

Developing a Realizable Vision for Retirement

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By Richard Atkinson

You can make the difficult transition into retirement easier by exploring your expectations and desires. With some careful prioritizing—and collaborating with your advisor—you can design a working plan for retirement that may surpass all your expectations.

When most people think of retirement, they imagine leaving a job they're tired of, getting out of the rat race, and leaving the pressures of employment behind. Often retirement is viewed as a reward for time in the workforce and a benefit of successful financial planning.

But retirement is so much more than giving up a job and relaxing. Retirees are entering one of the most exciting and challenging stages of their life. It can be a time to draw on personal and professional experiences to open new doors of opportunity and education. It can be a time to realize potential and accomplish goals previously delayed by careers and raising a family.

Although the opportunities are endless, a successful retirement doesn't come without its hurdles. There are many things to consider in order to get it right, such as living on a reduced income, creating a health and wellness strategy, and evaluating relationships. Also important is the allocation of personal time, determining living arrangements, and recognizing change in social roles. There is also the unfortunate but necessary adjustment to the eventual death of loved ones.

During the first days, weeks, or maybe even months of retirement, people often experience a blissful honeymoon-like feeling. No boss, no job, no worries! Just time to sit around and do whatever crosses your mind. During this period, people generally have little motivation to plan for the future.

But as the honeymoon period winds down, a number of newly minted retirees report a feeling of disenchantment. Retirement no longer feels like an extended holiday. Time begins to weigh heavily on their shoulders. Playing golf five times a week begins to feel like a chore. Projects around the house lose their appeal, and there can be a feeling that causes retirees to ask the question, "Is this all there is?" Frustration and disappointment can mount as some retirees get caught in this vortex and are unable to get out.

The life we lead is a result of the choices we make. That means in pre-retirement and retirement years, it's important to make the right choices—ones that build a fulfilling and energized retirement. The majority of successful retirees recognize the power of creating a realistic retirement vision and an action plan to achieve it. Armed with this mental model, they are able to make sound choices and progress toward their desired results.

Where you come in

With help from a trusted advisor, you can work in a systematic way towards formulating a clear and focused retirement vision. In a way, your experience in early and mid-life makes you more aware and articulate than ever before concerning your own priorities; a better executive for the next phase of life. Remember, it is equally important to consider how you will spend your time as it to know how you will spend your money.

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A good way to begin is by taking time to visualize what the word “retirement” means to you. What is it that attracts, scares, or excites you about this particular time of life?

Next, write out a description of your imagined retirement life. What are you doing? What are you accomplishing? It’s important to be as descriptive as possible. Consider the following questions:

In retirement:

- What makes me happy?
- How much money do I have?
- What possessions do I own?
- How am I spending my time?
- Who is in my retirement picture?
- How is my health? How do I feel?
- How are my relationships with my spouse or partner, children, other family members, and friends?

First, imagine yourself in their first six months of retirement, then, at one and two years out. You can then ask yourself to visualize the end of your retirement, when you are 90, 95, or 100+. What are you most proud of? What have you done that has brought happiness to you and to others? What legacy will you leave behind?

It’s important to communicate personal desires and goals to your advisor. That way, he or she will be better equipped to help you develop a plan that strikes as close as possible to what will truly make you happiest.

Most people know someone who has made a successful retirement. What is it about those people that you admire? Is it their family relationships, their energy and enthusiasm, or perhaps their overall sense of well-being?

Think then of those challenged by retirement. In your opinion, what are those individuals doing or not doing that makes them less successful? Is it the exorbitant amount of time they spend watching television, their lack of adventure, or possibly a sense of helplessness toward this ever-changing world?

Once you’ve recorded a retirement vision, share it with a partner or spouse, close friends—and of course with your advisor. This process of sharing will provide different perspectives and help shape your final vision.

Optimism is key throughout the retirement visioning process. It’s important to focus on the rewards of a balanced retirement; meditate on the feeling of being complete, enriched, and financially secure. Retirement visions should be reviewed and rewritten as often as necessary, until the vision feels right and is in line with your wants, needs, and beliefs.

Meet with your advisor regularly to review your retirement vision. Interrogate and revise your plan to determine what’s working and what is not. You can then identify what changes are required and work on developing targeted ideas and solutions.

Frances, a busy 63-year-old supervisor, is employed with a major manufacturing company. Though for years she contributed to her retirement savings program, retirement wasn’t part of her everyday thinking. It was just something that would happen down the road.

Recently Frances’s financial advisor encouraged her to visualize retirement. Together they explored her needs, wants, and beliefs. As a result, Frances began to visualize what she wanted from retirement. She imagined herself getting back into tennis, being fit, and exercising regularly. She visualized herself volunteering and giving back to her community. Frances began taking the first steps to building her retirement future. With the right plan, she had been able to bypass most of the life anxiety that many individuals on the cusp of retirement endure.

As you enter the second-longest phase in your life, take an informed, active role in getting it right. With appropriate guidance and thoughtful planning, you will be able to enjoy life after work, even relish it.

Richard “Rick” Atkinson is president of RA Retirement Advisors, a firm specializing in retirement planning, and the author of the book “Don’t Just Retire—Live It, Love It!”