

Three Ways to Avoid the Downside of Retirement

When it comes to retirement, it's easy to dream about the perks: sleeping in, traveling, reading a good book, playing golf—name your fantasy. Even if your retirement is fully funded, the reality can be far less fulfilling if you don't plan ahead.

Repeated studies have shown that people who do not have a rewarding retirement can suffer both physically and psychologically during retirement. Lack of mental stimulation is a primary reason. People are often forced into retirement before they are ready. Others think they are ready, and yet are not prepared for the day-to-day realities of a new lifestyle.

Working or volunteering can offer structure that is perceived both positively and negatively. When you move from working to not working, you can begin to wonder if you still matter. Even if you have financially planned for retirement, the impact can be more jarring than you may have anticipated.

If you want to get a real picture of what retirement might feel like, talk to someone who was *forced* to retire sooner than expected—as opposed to learning about it from someone who worked for 40 years in a job he didn't particularly like and then retired at 65. “Sudden retirees” are those who ended up in a retired state because of unexpected events such as the merger or sale of a business, downsizing, injury, sickness, or the need to care for a family member. The experiences of these individuals might be a better looking glass for previewing your own retirement. Many of the people who have been cast into unexpected retirements are often still energetic and full of vision for their future.

Sudden retirees find themselves having to make many life decisions before they are ready. Ideally, we want to determine not only our financial needs, but also our psychological ones (i.e. work) that we'll face at the retirement stage of life. We hear and read plenty on the financial aspects but not as much on the activity and existence facets of life.

Working is part of that equation—it keeps you both interested and interesting. Working may also help you stay married. Divorce among retirees is surprisingly high; in couples over the age of 50, the rate has increased from 8 percent in 1990 to 25 percent! The lesson here is that couples need space for relationships to grow and prosper, especially during the transition into retirement. Staying engaged and having outside pursuits—including work—is critical to both you and your partner's health and well-being. In addition, keeping your individual identity through the retirement process leads to a better sense of self-worth.

If you are concerned with health issues interfering with your work life expectations, pay attention to the factors that can impact your health, including excess body weight, tobacco use, high-risk activities or behaviors, chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, back pain, anxiety or depression, and frequent alcohol consumption or substance abuse. Factors that decrease your health risks include a healthy body weight, no tobacco use, healthy diet and sleep habits, regular exercise, moderate to no alcohol consumption, avoidance of high-risk behaviors, including substance abuse, a healthy stress level, and effective treatment of chronic health conditions. The takeaway? Take care of yourself!

If you speak to retirees who did not plan ahead, you may hear, “First, you're bored—then you're boring.” Staying both physically and psychologically healthy prevents both.

Most of us recognize that the second half of life can mean a second wind—not just a breeze, but a gust to fill our sails. It is a time in life to contribute, learn, and try new things. But because many of us are living longer than our parents and grandparents, the bonus of extended middle age is still so new that we may have neglected to plan adequately.

Many of us walk into retirement with rose-colored glasses and naïveté regarding the impact on our emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual beings. Instead, be sure to also look at the dangers, pitfalls, and traps that can swallow you whole. If your retirement plan extends beyond what's in your portfolio, you will, no doubt, be successful.

How do you avoid the downside of retirement? Have a conversation with your friends and family about activities and pursuits that fulfill you, and the things that you are concerned about. Even if you're forced into retirement sooner than you'd like, don't ever quit on your intellectual, social, or spiritual advancements in life. Here are three ideas for improving your long-term retirement outlook:

1. Continue to work or volunteer, even if it's part-time.
2. Continuously update your job skills so you stay current—and relevant.
3. Be a lifelong learner—seek additional education and training.

Focus on what's ahead of you, not on what's behind. Keep your eyes off the rearview mirror of life and the GPS, and focus on the road ahead...and keep the pedal to the metal!