
"Honey, I'm Home!" - For Good: The Transition to Retirement

"At first it was great having George around all of the time, but now he's into everything. He's rearranged my cupboards, moved the linens from one closet to the other, and has started giving me his own Hints from Heloise. When he was working, I never heard a peep about how I ran my home. If I have to hear one more time about how much he misses the 'guys' I'm going to scream. You know, I really thought it would be different, better somehow."

"For the past couple of weeks, things have been great--Ginger and I were really enjoying each other's company. Now all we seem to do is fight. The other day when I helped her out by maximizing our storage space and offered a more efficient way to do the dishes, man did she hit the roof! And I really miss my pals at the shop. It seems as if my usefulness has run its course."



Retirement is one of life's milestones. However, many people view retirement as a loss of roles, income, and socially recognized productivity (Nock, 1992). Retirement itself has no predictable negative effect on physical health, self-esteem, or life satisfaction. The manner in which couples learn to adjust to retirement depends on circumstances, such as whether retirement was taken voluntarily or involuntarily, and their health (Hanks, 1990).

Adjustment takes time.

For most couples, retirement progresses in stages (Hanson & Wapner, 1994). At first, couples experience a short-lived honeymoon in which everything seems to come together nicely. As soon as the reality of retirement hits, however, many find they're not quite as excited about the prospect of being a senior citizen or "stuck" with each other as they previously were (Smith, 1991). This is especially true when they've been "forced" to take retirement because of corporate downsizing, poor or diminished work performance, or failing health.

Men and women experience retirement differently (Hanson & Wapner, 1994). Men, many of whom have spent more than 40 years honing their identities as providers, are suddenly reliving the identity crisis of their adolescence. Women, many of whom have spent much of their lives independently keeping house and raising children, are now confronted with an intruder in their ordered world. The challenge becomes how to achieve a peaceful and successful integration of two lives into one living space. This integration depends on the couple's ability to grow, both individually and together. Adjustment is largely an individual thing; however, the dynamics of the couple relationship vary as a function of each partner's progression. To date, no concrete evidence points to some magical time period couples can expect to

spend adjusting. Most retired couples, however, report high levels of marital satisfaction (Vinick & Ekerdt, 1991).

Old Dogs & New Tricks

Initially, retired couples may find themselves invading each other's space. Wives may explore the world hidden under the hood of the car. Husbands may rearrange in attempts to maximize space. Spouses who have previously had little opportunity or desire to explore the other's domestic spheres find themselves with time on their hands and curiosity in their minds. This curiosity may cause much frustration. If one does adopt a new task, it will most likely be in an area they are more interested in and have a better aptitude for than their spouse (Szinovacz & Harpster, 1994).



Communication is essential.

Both wives and husbands have ideas, opinions, likes, and dislikes; attributes that attracted them to each other may now be the very things that spark frustration. Whatever the issue, couples need to talk about it in an open and honest way. If you don't like George rearranging the cupboards and linen closets, break the news to him lovingly. If you would like to do the cooking Ginger has done for years, express your interest and work out an arrangement. A few minutes of heated discussion is better than weeks of repressed anger and resentment.

Capitalize on interests.

Work typically occupies 33 percent of an average day. Without work many find themselves wondering what's left to do. Everything's been washed, rearranged, waxed, and buffed. You've watched all the TV you can stand, and couldn't possibly read or knit anything else. After years of a regimented and regulated schedule, many are suddenly faced with a void (Cude & Jablin, 1992).

In an attempt to fill the space, brainstorm activities you would like to do as a couple, as well as things you would like to do individually. Look around your community for groups and clubs that you may want to join. Volunteer. Enroll in a college course. Start with the day, then work on the week and month, and finally plan for the years ahead. This is one of the joys of retirement--planning the rest of your life together.

Enjoy the years ahead.

Stop and think about all the transitions you've navigated: marriage, having children, raising and launching your children, dealing with a boomerang child (one you sent out of the nest who somehow found his or her way back home), discovering the wonders of being a grandparent, coping with economic uncertainty. Now think about the happiness all of those times have brought you. Realize that there were some hurts and heartaches along the way, too. You're still together, so you must have done something right. Be proud of your accomplishments! Allow yourself and your spouse time to adjust to this new life phase--just as it took you time to get to where you are today. Remember, as a 65-year-old, you have more than 37 percent of your adult life ahead of you! Enjoy it!

Source: National Institute on Aging

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