

Your New Retirement Job: Staying Engaged

By Carolyn L. Rosenblatt

It's Monday morning. You wake up and try to clear the fog in your head. Immediately you force yourself out of bed. You stumble into the kitchen for your coffee, ready to steel yourself for the day.

You flip on the TV and hear about the traffic mess you have to get through to get to work. Suddenly you realize you don't have to deal with traffic. You don't have to multitask. You don't have to go to work. You're retired.

The day stretches in front of you with nothing on your calendar. What are you going to do? There are errands, of course. Things you've put off because you didn't have time. You have this weird feeling: aren't I supposed to be somewhere?

Isn't this supposed to be the day you've dreamed of for years? You were warned that the transition from work life to retirement might not be easy for you. Maybe the warnings were right.

Perhaps you'll consider a novel concept: Your new job could be the pursuit of happiness.

It may be part of the Declaration of Independence, but most people have never spent a lot of time thinking about the pursuit of happiness, let alone doing it. They don't know how to approach it.

Yet part of the lure of retirement is supposed to be an increase in happiness, right? After all, you have complete control over your time.

You could just decide to do nothing. But you've always valued your ability to be productive, and being retired isn't being productive. Or is it?

Most of us want to be happy in retirement. Perhaps we think it will just sort of happen because we don't have the stress of working anymore. But many who retire without a plan for transitioning from their work lives find themselves unhappy.

It may surprise you to learn that happiness is the subject of actual research in the field called positive psychology. Pioneering work begun decades ago and a significant body of scientific data amassed since teaches us about how we humans can attain true happiness.

The adage that "money can't buy happiness" is not entirely true, the research shows. People with money are happier than those without, but not by much. The measurable differences between the CEO of the large corporation and the underlings who work for her is not very big. On the scales used to assess happiness in these studies, the worker bees are almost as happy as their bosses.

The massive house, the fabulous car, the exquisite jewelry do create happiness, but it's transitory. The fun wears off all too fast, and we become used to them. We have learned that these objects only give us a happiness boost for a limited time.

So what does it then? What makes people happy in the long run? A number of things do. To reduce them to a few specifics, and to focus on you, the retired person, here are what we call The Big Three: structure, purpose and community.

First, Structure

School, work and raising our families all give us structure. One of the things that immediately ends with retirement is the structure of the work day. "But, isn't that great?" you ask. "I've looked forward to freedom from the daily grind for years!"

Yes, it's great, as long as you can create a new kind of structure for your life as a retired person. To find yourself with no structure turns out to be unhealthy. It can lead to feeling lost, unhappy and depressed. Routine of some kind creates structure. It's part of your new job to make your own, comfortable structure.

Second, Purpose

Purpose is of critical importance to a retired person who wants to be mentally healthy, pursuing happiness. Purpose is a building block of happiness. If your career was your prior purpose, you must now discover a new source of meaning in your life.

Maybe you have something in mind already. Introspection may be necessary to find it.

Some retirees take up daily golf, some get involved with charities, and some find what gerontologists call their "encore careers." We can reinvent ourselves to be anything, as long as the reinvented version gives us a true sense of meaning and direction.

Third, Community

Finally, there is community. Except for the isolated few, work typically involves a place and other people. That is a kind of community, whether it was ideal for you or not. Giving up your work to retire also is giving up that community, that connectedness to others.

Creating community for yourself can take many forms. I recently did a presentation at a local Rotary. The group meets weekly for lunch, is very congenial and has the added benefit of a group purpose: It raises money for local good causes. I was struck by how many of the members related to one another as a sort of extended family.

Some retirees move to communities built just for retirees. Presto! Immediate opportunity to create community with people of similar age and interests. Others find a sense of community by participating actively in religious groups, taking classes or doing regular volunteer work with others.

Whatever your way will be, why not purposely seek happiness as your new job in retirement?

Start exploring. Plot your strategy just as you used to plan your workday.

Get more connected in your community. With just a little effort, you'll be surprised at how quickly your new job of pursuing happiness is less work than you might think. It can be more fun than you can imagine. I toast your promotion.

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