

When Your Spouse Retires ... And You Don't

What changes when one of you drops out? A lot

by: Gil Klein | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | September 1, 2010



— Nathaniel Welch/Redux

When it came to closing out his working life, Tom Falvey planned things to a T. After 38 years of service with the federal government, the Arlington, Va., man walked away from his job at the Department of Homeland Security, leaving with a good pension—and health care coverage—on the very day he became eligible for retirement at age 55.

The life that followed was less well thought-out. Falvey and his wife, Jean, 43 at the time, settled into a sometimes out-of-sync existence at home together, he in leisure mode, she running a consulting business from a spare bedroom.

Related

- [Do Women Make Better Retirees than Men? Read](#)
- [Exclusive New Survey From AARP The Magazine Looks At Effect Of Retirement On Marriage. Read](#)

To Tom, a big issue was how to indulge in his noisy hobby of woodworking without disturbing Jean in the next room. To Jean, a big issue was how to manage financially with her husband's full paycheck gone and her own business suffering in the recession.

- [Couples Disagree About Retirement Finances. Read](#)
- [Retired Spouses: A National Survey of Adults 55-75. Read](#)

"I worried," she says of the now two-and-a-half-year-old retirement. "Tom's response was, 'Everything will be fine.' It was a Venus and Mars thing."

A new social dynamic is emerging between husbands and wives approaching retirement in America. With nearly 55 percent of all married couples having two incomes, a growing number of spouses are retiring at different times. This often raises thorny issues of income loss and mismatched outlooks on life.

Though the Falveys embarked on this existence by choice, the recent downsizings have forced it on many couples, with serious ramifications.

"A lot of companies make the assumption that because of somebody's age ... they are prepared to retire, so you might as well cut them loose," said Pam Schaffer, 52, of Columbus, Ohio, whose husband, John, 64, lost his position as vice president at a major publisher a year ago.

He has COBRA health coverage, but it runs out in April, four months before he gets Medicare. Pam's computer consulting job offers no health insurance, a challenge the couple will have to face.

But long before the recession, retirement patterns were changing. Formerly, "women would follow their husbands out of the labor market," says Richard Johnson, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute. "Now as women's employment is becoming more important, they're more likely to keep working even after their husbands retire."

A 2004 study by the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College found that fewer than one in five couples retired in the same year. Generally the husband stopped working first.

Things to Consider

- Which spouse should retire first? It's likely that one wants to be first, but the decision needs some sober analysis: Whose retirement will subtract the most income? Whose might cause medical coverage or other benefits to disappear—and cause a problem.
- If you're the one retiring, should you claim Social Security at 62, the earliest possible age? If you can afford it and are

in good health, you may want to put off collecting your Social Security in order to get higher monthly benefits later on. Having your spouse continuing to work can make it easier to say no to early Social Security.

- How could this period help you transition to joint retirement? It's a good time to test a new budget, what you can live without and what your new expenses (health care?) may be when all you have is retirement income.
- What about part-time work? Many retirees find that, after the initial euphoria over freedom from a job, they welcome the structure of part-time work—as well as the income.
- Finally, are both of you in this together? Household happiness will be maximized if partners agree on the details of this next stage of life.

At best, experts say, separate timetables can serve as a trial run for the full deal. By living on one paycheck when they're used to two, couples can experiment with cutting costs to prepare for life on retirement income alone.

On the downside, resentments may emerge when couples become out of sync—one person remains anchored to a job while the other wants to travel or relax. Mitch Anthony, author of *The New Retirementality*, says husbands often have trouble adjusting if they are the first to retire. "Their identity is wrapped up in what they do for work," he says. Seeing the wife leave for work every morning can heighten the problem. One man "found himself wandering around the garage and basement looking for something to break so he would have something to fix," Anthony said.

Ultimately, happiness can come down to how much couples like doing things together, says Kelly Campbell of Campbell Wealth Management in Fairfax, Va. "One spouse may hate the job but not really want the other spouse home at the same time. Other people say they want to retire together ... to enjoy life together."

Despite the many challenges, some couples get it pretty much right.

For St. Louis resident Jerry Brennan, who was a supervisor at Boeing, retiring at 62 did not pose a financial hardship. He and his wife, Peggy, who at 59 works as an administrative assistant, started planning for his retirement years ago. His veterans health coverage was a part of those plans.

Some of his friends have told him a man in his position has "got to clean the house," and he's doing some of that. But as Peggy heads toward retirement, he's begun buying and selling sports memorabilia, combining a hobby with some moneymaking.

Meanwhile, Tom and Jean Falvey have reached an accommodation. He now asks her before making a noisy woodworking cut. He gets out of the house with volunteer work and the occasional fishing trip. He's feeling his way toward bringing in some income again, in an entirely new field. "Going back to putting together PowerPoint presentations ... I don't need that," says Falvey.

Jean, meanwhile, spends two days a week working away from the house. "I'm still learning, still excited about the job," she says.

For now, she and Tom have different lives and different expectations. "We are two circles," she says, "and they overlap."

Gil Klein, formerly with the Media General News Service, is a freelance writer in Arlington, Va.