



# The MYTH of RETIREMENT

BY GWILYM

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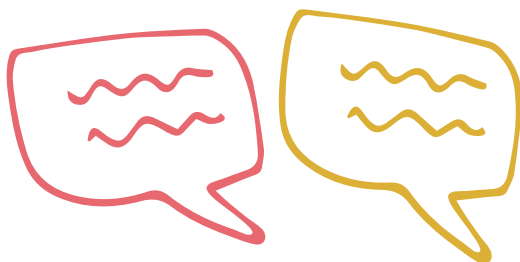
*'A time to do what you want  
to do, when you want to do it,  
where you want to do it, and  
how you want to do it'*  
Catherine Pulsifer

**So the journey begins – pick up your tool box and lets go**

**The myth of retirement and how we may transition into it is one of a series of pocket guides created to support the wellbeing of occupational therapists and colleagues from other disciplines who have decided to transit into this new stage of life.**

As an occupational therapist you will already have a range of well developed skills and excellent tools that you can use to inform your journey. Think of the pocket guides as an addition to your toolbox. Each guide will invite you to stop and think, to pause for a moment and reflect. They will encourage you to be pro-active, and to also seek support in order to take action. All of the guides are designed to support your wellbeing and thought processes. They will form a small part of a wide variety of other resources and mechanisms which may be personal or local to each one of you.

In bringing the pocket guides together, and in our discussions and writings, we hope that as authors. sharing our own experience of transitioning will be of value and that you get a sense that others are having similar experiences. As a team, we are excited to offer our thoughts, experience and hopefully at times some wisdom to colleagues who are considering retiring, before, during and after. Remember, you are certainly not alone. You are part of an experienced community,



some of whom will approach it as an opportunity and with excitement, and others with a less positive outlook. What is important, the invite is here to talk the talk so that we can walk the walk and journey together.

We invite you at certain points to stop, reflect and should you wish to, make notes. A kind of portfolio of your own experience, influenced by your values, beliefs, work experience, culture, family, environment – the influences are endless. These moments of stillness will appear as 'Pause Points'. In places, you will notice that we use terminology such as may, could, potential etc so that each one of us can make sense of what it personally feels like to make the transition, and what it truly means to our own life, our hopes and aspirations both in a practical and an emotional terms.

## **Remaining positive**

Respecting fully that our journey towards retirement is very much a personal one, we would like to offer you an approach which is affirmative and appreciative (See Appreciating transitions). We feel it's important to remain positive, whilst also respecting and including the associated anxiety, uncertainty and feeling of loss which may be present.

These pocket guides aim to encourage all of us to appreciate a more positive perspective of what it feels like to move on in life, as a way to fully understand how older adults can view and prepare for transition into retirement and beyond. We feel it's important to maintain a positive outlook, acknowledging that some aspects of society and indeed the media, may hold some stereotypical and negative perceptions of what it means to be a retired adult.

We can be proud that occupational therapists have a deep and specialist interest in the topic of meaningful activity. Occupational scientists likewise find meaningful activity in retirement professionally engaging. The foundation of the occupational therapy profession is a belief that every individual needs to participate in purposeful activity to maintain physical and psychological wellbeing in both their working and personal lives. Continued engagement in activity has a high priority for most

people following retirement, and all of us need to give much thought to how this can be achieved (Roberts and Workman 2019).

As an occupational therapist you will already have a range of excellent tools that you can use to support yourself. It is always helpful to listen to that kind voice that reminds you to stop for a moment and take some time to focus on yourself because your wellbeing is important. These guides are designed to not only make you stop and think but, as importantly, to take action. All the guides are designed so that you can dip in and out and pick the tools which resonate most with you.

### **Challenging old preconceptions and stereotypical views of older adults**

For most older adults, retirement is an important milestone that is associated with changes in daily routines, social roles, contacts, income and self-esteem. Engagement in meaningful occupations has a key role in the retirement transition and it is argued that most of us will choose only to live as long as there is, within our psyche, a purpose for life. When we consider some of the deeper challenges of our transition to retirement, we may ask whether there are any implications for our creativity and for us as occupational beings?

It is important to remember that a significant number of today's older adults are in the main much healthier than previous generations of retirees. Increasing numbers continue to make an economic contribution as they are breaking with the notion that old age and poverty are synonymous. Currently older people are no longer any more likely to be poor than younger people. Let's recognise too, that there may, in future, be a significant dependency on older adults to sustain the voluntary or unpaid work sector of our society, in addition to family support through child minding occupations. Many retirees are already enjoying life to the full, making the most of the opportunities of continued good health in older age and making a huge contribution to their families, communities and society in general. However, as the number of older people grows, society faces challenges too. One

challenge is to unlock the potential for retirees to play an even greater role within society, and in particular when considering the future of occupation. A second challenge is to enable society to appreciate and prepare more effectively for new and positive challenges in later life. In doing this, society will need to consider that living longer will inevitably mean additional pressures on support and social care, and the specialist professional skills of occupational therapists and other health care professions. (See: Transitioning into retirement)

## Contemplating retirement

Ending a career comes about for a wide variety of reasons, and most of us will make that decision after long debate and consideration. Some of us can't wait, others will journey towards this life stage with some trepidation and anxiety. Acknowledging all these emotions is important.

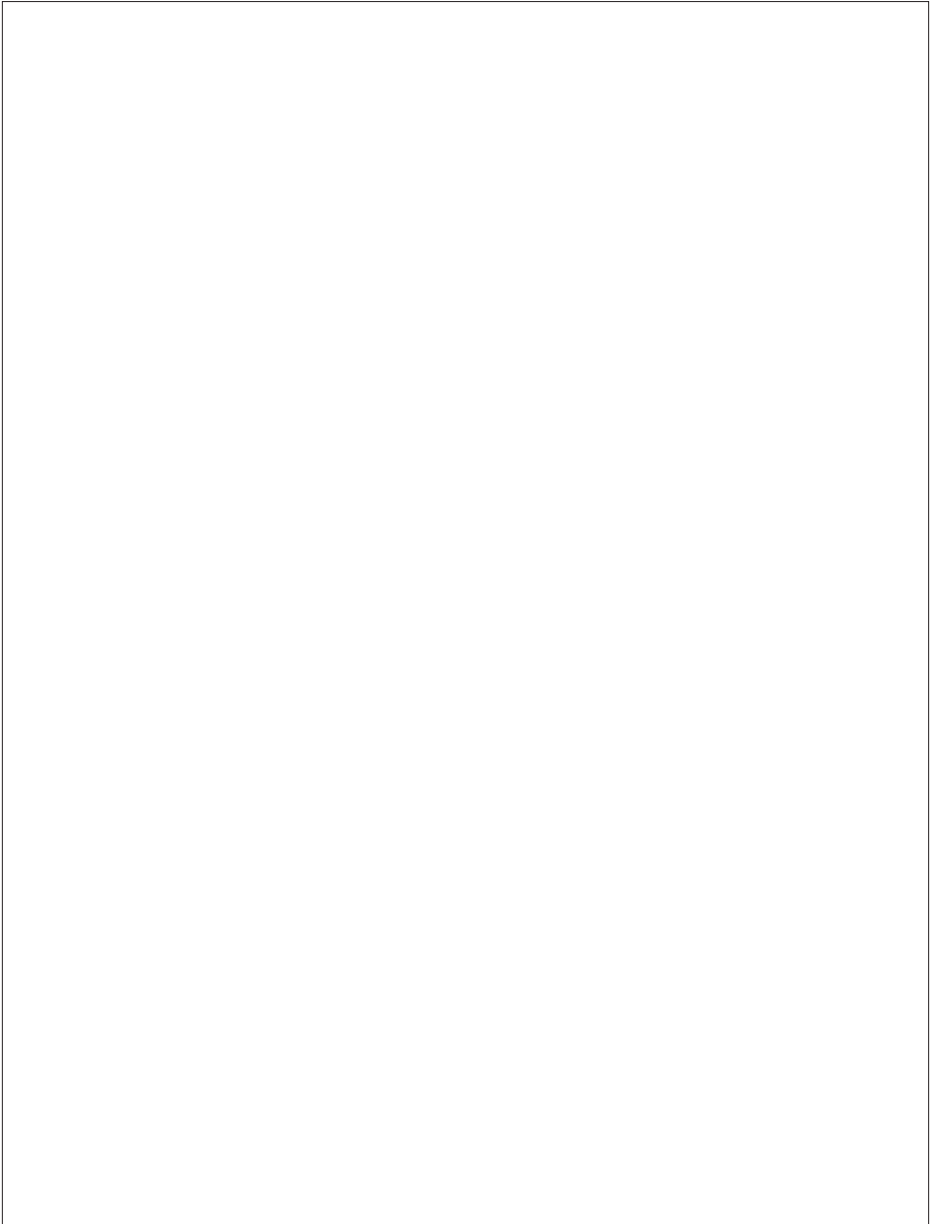
### Pause point

So, here's your first pause point. Let's get some practice by noting down your own reasons for retiring, and more importantly, acknowledging what emotions and feelings come up for you (both the positive ones and those that are not so positive)



# What are my reasons for retirement?

List your reasons in here

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to list their reasons for retirement. The box is currently blank.

# What are my emotions/feelings about retirement?

Positive

Not so positive

The very thought of retirement can be an exciting opportunity. At times though it can also be thought provoking, cause anxiety and be challenging. We may well feel all these emotions as we consider retirement and the eventual transition from paid occupation/employment towards occupations of your choice and a world that can truly become your oyster.

## Work versus occupations of choice

Can work become compulsive rather than a choice? Can it begin to imprison our identity rather than allow us to develop occupations of choice? The word 'work' is possibly loaded and often not useful. At times, and especially towards the end of our careers, it's not the way we'd choose to spend our time. Also, if we're really tied up in our careers, we can think that it's all there is, but the reality is that it's only a fraction of who we are.

When thinking about retirement, it's not uncommon to hear people say, "I can't wait to stop work". This can create a myth whereby retirement and stopping work are intimately associated. But, I wonder, are such a myth and a full stop usefully connected? To unravel the myth, let's transform the word 'work' and view it as an occupation. Then let's consider that 'work' will no longer be our primary occupation when we're retired. What is vital, of course, is that occupation per se doesn't end, even if 'work' does. One revision of the word 'work' at retirement is to replace it with the phrase 'occupation of choice'. Here, we use the word occupation in its widest and deepest context to include an endless choice of activities. Work is often associated with the job that we do, but by using 'occupation of choice' we can encompass not only what we do but also the identity it gives us. In other words, occupation can embrace our 'being' as well as our 'doing'. Here occupation has a more encompassing and holistic meaning (Wilcock 2001) and can begin to explain the issues some people may experience when their work identity is removed.

Have a think about the standard dictionary definition of occupation. It points immediately towards a job and or profession, but if we dig a little deeper, it more fully encompasses the state of 'being occupied'. The myth that as work ends this means the loss of occupation, can leave people in a position of stopping their main profession as they retire, and feeling absolutely lost or developing health issues. As occupational therapy places at its heart the invaluable and central role of occupation for the recovery and maintenance of health, it may not be a surprise



to realise that those who are unable to dispel or overcome the myth that retirement means loss of meaningful occupation, can fall sick and die prematurely. Some of you might remember the immense work of the late Professor Ann Wilcock, who took on the task of writing a commissioned work by the British Association and College of Occupational Therapy entitled *Occupation for Health*, Volumes 1 - A Journey from Self Health to Prescription, and 2 – A Journey from Prescription to Self Health (Wilcock 2001). You will recall this piece of research truly highlighted the historical and positive impact of occupation on health and how, as occupational therapists, we continue to move forward the work and vision of the profession's early pioneers such as Dr Elizabeth Casson.

## **Towards a healthy retirement**

While we wish to foster longevity and health as we approach retirement, the idea of ending work may be a wonderful dream, but stopping work may not be so good in reality. Retirement, however, is less about stopping work and more about starting occupations of choice. So, planning and facilitating a change that essentially involves a continuity of doing and being – up to, including and beyond retirement - is deeply important.

One of the challenges that enforces this myth is how many folk still only have one main profession – that one key job that sustains them throughout their working lives. For some however, what may be noticeable is that, despite having a job, they cultivate what could be referred to as a portfolio of work and occupations. What this can do is to help dispel the myth of stopping and ending our 'one' job when we retire. Additionally, it can enable the exploration of a number of occupations that collectively will ultimately fulfil us as individuals. This sort of approach too, means that we invest energy in our wellbeing early on, before we begin the transition into retirement. It also allows us to recognise those occupations we may long and/or love to do by starting to permit our exploration. Giving such early attention to occupations of choice can help dispel the myth so that, rather than retirement being

viewed as stopping, it becomes a seamless transfer from the occupation of work to occupations we now choose to do and how we choose to be. What the dispelling of this myth creates is often the opportunity to find that which fulfils us, areas of our lives that may not have been fully fulfilled during our main profession.

### Pause point

Consider this in your own life. What more would you wish, or choose to do to enable you to gain such fulfilment?

List your occupations of choice here



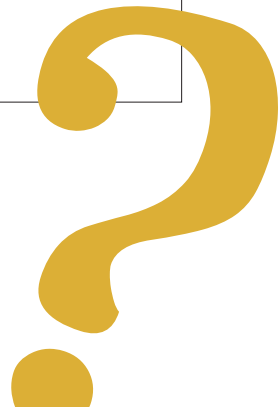
The list is endless and creating a seamless root from work to your occupations of choice then, may be one key to fulfilment. Might you consider then that your retirement is less about an ending and more about new beginnings; a realisation that occupations of choice are the natural bridge that span the ending and beginning? Ask yourself how that feels.

Look at what Andrew, a biochemist by profession, said during an informal interview I had with him while he was in the deep realms of thinking through his transition into retirement.

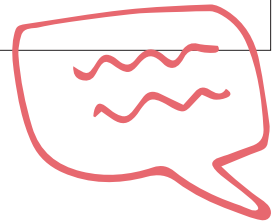
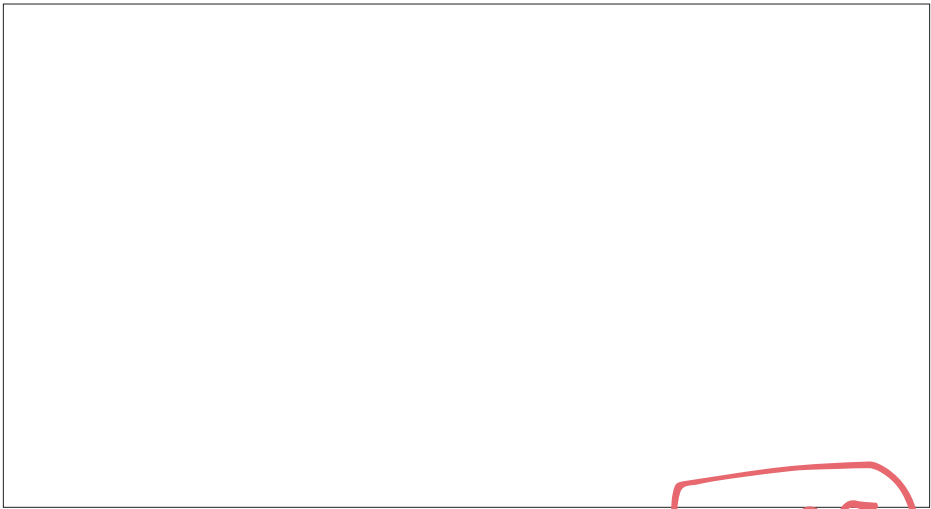
*"I wonder if it's time to consider how the chance for retirement is moving out into later life – that we all write the new mythology of retirement. For me the myth would have a golden thread whereby, throughout our lives, we may be invited to cultivate a more deepening awareness and understanding of our occupations of choice. That ending is replaced by bridging and retirement can then possibly account for our unlived life and ultimately fulfilment".*

### Pause point

**What are your thoughts about what Andrew said?** Should we be thinking about our life in retirement long before it's imminent?



**Can you identify the golden threads in your own journey to retirement?** What would you like to include that feels un-lived and would help you feel fulfilled?



The message then, is:  
**Don't just retire from something, have something to retire to**

### **Reflection**

So, take a short while to reflect on what you have just read in the Myth of Retirement. What are the particular points that you would agree with or would like to challenge? Write down some of your thoughts and try and summarise some of your main learnings from this pocket guide. They will be useful as you read further through these guides.

We hope you enjoy these guides and can learn from our research and experiences.

Happy reading!

## References

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