

The Hidden Key to a Rewarding Retirement: Embracing “Mattering”

Limitless freedom often doesn't bring satisfaction in retirement

By Dr. Nancy Schlossberg, Professor Emerita, University of Maryland

Retirement can be a mixed bag: Some folks are thrilled about the endless freedom to do whatever, whenever. But for others, the freedom of retirement can be pretty stressful—about 28% of retirees end up dealing with depression.¹

If you're feeling anxious about retirement or it's not living up to your expectations, think about your “mattering factor.” I've spent decades researching this and found that feeling like you matter is key to a happy retirement.

What We'll Cover

- Why mattering's so critical
- 5 criteria to assess your mattering factor
- How to boost your mattering factor

Why Mattering's So Critical

I discovered the concept of mattering when reading a study² about teenage boys and delinquency. They found that boys who felt they mattered to their parents, teachers, and school were less likely to get into trouble compared to those who felt unimportant.

Interestingly, the researchers made an unexpected observation about retirement. They suggested that one major problem with retirement is the feeling of no longer mattering to others. While retirement offers a break from work, it can also lead to a sense of not being needed, making life feel less meaningful.



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Source: Retirement Gets Harder the Longer You Wait, The Atlantic, 7/23/24



For example, I interviewed Jules, a DC police officer who retired from a fulfilling career. He said, "I turned in my badge and that was that." He moved to another state and took a few part-time jobs, but the work was menial and made him realize he missed the camaraderie, variety, and positive impact of his former job.

The Sudden Change, Feeling Like He Didn't Matter Anymore, And Struggling To Adjust Left Him Really Frustrated

This frustration turned inward and led to depression. Eventually, a family member helped Jules find a meaningful job as an assistant manager at an exclusive resort. Feeling like he mattered again, Jules says the job saved his life.

Retirees who feel like they no longer matter after leaving work might experience something similar. Losing a sense of purpose and social connections can be tough, leading to feelings of frustration and loneliness. This can spiral into depression, anxiety, or even physical issues such as high blood pressure. Without feeling like they matter, it can be hard for retirees to stay motivated and engaged, which can affect their overall health and happiness.

Understanding the importance of mattering is crucial, especially as you transition into retirement. Let's explore how you can assess your own "Mattering Factor" and ensure you maintain a sense of purpose and connection.

5 Criteria to Assess Your Mattering Factor

It might seem straightforward to gauge whether someone feels like they matter and are relevant, but there are 5 key aspects of mattering.

Exercise: Assess Your Mattering Factor

Evaluating your mattering factor is pretty easy. Just answer yes or no to the five aspects of based on how you feel. If you have two or more "nos," you may need to strengthen your mattering factor.

	YES	NO
Attention: I feel that I command interest or notice of another person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Importance: I feel that what I'm doing is important	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Appreciation: I feel that people appreciate me for who I am and what I do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dependence: I feel that people depend on me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pride: I feel that others are proud of my accomplishments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

When you think about it, you might realize that you already feel like you matter a lot, which is great. But if you think your mattering factor could use a boost, remember that you have the power to improve it, enhance your sense of significance, and find greater happiness.

How to Boost Your Mattering Factor

There are numerous ways to enhance your sense of mattering. We'll explore two methods next. If you're interested in discovering more, check out our workbook at hartfordfunds.com/mattering.

- **Step Out and Engage (Even Beyond Your Comfort Zone)**

One way to boost your "mattering" factor is to get involved. It's easy to turn down invites to things such as a book club or pickleball if they feel a bit outside our comfort zone. But instead of automatically rejecting the invite, consider that this may be an good chance to boost your mattering factor.

Trying new things can help you connect with others, learn new skills, and feel more valued. You can't say yes to everything, but seeing these invites as opportunities can lead to personal growth and a stronger sense of belonging. So next time, give it a shot and see where it takes you.

- **Choose a "Retirement Path"**

Another way to boost your mattering factor is to think about your "retirement path." There are six main paths retirees often take. Selecting a path can give your retirement a sense of purpose, which is a great way to boost your mattering factor.



Continuers: Maintain connections with previous work, home, or volunteer activities, adapting them to fit retirement while using existing skills and interests.



Easy Gliders: Embrace each day without a fixed agenda. They flit between friends, beaches, shops, and libraries, savoring their freewheeling lifestyle.



Adventurers: Retirement? Time to ditch routines and embrace adventure! Pursue a new career, learn something new, or finally try that dream hobby.



Searchers: Though both Searchers and Adventurers love exploring, Searchers are all about trying every option until they find the perfect fit. It's plan A, plan B, plan C, then "What's next?" on repeat!



Involved Spectators: Some retirees can't quit cold turkey. They follow their old industry like involved spectators, catching the latest news even though they're out of the game.



Retreaters: Come in two versions: Those who intentionally take a break to reflect and recharge, and those who prefer a perpetual state of relaxation.

Do Any of These Paths Strike a Chord With You?

Choosing a retirement path can significantly enhance your sense of purpose and provide a clearer identity, ultimately boosting your mattering factor and enriching your retirement experience. And remember, if you choose a path and it's not a good fit, you can always try out a different one. You might discover that a mix of paths suits you. For example, you could be both an "Adventurer" and a "Searcher" on the lookout for what's next.

"Do I Really Need to 'Matter' in Retirement?"

For many retirees, embracing a laid-back lifestyle filled with relaxation and leisure is a dream come true—especially if they feel they've missed out on these pleasures during their working years.

Yet, as appealing as it may sound, a retirement with too much leisure can come with risks. It can lead to a life lacking significance, meaning, or purpose—a low "mattering factor." Essentially, a leisure-focused retirement might leave retirees feeling unfulfilled, with little sense of accomplishment or appreciation from others. While it may sound appealing initially, it can ultimately leave retirees grappling with a sense of emptiness.

“If You Matter, You’ll Be Happy”

After talking to hundreds of retirees, I’ve realized that feeling like you matter and being happy are closely linked. No matter who I spoke to—men or women, rich or poor, young or old—they all shared the same needs: to be noticed, to feel important, to be appreciated, and to be relied on by others. These are the keys to feeling like you matter and having a happy retirement.

Next Step

Whether you’re close to or already in retirement, take a moment to check your “mattering” factor with the table exercise. If it’s looking a bit low, try out some of the tips we shared in the third section.



Nancy Schlossberg, EdD, Professor Emerita University of Maryland

Nancy, a Professor Emerita who retired from the University of Maryland after teaching counseling psychology for 25 years, is far from a typical retiree. Her daughter rightly pointed out to Nancy, “The only thing retired about you is your paycheck.”

With a focus on adult transitions, Dr. Schlossberg’s expertise spans various life changes, including geographic moves, returning to school, job loss, divorce, and retirement. She’s written 10 books, and her latest work focuses on retirement transitions; reflecting her mission to guide people through life’s inevitable changes.

Sources:

¹ Retirement Gets Harder the Longer You Wait, The Atlantic, 7/23/24.

² Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance to parents and mental health among adolescents. In R. Simmons (Ed.), *Research in community and mental health* (Vol. 2, pp. 163–182). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 179–180.

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