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Greetings!

With tax season out of the way, spring sports in mid season, and school in the final stretch, summer seems within reach. Get out and enjoy everything that comes with it...grilling, beaches, vacations, and sunshine!

For the market, after a dismal end of 2018, things have rebounded nicely, and so far this year, the market has a nice gain. But, short-term performance in either direction is somewhat irrelevant; as always, keep a long-term perspective when investing.

Enjoy this month's articles and feel free to reach out with any questions!

Ken, Megan, Sharon, Angela, and Derek

May 2019 Financial Fitness

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Quiz: Social Security Survivor Benefits

Did you know that Social Security may pay benefits to your eligible family members when you die, helping to make their financial life easier? Take this quiz to learn more.

Questions

1. What percentage of Social Security beneficiaries receive survivor benefits?

a. 5%

b. 10%

c. 15%

2. Your child may be able to receive survivor benefits based on your Social Security earnings record if he or she is:

a. Unmarried and under age 18 (19 if still in high school)

b. Married and in college

c. Both a and b

3. Which person may be able to receive survivor benefits based on your Social Security earnings record?

a. Your spouse

b. Your former spouse

c. Both a and b

4. Your parent may be able to receive survivor benefits based on your Social Security earnings record.

a. True

b. False

5. How much is the Social Security lump-sum death benefit?

a. $155

b. $255

c. $355

Answers

1. b. About 10% of the approximately 62 million Social Security beneficiaries in December 2017 were receiving survivor benefits.[1]

2. a. A dependent child may be able to receive survivor benefits based on your earnings record if he or she is unmarried and under age 18 (19 if still in high school) or over age 18 if disabled before age 22.

3. c. Both your current and former spouse may be able to receive survivor benefits based on your earnings record if certain conditions are met. Regardless of age, both may be able to receive a benefit if they're unmarried and caring for your child who is under age 16 or disabled before age 22 and entitled to receive benefits on your record. At age 60 or older (50 or older if disabled), both may be able to receive a survivor benefit even if not caring for a child (a length of marriage requirement applies).

4. a. That's true. To be eligible, your parent must be age 62 or older and receiving at least half of his or her financial support from you at the time of your death. In addition, your parent cannot be entitled to his or her own higher Social Security benefit and must not have married after your death.

5. b. The Social Security Administration (SSA) may pay a one-time, $255 lump-sum death benefit to an eligible surviving spouse. If there is no surviving spouse, the payment may be made to an eligible dependent child. The death benefit has never increased since it was capped at its current amount in a 1954 amendment to the Social Security Act.[2]

This is just an overview. For more information on survivor benefits and eligibility rules, visit the SSA website, ssa.gov.

[1] Fast Facts & Figures About Social Security, 2018

[2] Research Notes & Special Studies by the Historian's Office, Social Security Administration

How to Recover from a Mid-Life Financial Crisis

Only 48% of workers ages 45 to 54 are confident that they will have enough money to last throughout their retirement.

Source: 2018 Retirement Confidence Survey, Employee Benefit Research Institute

A financial crisis can be scary at any age, but this is especially true when you're in your 40s or 50s. Perhaps you're way behind on saving for retirement or have too much debt from unnecessary spending. Or maybe an unexpected challenge, such as a job loss, illness, or break from the workforce for caregiving responsibilities, took a direct hit on your finances.

Regardless of how you got to this point, it's important to develop a strategy that will help you re-establish financial stability.

Regain control

Start by accepting the reality of your situation. This may be easier said than done when you'd rather avoid the anxiety, stress, and guilt that you may feel when you have money issues. It's okay to feel these negative emotions as part of the recovery process. They are likely to pass with time as you come up with a plan to regain control.

Review your spending

Another step is to create a budget to help establish a positive cash flow. If you're spending more money than you earn, you'll need to cut back on your discretionary spending immediately. If you've made cuts and your monthly income still isn't enough, you'll need to figure out a way to cut your fixed expenses or increase your income.

Reduce your debt

It's likely that debt is one of the reasons why you're facing a financial crisis. One survey found that people between the ages of 45 and 54 reported the highest amounts of debt overall, totaling $134,600.[1]

To reduce your overall debt, identify the amount and interest rate for each obligation you have. Then tackle it by paying off the debt with the highest interest rate first, then the next highest, and so on.

You might also consider restructuring your debt. This involves negotiating new repayment terms with creditors so you can meet your monthly expenses and pay off your debts within a reasonable amount of time. If you can't afford to hire a professional credit counselor to help you manage or restructure your debt, check with your local Consumer Credit Counseling Service (CCCS) office or another nonprofit credit counseling service to receive assistance at low or no cost.

You should also consider other options, such as seeking part-time work for extra income or liquidating assets, that can help you pay off debt more quickly.

Rebuild your funds

Chances are you've drained your emergency savings fund. If so, you'll need to build it back up. Otherwise, you'll risk racking up credit card debt or dipping into your retirement savings when the next crisis hits.

It's okay to start small. Set aside a percentage of your paycheck each pay period to go into your cash reserve. Continue adding money after reaching your goal.

Revisit your financial relationships

In order to prevent another financial crisis, what changes will you need to make to your current financial relationships? Consider the following.

- **Career.** Do you need to increase your income with a second or a part-time job? Is there room for growth in your current career, or should you consider additional education or training to help boost your earnings?
- **Home.** Do you currently live in an expensive location? Does it make sense to downsize your home or move to a lower-cost area?
- **Family.** If you're financially supporting adult children, can you reduce or discontinue it? Similarly, if you support your elderly parents, can your adult sibling(s) share the financial burden of care?
- **Habits.** Do you overspend to reward yourself? Are you an emotional shopper? Do you buy things you actually want, or are you just trying to keep up with the Joneses?
- **Health.** Can you make a lifestyle change to improve your health to help avoid future issues and potentially reduce medical costs?

Some of these changes will require careful research (e.g., moving or changing careers), whereas others can be easier to implement (e.g., avoiding shopping sprees or reducing aid to adult children).

Reassess your finances periodically

As you get back on the right financial track, it's critical to monitor your progress. Failure to do so in the past might have contributed to your crisis, so make it a habit to periodically review your finances. You might benefit from working with a financial professional who can help you stay on track with your financial goals as your situation changes.

[1] 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances, Federal Reserve Board (most recent data available)

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How Does the Federal Reserve Affect the Economy?

The Fed's mission

The Federal Reserve is the central bank of the United States. Its mission is to provide the nation with a safer, more flexible, and more stable monetary and financial system. For more information on the Federal Reserve, visit [federalreserve.gov.](federalreserve.gov)

FOMC meeting schedule

The Federal Open Market Committee meets eight times a year. Scheduled FOMC meetings in 2019: January 29-30, March 19-20, April 30-May 1, June 18-19, July 30-31, September 17-18, October 29-30, and December 10-11.

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If you follow financial news, you've probably heard many references to "the Fed" along the lines of "the Fed held interest rates," or "market watchers are wondering what the Fed will do next." So what exactly is the Fed and what does it do?

What is the Federal Reserve?

The Federal Reserve — or "the Fed" as it's commonly called — is the central bank of the United States. The Fed was created in 1913 to provide the nation with a safer, more flexible, and more stable monetary and financial system.

Today, the Federal Reserve's responsibilities fall into four general areas:

- Conducting the nation's monetary policy by influencing money and credit conditions in the economy in pursuit of full employment and stable prices
- Supervising and regulating banks and other important financial institutions to ensure the safety and soundness of the nation's banking and financial system and to protect the credit rights of consumers
- Maintaining the stability of the financial system and containing systemic risk that may arise in financial markets
- Providing certain financial services to the U.S. government, U.S. financial institutions, and foreign official institutions, and playing a major role in operating and overseeing the nation's payments systems

How is the Fed organized?

The Federal Reserve is composed of three key entities — the Board of Governors (Federal Reserve Board), 12 Federal Reserve Banks, and the Federal Open Market Committee.

The Board of Governors consists of seven people who are nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. Each person is appointed for a 14-year term (terms are staggered, with one beginning every two years). The Board of Governors conducts official business in Washington, D.C., and is headed by the chair (currently, Jerome Powell), who is perhaps the most visible face of U.S. economic and monetary policy.

Next are 12 regional Federal Reserve Banks that are responsible for typical day-to-day bank operations. The banks are located in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Richmond, Atlanta, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Dallas, and San Francisco. Each regional bank has its own president and oversees thousands of smaller member banks in its region.

The Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) is responsible for setting U.S. monetary policy. The FOMC is made up of the Board of Governors and the 12 regional bank presidents. The FOMC typically meets eight times per year. When people wait with bated breath to see what the Fed will do next, they're usually referring to the FOMC.

How does the Fed impact the economy?

One of the most important responsibilities of the Fed is setting the federal funds target rate, which is the interest rate banks charge each other for overnight loans. The federal funds target rate serves as a benchmark for many short-term interest rates, such as rates used for savings accounts, money market accounts, and short-term bonds. The target rate also serves as a basis for the prime rate. Through the FOMC, the Fed uses the federal funds target rate as a means to influence economic growth.

To stimulate the economy, the Fed lowers the target rate. If interest rates are low, the presumption is that consumers can borrow more and, consequently, spend more. For instance, lower interest rates on car loans, home mortgages, and credit cards make them more accessible to consumers. Lower interest rates often weaken the value of the dollar compared to other currencies. A weaker dollar means some foreign goods are costlier, so consumers will tend to buy American-made goods. An increased demand for goods and services often increases employment and wages. This is essentially the course the FOMC took following the 2008 financial crisis in an attempt to spur the economy.

On the other hand, if consumer prices are rising too quickly (inflation), the Fed raises the target rate, making money more costly to borrow. Since loans are harder to get and more expensive, consumers and businesses are less likely to borrow, which slows economic growth and reels in inflation.

People often look to the Fed for clues on which way interest rates are headed and for the Fed's economic analysis and forecasting. Members of the Federal Reserve regularly conduct economic research, give speeches, and testify about inflation and unemployment, which can provide insight about where the economy might be headed. All of this information can be useful for consumers when making borrowing and investing decisions.

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Do I need to get a REAL ID when I renew my license?

If you need to renew your driver's license, you may want to get a REAL ID. The REAL ID Act, passed by Congress in 2005, enacts the 9/11 Commission's recommendation that the federal government set minimum security standards for state-issued driver's licenses and identification cards.

Beginning October 1, 2020, residents of every state and territory will need to present a REAL ID-compliant license/identification card, or another acceptable form of identification (such as a passport), to access federal facilities, enter nuclear power plants, and board commercial aircraft. Although implementation has been slow, states have made progress in meeting the REAL ID Act's recommendations. A majority of states and territories, along with the District of Columbia, have complied with all REAL ID requirements. The remaining noncompliant jurisdictions have been granted a temporary extension from the Department of Homeland Security.[1]

To obtain a REAL ID, you must apply in person at your state's department of motor vehicles (or other approved service center). Your picture will be taken and signature captured electronically. You must provide more documentation than you would normally need for a standard driver's license or identification card. A REAL ID requires that you show (in original or certified form) proof of identity and lawful presence (e.g., U.S. passport, birth certificate), state residency (e.g., mortgage statement, utility bill), and Social Security number (e.g., Social Security card, paystub). In addition, if your current name doesn't match the one on your proof of identity document, you must prove your legal name change (e.g., marriage certificate).

When states first implemented REAL ID recommendations, applicants were faced with delays and long wait times. However, many states have since streamlined the process by allowing applicants to start the application process online. For more information on applying for a REAL ID, you can visit your state's department of motor vehicles website or dhs.gov/real-id.

1 Department of Homeland Security, REAL ID Compliance Extension Updates, October 2018

How much money should a family borrow for college?

There is no magic formula to determine how much you or your child should borrow for college. But there is such a thing as borrowing too much. How much is too much? One guideline is for students to borrow no more than their expected first-year starting salary after college, which, in turn, depends on a student's particular major and/or job prospects.

But this guideline is simply that — a guideline. Just as many homeowners got burned in the housing crisis by taking out larger mortgages than they could afford, families can get burned by borrowing amounts for college that seemed reasonable at the time but now, in hindsight, are not.

Keep in mind that student loans will need to be paid back over a term of 10 years (possibly longer). A lot can happen during that time. What if a student's assumptions about future earnings don't pan out? Will student loans still be manageable when other expenses like rent, utilities, and/or car expenses come into play? What if a borrower steps out of the workforce for an extended period of time to care for children and isn't earning an income? There are many variables, and every student's situation is different. A loan deferment is available in certain situations, but postponing loan payments only kicks the can down the road.

To build in room for the unexpected, a smarter strategy may be for undergraduate students to borrow no more than the federal student loan limit, which is currently $27,000 for four years of college. Over a 10-year term with a 5.05% interest rate (the current 2018-2019 rate on federal Direct Loans), this equals a monthly payment of $287. If a student borrows more by adding in co-signed private loans, the monthly payment will jump, for example, to $425 for $40,000 in loans (at the same interest rate) and to $638 for $60,000 in loans. Before borrowing any amount, students should know *exactly* what their monthly payment will be. And remember: Only federal student loans offer income-based repayment (IBR) options.

As for parents, there is no one-size-fits-all rule on how much to borrow. Many factors come into play, including the number of children in the family, total household income and assets, and current and projected retirement savings. The overall goal, though, is to borrow as little as possible.

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