



April 4, 2010

Ken King column: Build a 'bridge' to a happier retirement

I was talking to a friend the other day and he made the observation that a lot of people our age are starting to look old. I had to agree with him and shared that I had noticed that he and I were aging much better than a lot of our other friends.

He was considering retirement, but thinks he would still like to keep working. I shared that I had read an article about staying young. The article pointed out that if you want to stay healthy after retirement, you need to keep working. That is exciting to me — a not so successful "recovering workaholic."

The research and findings were from a study done at the University of Maryland. The researchers found that people who transition from full-time employment to full-time retirement with part-time work, experienced fewer major diseases and functioned better day-to-day than those who totally quit the workforce.

I have found that to be true with some of my acquaintances as well. Many of the people I talked to who are retired and are enjoying it have either kept working at part-time jobs or have become involved with community organizations. The people factor and mental stimulation seem to be two of the top reasons they still work or volunteer.

The study was conducted by the National Institute on Aging over a six-year period. Every two years, the people were interviewed about their health, finances, employment history and work or retirement life.

The researchers considered only physician-diagnosed health problems, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, lung disease, heart disease, stroke and psychiatric problems. They controlled not only for baseline physical and mental health, but also for age, sex, educational level, and total financial wealth. The results showed the retirees who continued to work in bridge jobs experienced fewer major diseases and fewer functional limitations than those who fully retired.

The participants also answered a basic mental health questionnaire. The findings showed that people whose post-retirement jobs were related to their previous careers reported better mental health than those who fully retired. However, these mental health improvements were not found among people who worked in jobs outside their career fields. The research said this may be because retirees who take jobs outside their career fields may need to adapt to a different work environment or job conditions, and, therefore, become more stressed. The study also noted that retirees with financial problems are more likely to work in a different field after they officially retire. The authors of the study suggested that, when possible, retirees carefully consider their choices of post-retirement employment.

Kenneth Shultz, co-author of the study suggests: "Choosing a suitable type of bridge employment will help retirees transition better into full retirement and in good physical and mental health."

Simply stated, happy retirement means finding a purpose and sticking with it.
