

Transitions: Moving into a Happy, Productive Retirement



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Growing older is an unavoidable task. Despite numerous empirical studies and public health promotion strategies, negative images of aging never seem to go away. Aging is based on chronological age and is subject to many misperceptions and overgeneralizations, something psychologists call ‘age stereotypes.’^{1,2}

We all change with time. Change can be stressful, even if it is for the good. For many people, including CRNAs, retirement causes us to pause and perhaps to feel older. Certainly, each time we look in the mirror and see the physical changes we cannot deny that time is passing. Hopefully it also makes us realize that successful retirement and moving from the working world to leisure requires planning and a shift in thinking.

Research shows that one of the biggest causes of stress in life is retirement. It is a major life event that has many consequences that impacts different aspects of well-being, including financial situations, the allocation of time, social relations, as well as physical and mental health.³

Many people dread the thought of retirement. Historically retirement was perceived to be something for people who were growing older and perhaps no longer needed or useful.

Retirement and Stress

Sociologists have identified at least six sepa-

rate life transitions that will affect most people as they move through their retirement life. Anxieties associated with retirement usually fall into three groups; (1) loss of identity, (2) boredom, and (3) no longer feeling of value.³

When stressors multiply, people may be more vulnerable to mental health problems. The effect of disengagement from a work-life and the transition to retirement has been reported to create symptoms of depression, leading to partial identity disruption and limits on decision making. However, aging individuals who have mental and emotional resilience and who do not suffer from clinical depression report high rates of successful aging even in the face of worsening physical and/or cognitive functioning.^{1,3}

We know that chronic stress has been shown to have a number of negative health impacts, including premature aging. Stress can have a harmful effect on critical DNA in the cells. Researchers measured the length of DNA sections called telomeres and found that individuals with the most stress had the shortest telomeres. When telomeres become too short, the cells can die or become damaged.⁴

Millions of Americans have had to change their retirement plans in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown. Today it is more common for individuals to experience two or even three retirements. Contributing to this changing environment is the fact that older adults now retire at the age of 65 with a lengthy period of life ahead. On average men and women can expect about 15 and 20 years of continued life, respectively. For those who are in reasonably good health and who maintain a healthy lifestyle, living beyond these years should be a reasonable expectation.³

During our working years, our lives are organized around the job. Finishing our life-work can be a difficult adjustment. For many

professionals, like CRNAs, we are strongly identified with our chosen profession.

Upon retirement, the handshakes and celebrations are over and suddenly we have the rest of our lives to ourselves. The reality is even when we leave the traditional workplace, people, including CRNAs, still have a need to share workplace strengths and transferable skills.

There isn't a standard definition of a successful retirement. For some the yardstick is financial security. For others, it equates to successful aging and reducing mental and physical decline. A successful retirement is ultimately one meeting our expectations.

Informal conversations with nurse anesthetists suggest that to be successful in retirement, we must have a purpose in life. Further, meeting the challenge of aging gracefully is easier if we continue to do things that are important to us. More importantly, remember people retire, but minds do not.

Finding Meaning and Challenge

Most people think that being healthy physically is the key to healthy aging. In retirement, healthy mental aging is just as important. Brain-enhancing exercises may add creativity. Optimism, good humor, curiosity, energy, and intellectual involvement are all associated with healthy aging.

Acts of kindness turn on the happy switches in our brains; studies have shown that people who volunteer are more satisfied with lives and are less likely to be depressed. Happier people are also more likely to help others.⁵

People have different ideas of being meaningfully engaged. Like many people, CRNAs who have retired cite the freedom of choice as to how they spend their time as the greatest advantage to retirement. Inevitably, they also say they miss the work they spent much of their previous life doing. Many fill that void with volunteer work and mis-

In the end, it is not the years in your life that count. It is the life in your years!

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

sion trips. Many go back to work after their official retirement to “give them a hand” or “fill in” for another CRNA. Others may lecture at meetings or teach in nurse anesthesia programs. Some will go to state or national meeting in order to stay connected to their profession.

CRNAs also say they find new ways to challenge themselves. Many decide to fulfill a myriad of bucket list wishes—learning to sail or fly an airplane; climbing the Great Wall of China; or crossing the Irish Sea. Some visit parks, museums, historical sites, or other places in their home states, places they never had time to visit while working full time. Having time to reconnect with family and friends and spending time with grandchildren also seems a major goal.

Most simply extend the amount of time they have doing things related to their favorite hobbies and activities.

While many engage in paid work, many others volunteer through formal or informal channels, providing help to neighbors and friends. Others care for their frail parents, disabled spouses and children, and young grandchildren. Some combine paid work with other activities.⁶

Most will say what they really want is to live gracefully. To stay healthy enough to continue doing the things they love, at their own pace, on their own terms, regardless of their age.

It's Never too Late

While having good genes certainly helps, a growing body of research suggests that how well we age depends largely on us and what we do. Studies show that changes in diet, exercise, stress management, and social sup-

port may help. Fortunately, research also finds that it's never too late to make changes that can help us live a longer and healthier life.⁴

Years of research on happiness tell us that an overarching posi-

tive attitude is the foundation of contentment through all stages of adult life. We now understand that happiness in retirement results from many factors, including identifying a significant purpose, defining one's personal identity as distinct from one's professional role, and feeling a sense of belonging and connection to others.

Studies noted that social aptitude or emotional intelligence rather than brilliance or genetics or wealth leads to well-adapted old age. This is evident in healing relationships, a capacity for love, gratitude and forgiveness, maintaining spiritual practice, and engaging in community.¹

We cannot dictate or control all the circumstances of our lives. Resilience and the ability to deal with difficulties and challenges at whatever time they come determines how we approach growing older. We can, however, choose what we hold close and how we define the rest of our lives. Aging is a journey toward new opportunities and strengths.■

Resources

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