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Retirement: Riding the Next Wave

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Most of us dream of it. Expect to do it. Work and plan for it with great joy and anticipation. Ideally, retirement should be happy, fulfilling, and relatively stress-free period of one's life. But for a variety of reasons, many retirees find it is not what they expected.

For nurse anesthetists, disengaging from our professional work is a particular challenge. Although we now have the financial resources, the time, and the freedom to do what we really want, when the event is upon us, we often don't know what that is.

For us, our work holds a unique place, occupying 70 percent or more of our lives. More important, stopping work means we stop doing something we love. We strongly identify with our professional image, our role in surgical care, and the work environment. We may be uncertain about what will take up the space.

A Challenging Transition

Many people besides nurse anesthetists find retirement to be challenging, even frustrating. According to a recent study, 43 percent of Americans felt that adjusting to retirement was difficult. Another 20 percent of retirees have so much difficulty that it leads to depression. Research showed that 40 percent of those who retired at age 55 or younger went back to work in some way—some for financial reasons, most others because they wanted to.

According to experts, certain situations make retirement more stressful: if it is unplanned and involuntary, limited income, an unhappy home life, and poor health. In addition, retirement may interfere with our identity and image of ourselves. We experience a loss of status, authority, or purpose—an uncomfortable and stressful condition for anyone who has led a challenging and vigorous working life.

At some time we must admit that we are getting older. Retirement is strongly associated with the stereotypes of aging. We know getting older brings new physical, emotional, and mental challenges. We realize that with age comes the potential for illness and disabilities that may adversely affect our quality of life.

These stressful changes are reinforced daily with reminders to sign-up for Medicare, supplemental plans, ads for retirement homes, long-term care insurance, AARP, and invitations to retirement planning seminars. Further, we know science, medical technology, and

improved lifestyle habits can add more years to our lifespan. We know it is possible to be retired for almost one-third of our adult lives.

Unfortunately, other than doing some financial planning for when the paycheck ends, many people, including CRNAs, do not actively prepare for the emotional upheaval that can be associated with a transition into retirement.

Attitude Counts

In fact, retirement is likely going to be different from the life you had while you were working. For some the change is better, and for others it is not. Retirement stress originates from a multitude of sources and causes a wide variety of responses, both positive and negative, and reactions vary by the perceived threat presented by the situation.

Study after study has shown that attitude affects every facet of your life. It contributes to satisfaction and happiness and supports effective coping strategies in difficult situations.

Attitude involves resilience. Everything that happens to you, positive or negative, results in some stress. Retirement is not a single event. Research reveals that people migrate through distinct and somewhat predictable stages of retirement, each with different emotions and needs. It is important to recognize that transition emotions are a normal reaction to the new experience.

Studies indicate that people who have learned to adapt a positive, optimistic attitude when dealing with change appear to transition into retirement more comfortably. Those who have greater success have learned to view retirement as an opportunity with new possibilities. They also rely on supportive relationships. Research notes that expanding on hobbies and interests developed prior to retirement, staying active socially and physically, and otherwise keeping busy after retirement, contribute to longevity and general well being.

A study by Schlossberg¹ identified the various ways in which people approach retirement—those who continue using existing skills and interests, those who start entirely new endeavors; those who explore new options through trial and error, those who enjoy unscheduled time letting each day unfold, those who care deeply



You don't age until your regrets outnumber your dreams.

John Barrymore

about the world but engage in less active ways, and those who simply drift or disengage.

The study also found that the first year of retirement is one of many steps in transition. Factors that contribute to helping people transition depends on the role of the family, the timing of retirement, the degree to which work has been satisfying, the degree to which retirement is planned for, the expectations one has about retirement, the degree to which a meaningful life is established and, of course one's health and sense of financial security.

Findings by Abeles² found the happiest retirees enjoy a variety of activities, including volunteer work, physical fitness, continuing education, and traveling.

Moen³ conducted a series of studies looking at the connection between retirement and physical and mental health and well-being and how the retirement experience differed for men and women. The study offered experts' recommendations that people attend preretirement seminars that cover psychological aspects of retirement as well as financial aspects.

The more than 70 million baby boomers who will begin to retire in the next decade, combined with an increased life expectancy, will reshape how people will live their lives and what defines a "healthy" retirement. Many predict that this will lead to retirement no longer

being viewed as a permanent separation from work, but rather, as a bridge to partial retirement. Individuals will likely alternate between periods of not working with periods of part-time, temporary, or project-related work, or with episodes of self-employment, consulting, or mentoring. Whether gradual or complete, retirement is improved by being physically and mentally active—whether that means traveling, volunteering, hobbies, or playing with the grandchildren, You have accomplished many things



during your professional career. Your retirement should not prevent you from new accomplishments. Consider retirement as the beginning of a new career, one that you structure, develop, and customize on your terms. Chronological age does not define you, nor put limitations on your abilities. Avoiding the vacuum created by all the surplus time and taking an active role in managing a healthy retirement helps prevent boredom, lack of purpose, discouragement, and depression.

Revisit all the things you love to do, especially ones that will keep your mind active and engaged. Continue lifelong learning. It was key in your professional accomplishment; it will sustain you in new uses for your enthusiasm, experience, and insights.

Reconnect with your family. Rediscover the wonder of every day! Recapture the childlike qualities of awe, wonder, spontaneity, creativity, and freedom. Replace workmates with another social network. Rediscover how to play and have fun. Engage in creative activities and stay connected to the world. Recognize that 'work' can always be part of your life.

Consider retirement as another mile in the journey—a transition to new, exciting experiences. Life is constantly changing, unpredictable as the waves of the ocean. Each wave presents opportunities and challenges—either you wipe out or you get a terrific ride. You can never stop the waves, but you can learn to surf, successfully riding the wave to where you want to go and maybe even have fun doing it. ■

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