

Coaching people through life transitions: Retirement

Context

Over the last few decades, modern life seems to have become increasingly fast-paced, demanding and complex. For many people the “old days” of relative simplicity, stability and recognised structure have gone and have been replaced by a rapidly changing, technologically-orientated world – both at work and, increasingly, at home.

Dealing with a significant life change in the context of this modern way of life can be mentally and emotionally difficult. Many of us have got so caught up in the day to day running of our busy lives that we don’t get much time to stand back and assess what is really important for us, what works for us as an individual and what we truly want at a deeper level. A big change like retirement places all these issues right in front of your nose.

Issues that come up at retirement and how coaching can help

1. Who am I now? – changes in identity

Of all the life transitions, retirement is probably the one most likely to challenge our identity. It is understandable that people get sucked into their busy working lives and identify with their work role, so that they don’t have to think too much about who they are underneath. There was a ready-made identity available with the job/role/salary.

When the job and role stops, what happens to the identity that went with it? This can be a particular problem for people in prestigious, senior positions or in jobs where they get a lot of respect and recognition. A person could go from being “Executive Director of Finance” to “Retired” in a matter of days. Often (e.g. on forms to fill in, in social chit chat) there’s not even space for a qualifier on “retired” – a “retired----- what”? It is as if “retired” is a whole new, melting pot identity that many people have foisted on them.

For many people it is important to face the identity issue head on – and explicitly start to explore what roles and identities you had previously and what roles and identities you would like to develop now and into the future. It is also useful to look at what defines you as a unique human being – i.e. what are your strengths, your gifts and your values? Although to some people this may seem a bit “heavy” to do this delving and deliberating – it can, in practice, be a fun, energising and liberating experience. There is also not much point avoiding it by throwing yourself into “busy-ness” of one sort or another as that may simply be a distraction tactic to avoid facing the question “who am I now?” A coach can help people go through this important exploration and provide them with useful questions and methods to build a meaningful and clear personal identity for their new life.

2. Where do I want to go/ what do I want to do in my life now?

Most people facing retirement spend more time worrying about and planning for their finances, pensions and living accommodation than they do thinking

about the overall bigger picture of themselves as an individual person – i.e. an individual with wants, desires and talents. Taking care of the “worrying things” is obviously very important and most books and advice on retirement tend to focus on money, pensions, housing and health needs. However, they don’t tend to cover in much detail the mental, emotional and spiritual sides of people’s lives.

Retirement is an excellent time to do some thinking and planning about what it is that would really satisfy you, what is important to you in your life, and how you can make sure you get the balance right. There are so many opportunities available to everyone these days. Given that many retired people are fit and healthy with many years of active life ahead of them, it would be a waste for them not to take those opportunities to lead a fully satisfying life on all levels. It can be the perfect time to make sure you *do* all the things you would really want to do and *be* who you want to be.

There are many ways in which this exploration and planning can be done and again it can be an invigorating and enjoyable process. A good coach will facilitate this process and help you see the wood for the trees much quicker than trying to do all this on your own. Another benefit is that the coach is able to be objective and focus entirely on *your* needs. This can be difficult to achieve with well-meaning friends and family members as they are usually too close or involved.

3. How am I going to keep myself motivated and moving forwards with my plans?

Once you have a bigger picture of what you want your new retired life to be like, it is important to make your vision more specific and create some actionable goals. Psychology research shows that you are more likely to achieve what you want if you make desires and wishes into more specific, actionable goals. Especially important is *writing down your goals*.

Many people wouldn’t think twice about the importance of business plans when they were at work - but they wouldn’t necessarily think to do a “life-business plan” when they are retired! It is even more important to do when you are retired because there are probably a lot fewer people to keep you on track and far less people (if any) to be accountable to. Bobbing along, going whichever way the wind blows when you are retired may seem attractive when you have had a really busy, pressurised working life, but if you do have real wants and desires for your retired life, then you are far more likely to fulfil them if you carefully plan your goals.

There are many tools and techniques for helping you stay motivated and on track. In particular, it is really helpful to examine your beliefs about taking action to achieve your desired results. This stems from a well-researched psychological theory of motivation – that is, we are more likely to take action if we believe that it will eventually result in a personally satisfying reward and if we are convinced that we are able to do what is necessary along the way to achieve that.

Doing specific work on our limiting beliefs that get in the way of our goals is an essential part of the process. People often don't realise that they have limiting beliefs as they masquerade as completely true facts. We construct our beliefs, including our limiting beliefs, throughout our life as a result of our experiences and conditioning. By the time people get to retirement age, they may have been carrying round a whole set of limiting beliefs for a large part of their life. Some of these may be the result of cultural conditioning. For example, in this youth and appearance orientated culture, older people are likely to have been conditioned into believing that they are no longer young enough (or even attractive enough) to be or do certain things.

The good thing is that it is never too late for limiting beliefs and even long-held ones can be turned around into more empowering beliefs using some fairly simple techniques and practice.

Summary

Retirement is a challenging life transition and people may underestimate the psychological and emotional adjustments that are needed. Issues around changing roles and expectations mean that people need to re-build an empowering identity for themselves and make some informed decisions about what it is they want to be and do for the rest of their lives. Investing in a few sessions with a good coach can help people focus on these important issues. The coach can facilitate their progress through the adjustment process by helping them to build personal, meaningful goals for the future and providing useful tools and techniques for keeping on track, staying motivated and dealing with blocks. Most importantly, a coach will also give encouragement, support and objective feedback so that you can avoid costly trial and error mistakes and move forwards into your new life faster and more easily.

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