

Relationship Expectations in Retirement

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

As we age, our priorities and expectations shift. Retirement, in particular, is when many people believe they will spend a lot more time enjoying their lives and pursuing activities they could not do during their working years. Most couples have expectations about being able to devote more quality time to each other, but the reality can be quite different from their expectations. Retirement involves many changes that can affect the dynamics of a relationship. How couples manage their expectations can make all the difference in making the most of their golden years.

Current generations of retirees have higher expectations for retirement than previous generations. They expect to have good health and to enjoy their lives by engaging in various activities that bring them joy and fulfillment. Few people envision spending the rest of their days sitting on the porch watching the world go by. People want to stay active, continue learning, and grow as human beings.

Married couples, in particular, expect their spouses to grow with them during retirement. They look forward to having all the time and energy they spent working now available to be devoted to their relationship or having a life together. Sometimes, however, some couples find that they have grown apart in retirement, and apart from daily reports on their kids and grandkids, they have nothing in common. They may have also collected a mountain of resentments over the years and are not desirous of spending time alone with each other. Even without irritation, they may have different ideas about how much time they want to spend together or apart.

Retiring people face unique challenges in terms of identity. Jobs, careers, and work have been a significant part of their identity, self-esteem, self-

confidence, and sense of contribution to the community. Therefore, they may struggle to find a sense of self in retirement. Both partners may find a mismatch between their ideas about retirement roles when they discover that the partner's expectations have changed. A partner who was inattentive because of career demands may now be expected to make it up to the "neglected" spouse. A typical example is the spouse who points out that now that their spouse doesn't have to balance work, kids, marriage, and other relationships, they can devote time to them.

Retirement can be when expectations change about how those roles and responsibilities will be divided. Partners, not used to being under each other's feet, may not be fully acquainted with their spouse's skills. For example, one spouse may need to "teach" the other something they have been doing for years. Couples often settle into specific roles and responsibilities over the years. Now, with each person available for all kinds of functions, specific discussion or negotiation about those roles and other divisions of labor may be appropriate to avoid conflict, confusion, and hurt feelings.

When husbands and wives retire simultaneously, they will likely experience many of the same emotional transitions together. Both will experience a sense of loss of routine and structure. They both may flounder in their shifting identities and be on the lookout for the next thing to give them identity, value, and purpose. There may be a mismatch between what they think they should be able to do, financially and physically, and what they can do.

Personality differences can also come to the foreground during retirement. When spouses were separated most of the day by their separate work/careers, they may have engaged differently with the community. An example is the couple with an introvert and an extrovert. One prefers to be at home, while the other needs social stimulation. They will probably expect the other to join them in their preferred settings. They may each expect their partner will change into the person they always wanted them to be and be disappointed and hurt when that does not happen.

Retirement is a time to be realistic about your expectations and be willing to compromise. It is a significant life change that requires adjustments and flexibility. Couples can make positive adjustments with open, honest communication about their feelings, concerns, and needs. Communication will help avoid misunderstandings and conflicts and promote a healthy and happy retirement.

Talk about the kind of relationship you want to have with your spouse. Couples should identify things they would like to do together. Talk about your financial ability to do those things and make plans together. It's also important to discuss individual preferences for the time spent together and apart. There is no right or wrong amount of time to spend together, yet partners will usually be at odds. For mental health, partners should spend time apart, engaging in preferred activities. They should discuss the importance of those activities and decide on joint pursuits.

In conclusion, retirement can be an exciting and fulfilling time for couples if planned and approached carefully. It's essential to have open and honest communication, be willing to compromise and maintain individuality while also enjoying joint activities. Retirement allows you to explore new interests, strengthen your marriage, and enjoy the fruits of your labor. By planning and working together, couples can create a happy and fulfilling retirement that meets their expectations and needs.

Looking to improve your relationship in retirement? The Honey Jar is the perfect communication exercise to help you and your partner navigate this exciting but challenging time. With retirement comes new expectations, changing roles, and potential conflict, but by using The Honey Jar, you'll learn to communicate openly and honestly with your partner, and work together to create a fulfilling retirement that meets both of your needs. Don't let retirement be a strain on your relationship - Download The Honey Jar today!

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