

# Don't Wait: Advocate for Your Future Retired Self Now

The Mind Body Approach to Retirement: Determining when to retire and how to extend health span, once retired, requires careful planning and the ability to assess specific goals you want to achieve.

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By Susan Mangiero, CFA

When and how to retire depends on a variety of factors, not the least of which is money. Individuals who've adequately saved or possess ample capital have opportunities that others do not. However, if you think a plump piggybank is your sole answer to a satisfying retirement, think again. As the adage goes, "Money isn't everything."



Susan Mangiero, CFA, MBA, MFA, PhD

## Mind the Gap

According to Dr. Jennifer Baker-Porazinski, a practicing physician with more than twenty years of treating patients, current lifestyle choices are integral to determining whether retirement makes sense as we age and, if we do retire,

whether our post-work lives will be fulfilling or difficult. Currently on the staff of Canyon Ranch, and a recent recipient of the Lifestyle Medicine Certification by the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, “Dr. Jen” counsels her clients to focus on preventative measures that encourage/promote a high-quality health span rather than focusing exclusively on longevity. As she explains, “quantity does not equate to quality. We’ve all heard sad stories about people who retire, only to spend a year or two in misery before they die or receive a diagnosis of a debilitating illness that will destroy their chance to enjoy a productive and happy retirement



Dr. Jennifer Baker-Porazinski

Dr. Jen is one of countless medical professionals who espouse the virtues of a lifestyle approach to aging. A 2023 published paper, “The Impact of the Six Pillars of Lifestyle Medicine on Brain Health,” defines lifestyle medicine as a specialty that emphasizes behavioral changes to treat persistent diseases. The authors analyzed six pillars, each thought to mitigate the onset of rapid neurocognitive decline. The pillars include exercise, good sleep hygiene, connections with others, stress reduction, a plant-based diet, and avoidance of “risky substances” such as alcohol and tobacco. Ignoring these six pillars could, according to a 2021 paper, “Longevity leap: mind the healthspan gap” lop off years of potential good living. These authors estimate nine years as the average gap between how long people will live versus how well they live, taking life expectancy, disabilities, and disease into account.

## **Plan for Retirement Wellness**

Dr. Jen urges individuals to make positive changes now, before it’s too late to enjoy what should be a celebration of decades of demanding work. “The key question to ask yourself is whether you will be too sick in later years to do

what you want. You may end up living in a nursing home. Assess now how you plan to reinforce your social connections and take on challenges to invigorate your thinking abilities once you leave the workforce.” She adds, “Retirement doesn’t have to be bad for the brain. You can take or teach classes, volunteer, join a bicycling club, or get a part-time job. It’s all about stretching yourself while doing things that align with your core values.”

Planning is the operative word. Like collaborating with a financial advisor to calculate what you need to save today for later consumption, engage a wellness expert to help you determine the best lifestyle habits to stabilize, or perhaps improve, your physical stamina and ability to make independent decisions.

Consider drafting a retirement wellness plan that is flexible enough to accommodate an unexpected disability or economic drain that forces you to either retire sooner than you want or locks you into the workforce beyond your desired calendar milestone to leave. Your plan should include specifics about how, what, and when you intend to engage in intellectually stimulating activities that are complex and challenging, exercise regularly, and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, all of which will not only protect your brain, but will also increase your health span.

Examine the notion that an early retirement is the best outcome for you. Authors of a 2023 study, “Early Retirement Can Accelerate Cognitive Decline,” conclude that adults who stop working prematurely are at greater risk of diminished brain power. The individual and socioeconomic impact of reduced cognitive abilities is consequential. The Alzheimer’s Society states that 55 million people around the world live with dementia. They predict this number will grow to 139 million people by 2050. Dr. Jen tells her patients, “Do those things that protect your brain health. Just as how long you live may not be as important as how well you live, how you retire is likely as important as when you retire.”

# THE 6 PILLARS

Source: American College of Lifestyle Medicine



Avoidance of Risky Substances



Physical Activity



Restorative Sleep



Social Connection



Stress Management



Whole Food Nutrition

## Retirement is a Process

The modern philosophy about retirement is evolving. Unlike our forebearers who modeled retirement as a linear path from the factory or office to the golf course and exciting ports of call, modern day workers are open to alternatives like “flectirement.” As explained in a 2023 article in *Fast Company*, this gradual transitioning from full-time work to part-time employment offers advantages to both companies and individuals. Employers can retain institutional knowledge, still have access to skilled labor, and lower the costs of recruiting and training. Employees retain partial or full benefits and maintain social interaction with their network of colleagues. Others may opt to earn income as consultants to their previous employers or start their own businesses. Organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons publish articles about side hustles after fifty or turning your hobby into a business. Even if you end up using a different skill set than what you used in the past, a bridge job offers a seamless way to change your daily routine and keep the money flowing.

Reframing your attitude can help ease any worries about life beyond work. Questions about how you can fill your day, your self-awareness without a work identity, and the risk of losing social connections will be easier to address if you think of retirement in terms of continuity. Dr. Jen explains, “There’s this thing called the continuity theory where people want to maintain sameness in their lives. If you already have something like a leisure activity or something you’re doing outside of work, keep going. Unless you have a hobby or pursuit you can continue doing once you retire, you will almost surely face an abrupt, and often jarring, change to your everyday schedule. The things you do now keep you social, something that is paramount once you lose your work relationships.” A 2023 report by the U.S. Surgeon General, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,” makes clear that shrinking our access to others can significantly accelerate the risk of “premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” As revealed by the Blue Zone researchers, friendships and community attachments continue to improve the quality of life for seniors.

## **Advocate For Your Retired Self**

Decisions about how to optimize retirement, at whatever age, are complex and highly personalized. It's impossible to create a one-size-fits-everyone solution. Economic, physical restrictions, and sociocultural realities influence aging workers in diverse ways. What is steadfast and common to all of us is the need to act now, before you retire. Analyze the issues related to when and why you want to retire and whether your wants match your needs. Passivity is ill-advised.

Dr. Jen's favorite quote by philosopher Lao Tzu nicely captures the notion of self-reliance regarding retirement wellness planning. "If you do not change direction, you may end up where you're heading." If where you are heading is destined to cause you angst, it's up to you to create a retirement wellness map that can help you down the road.

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Susan Mangiero, PhD, CFA, MBA, MFA is a financial journalist, ghostwriter, and content strategist with articles, books, and thought leadership work appearing in more than one hundred business outlets. Her past work includes trading derivatives on Wall Street, launching a knowledge-sharing digital platform for institutional investors, teaching investments to corporate and university audiences, and testifying as an expert witness about retirement plan governance, financial advisory methods, and investment best practices. Learn more about Susan Mangiero by visiting <https://www.linkedin.com/in/smangiero/>.

Author's Disclaimer: Susan Mangiero has visited Canyon Ranch as a paying guest.