

Your Life after Dentistry: 10 Personal Questions to Consider

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For more than 30 years I have had the pleasure of working with dentists and helping them reach their financial and other life goals. Many of the clients I have worked with have done an excellent job planning for the financial part of their retirement. However, a much smaller percentage has given real solid thought to the *non-financial* part of their retirement planning.

When I'm working with a dentist and his or her spouse, in addition to the number crunching, I spend time with them discussing how to have an interesting and fulfilling retirement. In this article, I'd like to share with you some of the questions that I ask in these meetings. I think they're questions worth thinking about for any practitioner – and not just those near retirement. It pays to think ahead, even if you're still in your '30s or '40s.

Here they are ...

1. What are you going to do that is as relevant to you as practicing dentistry?

Dentists are blessed with a high intellect and are used to high achievement in their life. They enjoy the people contact experienced in their daily work life. When I'm working with clients on a transition, I want them to give this question serious consideration. If they cannot answer it, they may not be ready to leave dentistry.

There are important considerations here. For example, even if you have the best marriage possible, it's a significant change to have so much time together. This is one of the biggest adjustments retired people have. Just like the financial plan, couples are wise to discuss their expectations in this area and come up with a plan.

Having a lot of extra time is also something you will need to adjust to. I often ask the doctor this question: "What are you going to do with a month of Saturdays?" In the beginning, it's easy to enjoy not having to work. For a period of time, people are so busy they wonder how they had time to work. However, over time, they work through a lot of the things they were going to do when they got around to it and then boredom sets in. The truth is you can only golf, boat, fish, hunt, play tennis, shop, eat out, or travel so much.

To keep your retirement interesting, it's important to keep finding things to be passionate about. A satisfying retirement is not about lighting cigars with dollar bills, but rather getting up each day with something interesting to do. So, it's a good idea to have a system where periodically you spend some focused time thinking about what you really are passionate about. True passion calls for action, so as you consider your passions, think about what you'll take action on. Retirement in my opinion is not the time to throw away your "to do" list; rather, it's a time to just reorder your priorities. Consider volunteering at a local dental school, teaching part-time, or "giving back" to the profession that quite frankly changed your life!

2. Where will you live?

Deciding where you will live in retirement is really about defining your values and goals. Often, the location of children and grandchildren or the ease of commuting to see them are a big factor. Climate is another factor. I have a goal never to see snow again, not even on TV, so a warm climate is essential to my happiness. Yet other folks may enjoy winter sports and will locate someplace where that's possible. You may decide whether to have more than one home, however, as people age, I have found that eventually maintaining multiple homes, even if they can afford it, is more work than many people want. The same is true with boats and airplanes.

In today's world, I've found that people tend to move more in retirement. Some may wish to stay in their present home for some period of time, and move later. Others may find their first retirement home not suitable for a variety of reasons and may make a change. When people are in their mid-'80s, health issues can dictate where they live. Typically, when health issues become chronic, the need to be closer to family may become a necessity. The decision on where to live must support your goals and should leave some room for flexibility as your life changes.

So, as you think about where you would like to live your later years, consider this checklist:

- Your spouse's family.
- Your parents and siblings.
- Your children and grandchildren.
- Climate.
- The cost of living.
- Public transportation.
- Senior facilities.
- Culture.
- Diversity.
- Religion.
- Other.

3. What's on your bucket list?

The "bucket list" has become a popular term to describe the things you want to do before you "kick the bucket." Most of us have a few things on our list. Working with dentists, I have observed that it may be difficult to gather more than a dozen. I often give clients a homework assignment to complete: I ask them to make a list of 100 things they want to do before they die. There is no magic in the number 100; rather, it's just to get them thinking. Admittedly, I have done this exercise myself and found I cannot get past about 40.

It's a good idea to include your spouse and have both joint bucket list items and separate bucket list items. Some things will be great to do together, but others may not interest one of the spouses. One of the things I find is that people have two difficulties in creating this list.

The first is the idea that the list must be filled with monumental items that sound good to others, like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. This is a very personal list and shouldn't be something that other people get to vote on. As an example, on my bucket list is "take a glass- blowing class." An item like this won't change the world, but I think it might be interesting.

The second difficulty for people as they create their list is too much focus on whether the item is even possible for them. As you create your list, don't worry about how you'll do it. Most people find that even if they fail at an item the journey is worth it. Again, on my personal list is to write a good song. I know nothing about songwriting, but it's on my list and by having it there will help me find out the "how."

As you develop your bucket list, think about things you enjoy. Doing so will make the process go smoother and allow you to account for the 100 things you would like to accomplish before you pass.

4. What should not be on your bucket list?

As you work on your bucket list, some of the things you'll discover are the things you *never* want to do. I know for certain that I never want to run a marathon. I've often joked that I'll start running the first time I see someone smiling when they are running! Now I know that many people get tremendous joy from running and I am glad to pass them a drink along the course, but that's it for me. So what should not be on your bucket list? Anything that might cause you stress or create scheduling conflicts.

5. What are you going to do to stay healthy?

Perhaps the most important item on this list for you to think about is your health. If you want good health, you have to be intentional about it. Modern medicine has many ways to extend the length of our life, but the quality of our life is our responsibility. Some people do an excellent job doing the things that keep them healthy. Others struggle with it.

We have all heard the story about eating a good diet and getting sufficient rest and exercise. These facts cannot be disputed. Our challenge is to find a way to make it interesting and something we embrace, instead of something we dread. This is one key area of our life that we need a team to help us, as well as written goals to guide us and keep us accountable. My wife and I have a home in Florida and have the opportunity to watch people who are 15-20 years older than we are. We find the healthiest of them tend to get out and get moving every day. They belong to walking and exercise groups. Some of them even hire a personal trainer to keep them on track. Most of all, I think it's important to eat healthfully. Listen to your physician. If necessary, hire a personal nutritionist to help you with your diet and food choices.

6. What hobbies and interests do you have now or are developing for retirement?

One of the keys to having an interesting life after work is to have other interests. Most of us have a few hobbies, but it's interesting to see how people often either lose interest or don't make time for their hobbies. Unfortunately, in our society today doing something without producing something may not be valued, and in some cases it is even frowned upon.

I remember my mother used to spend a fair amount of time knitting and crocheting. I never understood how she could do something so repetitive and boring and find joy in it. I once asked her about it, and she said that it was relaxing to her. I guess with six kids it probably was a nice mental vacation!

When it comes to hobbies, maybe we need to become "yes men" or "yes women." By that I mean, as you look for new hobbies, make it a habit to say "yes." Become inquisitive and ask people about their hobbies. Be willing to learn to do something new. As you consider your hobbies, think of the ones you can do alone ("me time") and the hobbies you can do with your spouse ("we time").

7. What are your unrealized life goals?

Have you ever said to yourself that you are going to do a particular thing ... "someday"? Well, retirement provides you an unlimited supply of somedays. The best gift you can give yourself is an accomplished goal. I like to think of goals as dreams with a deadline. As you ponder your retirement, it's a good idea to put together your dream list. Making this list is a simple task. Take paper — or if you're of the digital age, your iPad — off to some quiet spot and ask yourself the question: "What would I attempt to do if I knew I couldn't fail"? Let your mind run wild. You can edit this later.

Once you've come up with items you really want to do, take the time to set a deadline. Having well-defined goals in your life will give your life purpose and make it much more interesting. It's one thing to set and identify a goal, and it's another to accomplish that goal. Just do it! You will be glad you did!

8. How will you downsize and de-clutter your life?

One of the things I dread is having to face going through our home and getting rid of all the things that we do not need, never use, or do not want. Our kids always joke that they will sell our house "as is" after we are gone. I wish I were joking! But as you contemplate retirement, it's a good time to start working on a plan to de-clutter your life. There are multiple books on the subject and, believe it or not, even consultants who can work with you. The best way to approach this is the way you would eat an elephant: one spoonful at a time. Consider a recognized 501c(3) charity such as Goodwill, the Salvation Army, AMVETS, etc. Not only will you clean up the "clutter," you'll also receive a tax deduction. Please be sure to obtain a receipt and itemize your deductions, too.

9. How will you make the world a better place?

One of my favorite quotes is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: *“To laugh often and much; To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”*

As a successful dentist for many years, you spent your life making the world a better place by treating patients, easing their pain, and helping them enjoy a healthy mouth. To continue that success in retirement, you will need to find new ways to make the world better because you were here.

These efforts don't have to be so grand that they change the entire world. But every effort you make is worth it. You don't have to set up a charity to feed an entire village. In some cases, helping out a friend or family member can do it. Sharing the gifts you've been given is basically all it takes. One of the best things you can do to make your retirement interesting and rewarding is volunteering. Our world has no shortage of problems, so pick one and find a way to be part of the solution.

Finally, consider acts of kindness. For example, picking up something for someone who has dropped it, holding the door for someone, letting someone go in front of you in line, offering to help put their groceries in the car, or just being downright “nice.” You will be surprised how rewarding this simple action can be.

10. What is your plan for making new friends?

As you look ahead to retirement, one of the best things you can do is have a plan to meet and develop new friends. It may sound odd to have a plan to make new friends. However, like anything else in your life, if you don't have a plan, chances are you won't achieve as much. I once spoke to a wise older man about the things that mattered to him in his life. After his family, he said his friends had the most impact on his happiness and quality of life. The interesting thing is that he recommended having younger friends, because they kept him active and younger.

As you enter the retirement years, you may find that maybe you or your old friends have moved, found new interests, grown apart — or even worse, passed on. Here are some good ways to make new friends:

- Ask your existing friends to introduce you to others.
- Invite potential friends do something with you.
- Make it a habit of getting people's contact information. In Florida, it is common for people to have cards with their names, phone, and e-mail information.

- Accept invitations whenever possible.
- Give as much as you get from a new relationship.
- Join clubs, or form one.
- Find a church of your choosing and become active in it.
- Take classes.

Above all, be interested in others and ask questions about their family, where they are from, what was their occupation, their hobbies, and so on. As you communicate, truly listen to the responses. While attending an event, remember to introduce yourself and your spouse.

Without a doubt, non-financial planning is as important to a successful retirement as the financial aspects. Take some time to consider these questions and make your plan. I think you'll find many of these suggestions are applicable not just at retirement, but throughout life. As always, feel free to contact me with questions or assistance.