Smart Retirement Habits To Cultivate

Too many people think of retirement as the end of a race. After closing out a long and successful career, they run through the finish line ribbon and raise their arms in victory.

We believe retirement isn't so much a finish line as the start of something new and hopefully lasting—a significant and rewarding next chapter in your life. And the sooner you can adjust yourself to thinking proactively about what you're going to do with those years, the better you'll likely be able to position yourself to enjoy them.

How can you create a good retirement for yourself and make the most of all the free time you've earned after working so hard for decades? One idea is to start working on a mindset and habits that have the potential to carry you well into the next phase of life and allow you to enjoy your retirement with energy, health, happiness and purpose. Ideally, you want to start that work early—maybe in your 40s and 50s, when retirement is far off on the horizon. After all, mindsets and habits don't become strong and automatic overnight. But even if you're at retirement's doorstep or already there, it's never too late to cultivate strategies for retirement success.

What do you want to do with your post-work life: Travel the world? Volunteer? Mentor? Or just kick back and relax? It's crucial to have a plan and a strategy to wring as much purposeful enjoyment as you can from your well-earned retirement.

But it's harder for many people than you may think. In our experience, career professionals—the driven high achievers especially—often find themselves surprised to feel adrift and untethered once they hang up the tools of their trade. They may struggle with the loss of daily structure, a larger purpose and even the sense of self and identity that can accompany having a particular job or title.

However well-funded their retirement accounts may be, many people simply don't know what they're going to do with themselves after they leave the workforce—even if they expect to exit in the near future. They haven't thought about what their day-to-day lives will entail, let alone a bigger vision of a meaningful future.

As a result, we see too many retirees who are bored and rudderless. A lack of meaningful goals and direction can cause depression or even contribute to cognitive decline and dementia.

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RETIREMENT WITH INTENTION

The good news: Cultivating some simple shifts can potentially stand you in good stead for the years ahead. For example, try starting with a change in mindset—prioritizing day-to-day enjoyment over career achievement and wealth accumulation.

Some lifestyle choices to consider include:

- **Get fit.** Mayo Clinic research has shown that exercising regularly can help reduce the risk of cognitive decline by 30%. And yes, golf counts—as does pickleball, yoga, hiking or whatever other activity gets your body moving.
- **Maintain structure.** It's okay to enjoy your newfound freedom by sleeping in a bit or puttering around the house from time to time. But in the absence of a workweek, it's useful to keep a certain amount of structure in your daily life. Some research has shown that retirees who keep regular routines report better mental health.
- **Stay connected.** It's never too late to build out your social network (and no, not the online kind). Staying in touch "in real life" with friends and family in your retirement is critical. The U.S. surgeon general has shown that loneliness has severe adverse health effects: It's as bad as taking up smoking and puffing half a pack a day.
- **Open yourself to new hobbies.** Find new and interesting ways to spend your time each day. Gardening? Antiquing? Auto restoration? Learning a new instrument? It doesn't matter what new niche interest might float your boat as long as you identify one to explore.
- **Keep learning.** Many studies funded by the National Institutes of Health have shown that staying mentally active can play an important role in staving off Alzheimer's and dementia. Keep reading—and consider reading new types of books—in retirement. You might have devoured nothing but business books for years, so maybe explore unfamiliar genres that expand your thinking. If you live near a college, consider auditing a course or two in a novel subject. Maybe even try to pick up a new language.

When you approach retirement with an open mind and a positive mental attitude, you set the stage for potential health benefits to follow. Staying curious, mentally sharp and physically active not only can make for a more enjoyable life, but could also increase the number of years you have ahead. Consider some of these stats:

- A study of some 1,200 adults of retirement age found that those who enacted specific plans for retirement experienced improved mental health, more social activity and higher self-esteem compared with those who didn't.
- Taking time to plan and gently shift into retirement mode has been correlated with a boost in leisure-time exercise and improvements in people's perceptions of their own health—even as some abilities declined in one study's cohort, aged 55 to 70—suggesting that retirement is a good opportunity to start cultivating healthy behaviors.

It's up to you how to spend your retirement years, of course. But rather than let retirement happen to you, consider preparing for it in ways that may help your golden years be not only financially comfortable but also physically, mentally and emotionally successful.

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