

Hillary Clinton and Women's Retirement Anxiety

The secretary of state's return to work may symbolize a growing female dread of walking away from their careers

posted by Kerry Hannon, January 9, 2013 [More by this author](#)



Kerry Hannon has spent more than 25 years covering personal finance for Forbes, Money, U.S. News & World Report, and USA Today. Her website is kerryhannon.com. Follow her on Twitter @kerryhannon.



Digital Vision/Thinkstock

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was welcomed back to work Monday with a heavily padded football helmet and a standing ovation by her staff. I never doubted she'd be back as soon as she could, following her blood clot scare.

Whatever you may think of her politics, Clinton is a role model for women of all ages; she certainly is for me. At 65, she seemingly can do it all and devotes herself to work vigorously.

But isn't she at an age where the notion of retiring is in most circles *acceptable*?

Not necessarily.

Working Women Dreading Retirement

A friend of Clinton's, Ellen Chesler, author and senior fellow with the [Roosevelt Institute](#), told [The New York Times](#): "Women of our generation are really the first to have worked through the life cycle in large numbers. Many seem to be approaching retirement with dread."

Given Clinton's role-model status, Chesler added, working women will be watching which path she decides to take after leaving her post, as they plan their own life transitions.

Clinton's plunge back into her job has made me wonder: How can women in their 50s and 60s who *are* dreading retirement because they define themselves by their work conquer the anxiety of losing their identity after fighting so hard to get it?

As a writer in my 50s with no plans to retire, I may not have to sweat this loss of identity — or, hopefully, income.

So I spoke to some smart men and women who spend a lot of time thinking about work transitions and retirement planning.

Retirement Planning Advice for Women

The lofty takeaway from my interviews: Instead of dreading retirement, dive into "work with meaning."

"Purpose is the antidote to dread," Bruce Frankel, author of *What Should I Do With the Rest of My Life?: True Stories of Finding Success, Passion, and New Meaning in the Second Half of Life* told me.

My pal Marci Alboher, author of the recently published *The Encore Career Handbook: How to Make a Living and a Difference in the Second Half of Life*, believes "dread of retirement is what will likely fuel many women in their 50s and 60s to plan for what's next, even before they wrap

up what's now."

Her advice to transition into retirement: Start volunteering for an organization you care about. You could do this by taking on a pro bono project through the [Taproot Foundation](#), [Catchafire.org](#) or one of the other great outfits that matches people with nonprofits who need their skills.

Chesler agrees about the importance of embarking on a purposeful mission to combat the dread of retirement. "It's vital to transition to something outside of yourself and find work with purpose," she said. She recommends tapping into groups, like [ReServe](#), that offer experienced workers new part-time jobs with nonprofits.

Camilla Webster, co-author of *The Seven Pearls of Financial Wisdom: A Woman's Guide to Enjoying Wealth and Power*, strongly encourages women to find ways to move forward as they approach retirement.

"Women over 50 are strong, sexy, involved and highly creative," she says. "Looking at the second half of your life through this lens will galvanize you into action, rather than making you feel defeated. If you are in a financially sound position, consider pursuing a passion-driven calling and restore your joie de vivre. Open a new door on your life."

The Other Reason for Dreading Retirement

Therein lies the rub: *financially sound*.

Truth is, another reason many working women are approaching retirement with dread is because they know that women have a greater likelihood than men of winding up single, living longer and struggling to make ends meet, as I [have blogged about on Next Avenue](#).

"Money plays a role for some women who dread retirement — almost every woman I know is quite concerned about not having enough," says Donna Sapolin, vice president, editorial director and general manager of Next Avenue (aka my boss). "It's quite difficult to lose the peace of mind and especially the sense of personal power that comes from producing an income and not being dependent on someone else."

To maintain your identity and income, Chesler says, you might want to try holding onto your current job as long as you can, assuming you like it. Even part-time work can help women maintain a sense of purpose while receiving an income.

If you can afford to take a break from career to figure out your next step, that could also be a smart move.

You might then decide to put retirement off for a bit so you can accomplish something really big like, oh, maybe running for president?