

Why Is Retirement So Stressful?

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but retirement doesn't always turn out the way people think. Furthermore, since it's often portrayed as this perfect, happy time in life where everything goes well, when it doesn't turn out that way people end up suffering in silence, struggling with the transition and not always understanding why or how to change it.

Therefore, I want to share some breakthrough insights as to how retirement can end up being so challenging for some people. In my opinion, the evidence is downright shocking and a major reason why retirement planning needs to change and focus as much on the non-financial pieces as the time and energy that is spent on the dollars and cents of it.

This may come as a surprise to many but will make sense as I paint a very different picture here. One where this stage of life can intersect with an avalanche of activity that causes massive amount of stress, worry, and anxiety.

Taking it one step further, I want to show you why it happens. The foundation for this work comes from what is referred to as the [Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale](#). Back in the late 1960s Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe studied how stress can contribute to illness. They surveyed over 5,000 medical patients and asked them if they had experience any of a series of 43 life events in the previous two years.

Each of these events is referred to as a Life Change Unit (LCU) and is given a different "weight" in the scale, meaning some events are more stressful than others. The larger the number of LCUs for an individual, the more likely the patient was to become ill.

As a result of their work, this scale identified 43 of the most stressful life events, in order of their significance. While I don't want to list all 43 items, [you can view an online copy here](#). Below, I want to draw attention to several that are commonly associated with those in or near retirement.

- #1) Death of a spouse (harsh reality that you may live alone for some portion of retirement)
- #2) Divorce (grey divorce rates continue to climb)
- #5) Death of a close family member (as we age we tend to lose more family and friends)
- #6) Personal Injury or illness (Think cancer, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's or other diagnosis)
- #8) Fired at work (Forced or sudden retirement)
- #10) Retirement (Yes, the 10th most stressful event in life is retirement all by itself... without these other factors)
- #11) Change in health of a family member (Aging parent with Alzheimer or spouse with cancer)
- #13) Sex difficulties (as we age, our bodies change – [See sex in retirement](#))
- #16) Change in financial state (No more paycheck and a fixed income causes lots of retirement arguments)
- #17) Death of a close friend (impacts social network)
- #18) Change to a different line of work (Retirees with part-time jobs aren't always happy with the gig or pay)
- #19) Change in number of arguments with spouse (they tend to go up with more time together in retirement)
- #20) A large mortgage or loan (Not having you home paid off can add stress in retirement)
- #23) Son or daughter leaving home (Hardest part of raising kids is when they leave)
- #26) Spouse begins or stops work (Changes the routine, roles, and expectations)
- #28) Change in living conditions (more time together, aging parent moving in, adult kids coming back home)
- #29) Revision of personal habits (personal activity will change and if married it can disrupt partners routine)
- #32) Change in residence (downsizing or re-locating)
- #36) Change in social activities (while people think they will do more, they often do less with friends)
- #40) Change in eating habits (in the refrigerator more and other stresses can cause snacking)

As you can see, retirement can bring about almost half of the most stressful events in life, often with many of them taking place at the same time. Think of someone who is forced into retirement, who gets a part-time job

and decides to downsize to save money and be closer to their aging parent. Or the spouse whose husband retires at the same time she is diagnosed with breast cancer, while her youngest heads off to college, and her mother recently passed. In some cases, these would be the lucky ones based on other situations I have come across.

Can you imagine a TV commercial for retirement including this list? No happy couple walking on the beach, applauding at their grandkids graduation, or writing their first novel. Just sad people, suffering in silence, unsure as to why retirement didn't turn out the way they thought it would.

On the surface this entire article can appear like a giant buzz kill and make you consider working forever instead of retiring. But that's not the point. This information is important to raise more awareness about retirement planning and what people need to be prepared for.

It's not just about the money and needs to include some form of vaccination to these factors. Similar to the way we vaccinate our children, we have to start vaccinating those near and in retirement by introducing small amounts of negative things into the mind and body so that it can build up its defenses and fight them off.

In other words, we have to stop painting this perfect picture of retirement and start sharing what can happen if people don't have a plan for the non-financial aspects. We have to teach people that there is always a positive message in the mess that they are going through, and that a successful retirement isn't on without problems, but rather one in which they learn to overcome them.

Any one of those stress factors can serve as an anchor around someone's retirement... and for good reason. Many of these things are difficult to deal with. But it's also why we should be teaching people about resilience instead of asset allocation, and positive psychology, instead of stock market returns. What's interesting is that if you look at the list of stressors, only a handful are financial whereas the majority of the list hits on mental, social, physical, and spiritual issues. A valuable insight into the direction retirement planning needs to go!