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Projecting a Happy Retirement



A 2015 study found that 41% of households headed by someone aged 55 to 64 had no retirement savings, and only about a third of them had a traditional pension. Among households in this age group

with savings, the median amount was just \$104,000.¹

Your own savings may be more substantial, but in general Americans struggle to meet their savings goals. Even a healthy savings account may not provide as much income as you would like over a long retirement.

Despite the challenges, about 56% of current retirees say they are very satisfied with retirement, and 34% say they are moderately satisfied. Only 9% are dissatisfied.²

Develop a realistic picture

How can you transition into a happy retirement even if your savings fall short of your goals? The answer may lie in developing a realistic picture of what your retirement will look like, based on your expected resources and expenses. As a starting point, create a simple retirement planning worksheet. You might add details once you get the basics down on paper.

Estimate income and expenses

You can estimate your monthly Social Security benefit at ssa.gov. The longer you wait to claim your benefits, from age 62 up to age 70, the higher your monthly benefit will be. If you expect a pension, estimate that monthly amount as well. Add other sources of income, such as a part-time job, if that is in your plans. Be realistic. Part-time work often pays low wages.

It's more difficult to estimate the amount of income you can expect from your savings; this may depend on unpredictable market returns and the length of time you need your savings to last. One simple rule of thumb is to withdraw 4% of your savings each year. At that rate, the

\$104,000 median savings described earlier would generate \$4,160 per year or \$347 per month (assuming no market gains or losses). Keep in mind that some experts believe a 4% withdrawal rate may be too high to maintain funds over a long retirement. You might use 3% or 3.5% in your calculations.

Now estimate your monthly expenses. If you've paid off your mortgage and other debt, you may be in a stronger position. Don't forget to factor in a reserve for medical expenses. One study suggests that a 65-year-old couple who retired in 2015 would need \$259,000 over their lifetimes to cover Medicare premiums and out-of-pocket health-care expenses, assuming they had only median drug expenses.³

Take strategic steps

Your projected income and expenses should provide a rough picture of your financial situation in retirement. If retirement is approaching soon, try living for six months or more on your anticipated income to determine whether it is realistic. If it's not, or your anticipated expenses exceed your income even without a trial run, you may have to reduce expenses or work longer, or both.

Even if the numbers look good, it would be wise to keep building your savings. You might take advantage of catch-up contributions to IRAs and 401(k) plans, which are available to those who reach age 50 or older by the end of the calendar year. In 2016, the IRA catch-up amount is \$1,000, for a total contribution limit of \$6,500. The 401(k) catch-up amount is \$6,000, for a total employee contribution limit of \$24,000.

Preparing for retirement is not easy, but if you enter your new life phase with eyes wide open, you're more likely to enjoy a long and happy retirement.

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Retirement Security," May 2015

² *The Wall Street Journal*, "Why Retirees Are Happier Than You May Think," December 1, 2015

³ Employee Benefit Research Institute, Notes, October 2015

Four Reasons Why People Spend Too Much



You may be more likely to overspend on a particular purchase compared to other possible expenditures. According to research conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, adults in the United States reported that they would spend money on the following throughout the year:

- 54%--electronics
- 33%--appliances
- 27%--a car
- 23%--home remodeling

Source: Consumer Reports, November 2014

You understand the basic financial concepts of budgeting, saving, and monitoring your money. But this doesn't necessarily mean that you're in control of your spending. The following reasons might help explain why you sometimes break your budget.

1. Failing to think about the future

It can be difficult to adequately predict future expenses, but thinking about the future is a key component of financial responsibility. If you have a tendency to focus on the "here and now" without taking the future into account, then you might find that this leads you to overspend.

Maybe you feel that you're acting responsibly simply because you've started an emergency savings account. You might feel that it will help you cover future expenses, but in reality it may create a false sense of security that leads you to spend more than you can afford at a given moment in time.

Remember that the purpose of your emergency savings account is to be a safety net in times of financial crisis. If you're constantly tapping it for unnecessary purchases, you aren't using it correctly.

Change this behavior by keeping the big picture in perspective. Create room in your budget that allows you to spend discretionary money and use your emergency savings only for true emergencies. By having a carefully thought-out plan in place, you'll be less likely to overspend without realizing it.

2. Rewarding yourself

Are you a savvy shopper who rarely splurges, or do you spend too frequently because you want to reward yourself? If you fall in the latter category, your sense of willpower may be to blame. People who see willpower as a limited resource often trick themselves into thinking that they deserve a reward when they are able to demonstrate a degree of willpower. As a result, they may develop the unhealthy habit of overspending on random, unnecessary purchases in order to fulfill the desire for a reward.

This doesn't mean that you're never allowed to reward yourself--you just might need to think of other ways that won't lead to spending too much money. Develop healthier habits by rewarding yourself in ways that don't cost money, such as spending time outdoors, reading, or meditating. Both your body and your wallet will thank you.

If you do decide to splurge on a reward from time to time, do yourself a favor and plan your purchase. Figure out how much it will cost ahead of time so you can save accordingly instead of tapping your savings. Make sure that your reward, whether it's small or big, has a purpose and is meaningful to you. Try scaling back. For example, instead of dining out every weekend, limit this expense to once or twice a month. Chances are that you'll enjoy going out more than you did before, and you'll feel good about the money you save from dining out less frequently.

3. Mixing mood with money

Your emotional state can be an integral part of your ability to make sensible financial decisions. When you're unhappy, you might not be thinking clearly, and saving is probably not your first priority. Boredom or stress also makes it easy to overspend because shopping serves as a fast and easy distraction from your feelings. This narrow focus on short-term happiness might be a reason why you're spending more than normal.

Waiting to spend when you're happy and thinking more positively could help shift your focus back to your long-term financial goals. Avoid temptations and stay clear of stores if you feel that you'll spend needlessly after having an emotionally challenging day. Staying on track financially (and emotionally) will benefit you in the long run.

4. Getting caught up in home equity habits

Do you tend to spend more money when the value of your assets--particularly your property--increases? You might think that appreciating assets add to your spending power, thus making you feel both wealthier and more financially secure. You may be tempted to tap into your home equity, but make sure you're using it wisely.

Instead of thinking of your home as a piggy bank, remember it's where you live. Be smart with your home equity loan or line of credit--don't borrow more than what is absolutely necessary. For example, you may need to borrow to pay for emergency home repairs or health expenses, but you want to avoid borrowing to pay for gratuitous luxuries that could put you and your family's financial security at risk. After all, the lender could foreclose if you fail to repay the debt, and there may be closing costs and other charges associated with the loan.

Common Financial Wisdom: Theory vs. Practice



It might not always be possible to follow some common financial wisdom.

Note: All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there can be no assurance that any investment strategy will be successful.

In the financial world, there are a lot of rules about what you *should* be doing. In theory, they sound reasonable. But in practice, it may not be easy, or even possible, to follow them. Let's look at some common financial maxims and why it can be hard to implement them.

Build an emergency fund worth three to six months of living expenses

Wisdom: Set aside at least three to six months worth of living expenses in an emergency savings account so your overall financial health doesn't take a hit when an unexpected need arises.

Problem: While you're trying to save, other needs--both emergencies and non-emergencies--come up that may prevent you from adding to your emergency fund and even cause you to dip into it, resulting in an even greater shortfall. Getting back on track might require many months or years of dedicated contributions, leading you to decrease or possibly stop your contributions to other important goals such as college, retirement, or a down payment on a house.

One solution: Don't put your overall financial life completely on hold trying to hit the high end of the three to six months target. By all means create an emergency fund, but if after a year or two of diligent saving you've amassed only two or three months of reserves, consider that a good base and contribute to your long-term financial health instead, adding small amounts to your emergency fund when possible. Of course, it depends on your own situation. For example, if you're a business owner in a volatile industry, you may need as much as a year's worth of savings to carry you through uncertain times.

Start saving for retirement in your 20s

Wisdom: Start saving for retirement when you're young because time is one of the best advantages when it comes to amassing a nest egg. This is the result of compounding, which is when your retirement contributions earn investment returns, and then those returns produce earnings themselves. Over time, the process can snowball.

Problem: How many 20-somethings have the financial wherewithal to save earnestly for retirement? Student debt is at record levels, and young adults typically need to budget for rent, food, transportation, monthly utilities, and cell phone bills, all while trying to contribute to an emergency fund and a down payment fund.

One solution: Track your monthly income and expenses on a regular basis to see where your money is going. Establish a budget and try to

live within your means, or better yet *below* your means. Then focus on putting money aside in your workplace retirement plan. Start by contributing a small percentage of your pay, say 3%, to get into the retirement savings habit. Once you've adjusted to a lower take-home amount in your paycheck (you may not even notice the difference!), consider upping your contribution little by little, such as once a year or whenever you get a raise.

Start saving for college as soon as your child is born

Wisdom: Benjamin Franklin famously said there is nothing certain in life except death and taxes. To this, parents might add college costs that increase every year without fail, no matter what the overall economy is doing. As a result, new parents are often advised to start saving for college right away.

Problem: New parents often face many other financial burdens that come with having a baby; for example, increased medical expenses, baby-related costs, day-care costs, and a reduction in household income as a result of one parent possibly cutting back on work or leaving the workforce altogether.

One solution: Open a savings account and set up automatic monthly contributions in a small, manageable amount--for example, \$25 or \$50 per month--and add to it when you can. When grandparents and extended family ask what they can give your child for birthdays and holidays, you'll have a suggestion.

Subtract your age from 100 to determine your stock percentage

Wisdom: Subtract your age from 100 to determine the percentage of your portfolio that should be in stocks. For example, a 45-year-old would have 55% of his or her portfolio in stocks, with the remainder in bonds and cash.

Problem: A one-size-fits-all rule may not be appropriate for everyone. On the one hand, today's longer life expectancies make a case for holding even more stocks in your portfolio for their growth potential, and subtracting your age from, say, 120. On the other hand, considering the risks associated with stocks, some investors may not feel comfortable subtracting their age even from 80 to determine the percentage of stocks.

One solution: Focus on your own tolerance for risk while also being mindful of inflation. Consider looking at the historical performance of different asset classes. Can you sleep at night with the investments you've chosen? Your own peace of mind trumps any financial rule.

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Can I make charitable contributions from my IRA in 2016?

Yes, if you qualify. The law authorizing qualified charitable distributions, or QCDs, has recently been made

permanent by the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes (PATH) Act of 2015.

You simply instruct your IRA trustee to make a distribution directly from your IRA (other than a SEP or SIMPLE) to a qualified charity. You must be 70½ or older, and the distribution must be one that would otherwise be taxable to you. You can exclude up to \$100,000 of QCDs from your gross income in 2016. And if you file a joint return, your spouse (if 70½ or older) can exclude an additional \$100,000 of QCDs. But you can't also deduct these QCDs as a charitable contribution on your federal income tax return—that would be double dipping.

QCDs count toward satisfying any required minimum distributions (RMDs) that you would otherwise have to take from your IRA in 2016, just as if you had received an actual distribution from the plan. However, distributions (including RMDs) that you actually receive from your IRA and subsequently transfer to a charity cannot qualify as QCDs.

For example, assume that your RMD for 2016 is \$25,000. In June 2016, you make a \$15,000 QCD to Qualified Charity A. You exclude the \$15,000 QCD from your 2016 gross income. Your \$15,000 QCD satisfies \$15,000 of your \$25,000 RMD. You'll need to withdraw another \$10,000 (or make an additional QCD) by December 31, 2016, to avoid a penalty.

You could instead take a distribution from your IRA and then donate the proceeds to a charity yourself, but this would be a bit more cumbersome and possibly more expensive. You'd include the distribution in gross income and then take a corresponding income tax deduction for the charitable contribution. But the additional tax from the distribution may be more than the charitable deduction due to IRS limits. QCDs avoid all this by providing an exclusion from income for the amount paid directly from your IRA to the charity—you don't report the IRA distribution in your gross income, and you don't take a deduction for the QCD. The exclusion from gross income for QCDs also provides a tax-effective way for taxpayers who don't itemize deductions to make charitable contributions.

Cartoon: 401(k)-9



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