

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My husband, Phil, and I have worked hard for years in order to retire early (we're both 59). We've looked forward to the day when we would have the time to do all the things that we've put off because of our careers and raising a family, but Phil isn't enthusiastic about anything. In spite of the economic slump, we've invested and planned well. We have financial security and money to do the things we want. We're both in excellent health. Still, Phil can't seem to make the adjustment from his former high-powered executive life in a major corporation. He mopes all the time or – worse – follows me around. Do you have any suggestions for turning our 'golden years' into gold?

-- Amelia

Dear Amelia,

Despite reaching your joint dream of an early retirement, Phil may be grieving the loss of his identity, status, and power as an executive. Together, you've accomplished excellent financial planning for this day, but he seems to have neglected planning for the psychological and social role changes that result from retirement. This is a rite of passage that goes mostly unnoticed after the gold watch and nice retirement dinner from his corporation. He's not alone – and it may help for him to know that. Research has shown that about 30% of the newly retired have significant adjustment problems.

Phil knew who he was in the first half of his life, but has not yet figured out who he is in the process of becoming. The loss of a job ushers in a crisis period for some people, even when that change is a good one, and has been self-initiated – like the decision to retire. Phil is in a swirl -- a difficult psychological transition -- and he will be happier when he better understands and articulates his feelings.

You don't mention how long ago you and Phil retired. If it has only been a few weeks, then give him both support and the space to live into the answers and a new way of seeing himself. If, however, this has been going on for months, then Phil needs to get some help. There are many excellent books, websites, and other resources about adjusting to retirement, and living large in midlife and beyond. Some communities offer support groups and the AARP (www.aarp.org) continues to provide a wealth of resources for folks over 50.

If talking with you, and learning more about where to go from here doesn't seem to encourage him, then his moping may be more than just a transitional adjustment to a new lifestyle. Instead, his behavior may indicate some level of depression, which would improve with professional help from a counselor or therapist who understands the psychological dynamics of retirement.

An honest heart-to-heart conversation may start the ball rolling, and help Phil get a grip on his feelings. Let him know that you love him, and want to do whatever you can to lend a hand with his adjustment to a new lifestyle. Then ask him to list the things he

most misses about leaving his executive position, and brainstorm ways to integrate some of these activities into his present life.

Perhaps he misses the ability to create a vision and the strategic plans to realize it. Could he use these same leadership skills in the service of a community or volunteer organization whose mission is close to his heart? Does he miss the travel to new and exciting places? If so, would vacations in exotic ports of call fill that void for him? Before he can go forward, it's important to know where he is heading. What does he want in his life now?

You are both blessed with good health, and are entering into what can be a vibrant and meaningful second half of life. But Phil may be grieving the end of one part of his life, and he may be unable to see that he stands before an open door – a new beginning with its own challenges, rewards, and opportunities to grow. Midlife, aging, and retirement offer us unique opportunities to live with meaning and passion. That wisdom is the gold in our “golden years.”

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) All of the “Your Personal Coach” columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.