

Guest Column • Financial Independence: A Critical Part of Our Professional Goals

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In our life cycle from birth to death, we encounter many challenges. One significant variable is our quest for financial independence. Our relationship with money is often skewed by our parents' opinions, our own life experiences, and our limited educational exposure to concepts related to finance.

Unfortunately, our educational system has failed us in this realm. In our classrooms, we spend an incredible amount of time on subjects that have little positive impact on our ultimate quality of life. Understanding the ins and outs of money management is not considered an essential part of our educational programs. For this reason, financial illiteracy is epidemic in our country, as well as across the entire world.

Personal finance is taboo in both our optometric curricula and our continuing education programs. The decision to avoid presenting any concepts related to personal financial decision-making is old-school thinking. In truth, you cannot manage a thriving practice while your household finances are in chaos. Current practice management courses are still focusing on managing a private practice, while our graduating optometrists are entering an era dominated by corporate practice.

Worries related to money matters have a negative impact on our relationships, marriages, stress levels, and mental/physical functioning. Debt blindness, like any other chronic condition, can have devastating effects on our overall wellbeing. In other words, debt is crushing the aspirations of our younger generations, while Baby Boomers are entering retirement still paying off their children's college loans. Our quality of life has been severely limited by our lack of basic knowledge in money management and investing. Ironically, our financial education has been relegated

to individuals within the financial community, who may have a conflict of interest when determining their professional recommendations.

As in all of our life experiences, there are good and bad outcomes based on ethics and incentives. The history of successful Ponzi schemes has always been based on trust. In my experience, our relationship with financial planners and advisors has the potential to lead to financial uncertainty and disappointment. After a series of financial debacles, based on blindly following the advice of two different financial planners, my mantra became, "If I was going to lose money, I was going to do it myself."

As my career in binocular vision and vision therapy evolved, I realized that there were some similarities between my expertise in optometry and the complex world of money management. These insights were based on the importance of developmental and behavioral components in both areas. There was also a degree of skepticism regarding the efficacy of these approaches.

In a series of articles on Medium entitled "Stepping into the Financial Wilderness," I focused on three different phases in my own personal journey. For this column, I plan to use a similar format, with an emphasis on the following:

- **Age of Denial:** Focusing on the beginning of this journey and facing the challenges of balancing debt with developing an appropriate financial plan
- **Age of Uncertainty:** Focusing on the professional and financial challenges encountered during the transition years of our careers
- **Age of Misperceptions:** Focusing on the important concerns regarding retirement in both the pre and post time frames.

I have certainly made my share of mistakes. The demonization of mistakes is a significant flaw within our educational system. Tom Corley¹ addresses this issue in the following summary: "Mistakes and failure are nothing more than lessons to be learned. They are not reflections of our incompetence, lack of education, or some character flaw. They are just things to learn from. Focus on your successes versus your mistakes or failures." In real life, one needs to confront their

mistakes in a positive manner rather than being embarrassed by them.

In the realm of money management and investing, there is a greater chance of making a bad financial decision than of maintaining a perfect record. As stated by Charles Ellis in his excellent book, *Winning the Loser's Game*,² no one has a perfect record in predicting the stock market direction or in consistently finding the right investment opportunity. Black and white decision-making needs to be replaced by different shades of gray. In other words, it is about probabilities without any guarantees for a successful outcome.

Beyond mistakes, time is another key factor in one's quest for financial independence. An underlying rationale for not implementing a financial plan or planning for the future is the lack of time. In my experience, this response is often a cover-up for feeling overwhelmed by one's money matters or a fear of losing one's money. Over a lifetime, this approach is the formula for a financial disaster.

The bottom line is that we need to make money management a priority. The creation of a financial plan on an index card is an important step in developing a road map to achieving this specific goal. The book *The Index Card*³ by Helaine Olen and Harold Pollack, which has a subtitle, "Why Personal Finance Doesn't Have to Be Complicated," is a wonderful resource for anyone seeking assistance on their own personal journey.

If extenuating circumstances do not allow for a self-directed management of one's assets, co-management with a competent professional is always an option, which commonly occurs in our clinical practices. In this

relationship, an advisor and/or planner must conform to the fiduciary standard for this arrangement to have any degree of credibility. It is also critical that you are involved in setting realistic goals and monitoring the status of your proposed plan at appropriate time frames.

The goal of this series of columns is to raise awareness of some of the peaks and valleys encountered on one's journey to financial independence. In finishing this introduction, I want to share an anonymous quote, which helped me during my quest for freedom from nagging money worries. It states the following: "If you don't think money matters, try living without it."

References

1. Corley T. *Change Your Habits, Change Your Life*. Minneapolis: North Loop Books, 2016.
2. Ellis C. *Winning the Loser's Game*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2021.
3. Olen H, Pollack H. *The Index Card*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2016.

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