

## **Relationship Expectations in Retirement**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Most people these days have higher expectations for retirement than did previous generations. They not only expect to have relative good health, but have the added expectation that they will enjoy their retirement and perhaps have an opportunity to do many of the things they could not do in their working years. They expect to have fun and to have a life after the end of working. Although there are not many obvious role models for happy, healthy retirement, gone are the days when people expect to retire and sit on the porch watching the traffic go by. People expect to be busy, to be engaged, to continue to grow and develop as a human being.

Married people expect their spouses to grow along with them. Many have the expectation that all the time and energy spent in working all those years will now be available to be devoted to the relationship or to having a life together. Many couples discover in retirement that they have grown apart and fear that apart from the daily reports on the kids and grandkids that they have nothing in common.

Unlike previous generations, women retiring now face many of the same identity issues from which men struggle in early retirement. Jobs, career, and work have been as much as part of their own identity, their self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of contribution to the community. Women do not expect to be satisfied with traditional roles and activities and experience a loss in a sense of self. Husbands may expect their wives to fall into more traditional roles in retirement now that they don't have to balance, work, kids, marriage and other relationships.

When husbands and wives are retiring at the same time, they will probably be going through the emotional transitions at roughly the same time. Both suffer a loss of a well established routine, the responsibility of having the freedom to make choices about pursuing new activities, and need for something to give them a new or different sense of purpose or value. Both may have an expectation that the other person will change into the person that they always wanted him/her to be. They may have very different ideas about how much time they "should" spend together or want to spend with each other.

Most couples over a lifetime together settle into a specified roles and responsibilities. Retirement may be a time when the expectations change on how those roles and responsibilities will be divided. Many spouses complain about how the other spouse, after many years has felt the need to "teach" the other one some that she has been doing these thirty years. There may be a role confusion that needs to be renegotiated.

Personality differences can also come to the foreground. When spouses were separated most of the day by their separate work/career, they may have engaged differently with the

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community. One may be introverted and happy to be at home while the other is a social butterfly who needs the connections with many other people. They may find themselves at odds with each expecting the other to 1) join him/her at the social get-togethers, or 2) spend more time at home doing domestic activities.

It is crucial to have open and frequent discussions about what kind of relationship you want to have with your spouse in retirement. Identify some things that you would like to do together. Talk about financial ability to do those things. Make plans together. Talk about the amount of time that you want to spend together vs. the time you want to spend alone or with others. Talk about investing in individual activities and hobbies and plan together the joint activities that you will pursue. Identify the roles and responsibilities for managing the house, the finances, etc. and make joint decisions on who will be responsible for those tasks. Talk about any concerns that you may have about your partner “micromanaging”, over-committing to social engagements. Talk about what levels of structure you need to function well as a retired team. Identify any potential unwanted family demands for your time and attention and develop a plan to deal with those in a unified and consistent manner.

2013, Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK



If you find yourselves at a loss for topics of conversation, the "Honey Jar", can assist most couples with “breaking the ice” to begin to once again share themselves with each other. The “Honey Jar” is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each one serving as an open-ended prompt to discuss one of a number of individual or couple subjects. It was designed and “field tested” for couples in long standing and well established marriages. When it seems like you have run out of things to talk about, it

can assist in generating conversation about oneself and about the relationship in a non-threatening way. Each numbered item is a sentence stem that can spark the revelation of information forgotten and as yet unknown about you or your significant other. The sentence stems are random in subject and depth. ***This is a digital product in a PDF format that you download directly onto your computer.***



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