

RETIREMENT HIGH...OR PIE IN THE SKY

BY GINGER E. BLUME, PH.D.

Slick magazine ads and TV promos would have you believe that your retirement years will be filled with wonderment and freedom as you travel and participate in all those activities you never had time to do before. But wait. The small print might have you understand otherwise. Let's take a look.

Whether we're discussing retirement or any other aspect of human development, there are some major determinants of human happiness. Once our needs for adequate financial resources are met, we need a social network where we belong, a sense of purpose for waking up every morning, decent health to enjoy what we have, and a psychological attitude that will allow us to appreciate the positives. These factors, in a nutshell, will determine a lot of our adult happiness, especially in retirement.

When I ask people if they've begun planning for retirement, they usually think I'm asking about their financial planning. This is only one aspect of retirement planning. Other key items on the planning list should include the following:

- 1. Self-Awareness:** People need to develop some self-awareness that allows them to understand their own personal needs so they can anticipate and plan for a fulfilling lifestyle in retirement that will help meet those important needs.
- 2. Network of family and/or friends:** The research is clear. One of the factors that makes retirement more difficult, for some, is that it is stressful to be a distance away from the support system and people you have known all your life. People need to have a sense of belonging. Women are especially good at developing significant relationships throughout their adult lives and by the time they retire, they're more likely to have developed life-long friendships. In general, women tend to be the social coordinator for the family. They tend to be, therefore, more oriented towards relationships and relationship building. Men usually have friendships associated with their work and once work ends, these friendships oftentimes end, too. Many retirees seek a social network through club membership, church/synagogue participation, etc
- 3. A Plan or Structure for Retirement Lifestyle:** Most people, who work on a daily basis, have a routine or structure that determines the bulk of their waking hours. In retirement, this artificially imposed structure is suddenly gone. Initially, the freedom to get up in the morning when you want, decide to get dressed or stay in pyjamas all day, etc. can feel great. But over time, we need a sense of structure in our lives, whether it means playing cards with the buddies on Friday nights, babysitting for grandchildren every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, attending a monthly concert series, etc.
- 4. Decent Health:** To enjoy your retirement years, you need to be in good enough health. This means taking care of your overall health along the way, with adequate health check ups, eating right, maintaining a healthy weight, and developing some routine ways for exercise in your lifestyle.

5. A sense of Purpose: Without a sense of purpose or meaning for waking up each day, the retirement days will eventually run into each other and retirement can become a slow “death walk.” Keep in mind that for most people, their retirement may be as long as their childhood---about 18 years (and this can seem endless for some).

Prior to retirement, most people have found purpose through their work or career. When work ends, purpose can end, too. Many people’s personal sense of identity is locked into their work---i.e. I’m a high school teacher, accountant, judge, software developer, etc. Without having a sense of balance in life with an identity that extends beyond what you “do,” retirement can seem meaningless. After all, we can only be “in vacation mode” for so long before it gets boring. A sense of purpose must be developed prior to ending work, by developing an understanding of your value as a person (i.e. value in your very being, not just your every doing).

Begin preparing for retirement now

In addition to considering the above five points, remember this important fact: Who you are prior to retirement is who you will be after retirement. If you’re living for the golden years when you’ll finally do x, y and z, you may be fooling yourself if you’re not already doing some of those things now. Circumstances may change, but we always bring “ourselves with us” wherever we go!

This brings up another aspect of retirement happiness. Some of your satisfaction with retirement will come down to what you have versus what you expected to have... and I’m not simply referring to money here. It is the same as every other aspect of life. This one factor (*expectations*) can be a major determinant whether you are happy or sad.

Retirement satisfaction will also be affected by the *attitude* you bring to this phase of life. The more optimistic you are, the better you will be able to adjust to change and stress compared with a pessimist. Again, your attitude is probably going to be easy to predict. Just look at your general attitude about your life right now, regardless of your age.

Your *ability to manage change* in a positive way is another factor. People have different abilities and coping mechanisms to deal with major changes in their lives. Change can be synonymous with stress. There are different ways of adjusting to perceived stressors in your life. Some people may turn to alcohol or gambling in response to stress. Others may internalize stress and develop various health problems or ailments. It is possible to predict how someone will handle adjusting to retirement by observing how s/he has handled other stresses in their lives prior to retirement.

Control is an important issue that runs through all stages of life. Was I forced to retire or did I retire voluntarily? Do I have control over this stage of my life? The more control you have, the easier you’ll cope. How you manage change will dramatically affect how you manage stress.

If you’ve read this entire article, you’ve been exposed to the “small print” about retirement reality. Please, use this information to prepare for a successful retirement stage of life that you can truly enjoy.

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