consumers, **72%, feel at least some guilt when spending on joy instead of other financial goals.** 1 in 5 overall feel a high amount of guilt.

	Guilt when spending on joy instead of financial goals (% any guilt): A high amount of guilt	Feel any guilt	Say Joy-Spending Is Completely Worth the Cost
Overall	20%	72%	29%
Gen Z	22%	77%	27%
Millennials	23%	76%	29%
Gen X	22%	74%	27%
Boomers+	14%	63%	32%
Women	25%	75%	28%
Men	15%	68%	30%

● A high amount of guilt ● Feel any guilt

When Joy Comes with a Side of Guilt

Guilt Extends Far Beyond Perceived Overspending

More than two-thirds of consumers, 68%, believe they spend the right amount on joy, or close to it. Slightly more than one-quarter (26%) say they spend too little, while only 6% believe they spend too much.

Separately, 72% report feeling at least some guilt when spending on joy instead of other financial goals.

The discomfort may be less about recklessness than uncertainty over whether a choice is the right one. When every dollar is being asked to do several jobs — cover today's needs, pay down debt and build savings — it's easy to get caught up in rumination about how that money could have been more effectively used.

Younger Consumers Feel Joy-Spending Guilt More Acutely

Gen Z and millennials are equally likely to feel at least some guilt, at 77% and 76% respectively. **Millennials are the generation most likely to report feeling a lot of guilt, at 23%.**

Gen X follows closely, with 74% reporting some level of guilt and 22% reporting a lot.

Boomers+ offer a contrast. While a majority still experience guilt (63%), they are less likely than younger generations to report it and more likely, at **32%, to say joy-spending is completely worth the cost.**

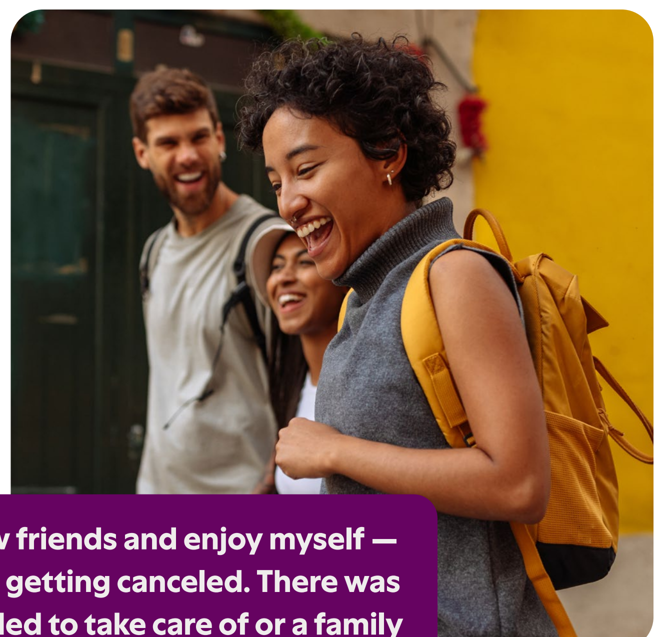
Women Experience Similar Joy, But Shoulder Greater Financial Guilt

Women and men earn nearly identical Experience scores on the Joy Index: 16.2 versus 16.0 out of 25.

But women report more guilt surrounding joy spending.

Three-quarters of women feel at least some guilt when spending on joy instead of another financial goal, compared with 68% of men. Women are also considerably more likely to feel a lot of guilt, at 25% versus 15%.

Women are not experiencing less joy, but they may be carrying more of the emotional negotiation behind making room for it.



"I was really wanting to go out, make new friends and enjoy myself — actually have some me time — but it kept getting canceled. There was a bill I should have paid off, a utility I needed to take care of or a family member who needed something. Necessities always matter more, and life is expensive, so you just have to deal."

Woman, 33, Millennial
$40K–$60K household income

The Joy Tradeoff

What Consumers Cut & What They Protect

When Budgets Tighten, Material Spending Gives Way Before Rest, Connection and Personal Growth.

When budgets are pressured, Americans are finding ways to keep joy in the picture. They are navigating lifestyle tradeoffs in real time — scaling back where they can while deciding what can flex, what can wait and what they're not willing to sacrifice.

More than seven in 10 consumers, 72%, reduced spending in at least one joy-related category during the past three months to stay on track with bills, savings or other financial priorities.

Gen Z and millennials are the most likely to have made at least one cut, at 79% and 78% respectively. That compares with 71% of Gen X and 63% of Boomers+.

Women are also more likely than men to have reduced spending in at least one category, at 75% versus 68%.

Where consumers choose to pull back reveals a broader hierarchy. Material purchases and higher-cost discretionary experiences are more likely to give way, while relationships, rest, wellness and personal growth are more often preserved.

What Consumers Are Most Likely to Cut

Over the past three months:

- **38% of consumers** reduced or cut back spending on dining out or food experiences.
- **34%** cut back on shopping or retail splurges.
- **27%** cut back on entertainment.
- **25%** cut back on travel or adventure.
- **21%** cut back on hobbies or personal interests.
- **21%** cut back on home improvement or DIY projects.

What Consumers Are More Likely to Protect

Smaller shares of consumers reduced spending on connection, rest and other forms of personal well-being:

- **17% of consumers** cut back on social time with friends.
- **15%** cut back on shared social experiences.
- **12%** cut back on social time with family.
- **11%** cut back on helping others or giving back.
- **12%** cut back on relaxing and taking time to recharge.
- **11%** cut back on fitness or wellness.
- **9%** cut back on spending related to pets or other animals.
- **9%** cut back on a personal fitness or health goal.
- **9%** cut back on time outdoors or in nature.
- **8%** cut back on learning or personal development.
- **7%** cut back on achieving an important personal goal.

38% of consumers reduced or cut back spending on dining out or food experiences

The Joy Tradeoff

The pattern becomes more meaningful when viewed alongside the experiences consumers say bring them the most joy.

Shopping or splurging ranks last among the measured experiences, well behind family, partners, laughter, rest and connection.

Experience	Contributes a Lot or a Great Deal of Joy
Meaningful time with family	46%
Meaningful time with a partner or spouse	43%
Unexpected laughter, delight or surprise	42%
Relaxing and taking time to recharge	40%
Time with pets or other animals	35%
Meaningful time with friends	34%
Travel or adventure	30%
Achieving an important financial goal	31%
Celebrating major life moments	29%
Shopping or splurging on retail items	15%

"If we want maybe a little extra money for something fun, one of the places I can cut back really easily is groceries. Maybe we won't buy expensive groceries or lots of snacks. Maybe we won't buy a new outfit for an event. It's tradeoffs everywhere."

Woman, 41, Gen X
$80K–$100K household income

"We are prioritizing the kids, basically. Spending on the kids brings me joy. Seeing them happy is definitely joyful."

Woman, 47, Gen X
$200K+ household income

The Joy Tradeoff

When Wallets Tighten, Joy Finds Another Way

Scaling back does not always mean giving up joy altogether. **When money is tight, 47% of consumers seek lower-cost or free ways to experience joy.**

Lower cost alternatives lead, suggesting financial pressure often changes the price or format of joy rather than removing it altogether.

How Consumers Respond When Money Is Tight	Overall
Seek lower-cost or free ways to experience joy	47%
Save up and spend on joy only when they can afford it	42%
Cut back on necessities to make room for joy	20%
Take on debt or use credit to pay for joy	13%
Not sure	9%

"I might not say yes to every concert or dinner invitation. I would rather find joy at home — going on walks, being in my backyard or gardening. Things that don't necessarily cost money but still bring you joy."

Woman, 42, Gen X
$100K–$150K household income

Joy Begets Joy

How Mindset Shapes the Joy Experience

A Joy-Oriented Mindset Is Strongly Associated with More Frequent Joy — Across Income Levels.

One of the clearest differentiators in how often consumers experience joy was not simply how much money they had. It was whether they demonstrated what the research defines as **a joy mindset.**

Respondents with a joy mindset report all four of the following at least weekly:

- Appreciating the little things in life.
- Feeling gratitude for what one has.
- Feeling excited or hopeful about the future.
- Experiencing moments of wonder or awe.

More than one-quarter of consumers, 26% report all four attributes at least weekly.

Consumers with a joy mindset are nearly twice as likely to say they generally experience joy at least once a week: 88% versus 45% among consumers without a weekly joy mindset.

The data suggest a reinforcing pattern. Experiencing joy may make gratitude, optimism and appreciation easier to access, while regularly noticing those moments may make joy easier to recognize and experience.

The research does not establish that mindset causes joy. But it does show a strong relationship between the habits associated with noticing joy and how frequently consumers experience it.

"I had a big piano performance. Being able to share music, art and my work with an audience — and seeing them receive joy from it — created a meaningful cycle of joy."

Man, 26, Gen Z
$50K–$100K household income

Joy Begets Joy

Mindset Shapes the Experience of Joy Across Income Levels

The pattern becomes especially striking when viewed across household income.

Among consumers with a joy mindset, Experience scores are virtually identical:

Household Income	Experience Score with a Joy Mindset
Less than $50,000	24.2 out of 25
$50,000–$99,999	24.0 out of 25
$100,000 or more	24.0 out of 25

Consumers with a joy mindset report nearly the same Experience score regardless of income.

The overall Joy Index continues to rise with income, however, reflecting the greater affordability, stability and resilience that additional financial resources can provide:

Household Income	Overall Joy Index With a Joy Mindset
Less than $50,000	63.0 out of 100
$50,000–$99,999	68.2 out of 100
$100,000 or more	71.7 out of 100

Income can make joy easier to access by creating greater financial flexibility. But among consumers with a joy mindset, nearly identical Experience scores across income levels suggest that income alone does not determine how fully joy is felt.

Financial Well-Being Should Leave Room for Life

Financial well-being is often defined by what people can cover, save and withstand. Those foundations matter. But the Joy Index widens the lens to include whether people have enough room to experience the life their financial goals are meant to support.

Americans are not simply choosing between responsibility and joy. They are trying to make room for both — protecting tomorrow while preserving rest, connection and personal growth today.

When budgets tighten, many adapt rather than abandon joy. They pull back where they can, find lower-cost alternatives and hold closer to the people and experiences that matter most.

Money can create greater security, choice and access. Mindset can shape how fully people recognize and experience what is already within reach. Neither replaces the other.

For Ally, that is the broader promise of financial well-being: helping people build confidence for what comes next while making thoughtful, intentional choices about the life happening now.

Because preparing for tomorrow should not require putting today completely on hold.

Behind the Research

Methodology

The Joy Index is a proprietary index designed to capture how well consumers are able to balance financial responsibilities while maintaining a joyful and fulfilling life. The Joy Index is a composite score, based on four components, Affordability, Resiliency, Importance, and Experience. Each component is equally weighted with a maximum of 25 points to create an index score, ranging from 0 to 100. The score is informed by questions about how often consumers experience joy, whether they can afford the things that bring them joy, how important those experiences are relative to other priorities and how resilient joy remains during periods of financial stress.

The research was conducted by YouGov and fielded in July 2026 among a nationally representative sample of more than 5,000 U.S. adults, ages 18 and older who have some role in household financial decision-making. Savings buckets are a feature of Ally Bank's Savings Account. Ally Bank, Member FDIC.

To learn more about the financial decisions, tradeoffs and emotions shaping modern life today, visit allybank.com/reports.