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THE Gold Standard

THE WEALTHOLOGIST'S WISDOM

Pre-Tirement: From the Big Jet to Your Own Wings

One of our clients, Jeff, spent his career as a commercial airline pilot. Checklists. Tower instructions. A world built on structure and precision. When he retired, he did something that almost made perfect sense: he started building his own plane.

Jeff loves to fly. Retirement wasn't about leaving that behind. It was about flying on his own terms. More control, more freedom, and also a new reality: more responsibility sits on his shoulders. That's retirement in a nutshell. The goal isn't to stop moving. It's to change aircraft, change altitude, and choose your destination, knowing you're now the one in the left seat.

And Jeff's project didn't happen by "just figuring it out." He planned. He gathered the right parts. He worked step by step. Along the way, he found something many people miss: joy shows up when you combine preparation with freedom.

That's what pre-tirement is for: the 12–24 month runway where you tighten the bolts, confirm your instruments, and make sure the first stretch of retirement feels steady, not stressful.

Here are five runway moves that make the transition smoother: review your plan with fresh eyes, stress-test your income and withdrawal strategy, get proactive on taxes and Social Security timing, simplify accounts and beneficiaries, and practice your retirement paycheck for a month. Even one of these can prevent a small mistake from becoming a big headache later.

Pre-tirement isn't busywork. It's how you trade uncertainty for confidence, so you can enjoy the freedom you worked so hard to earn.

Challenge: pick one runway move to complete in the next 30 days, then share this with someone you care about who's nearing retirement.



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ANDREW GREER, CFP®

Smart Ways to Use Your RMDs

Once you reach RMD age, distributions from retirement accounts become a required part of your financial picture. While many people view RMDs as a tax nuisance, they can actually be a useful planning tool when handled thoughtfully. Below are several ways we commonly help clients put RMDs to work in a way that aligns with their goals.

Cover living expenses and simplify cash flow

For many retirees, RMDs naturally replace earned income and help fund day-to-day spending. If you are already taking withdrawals from other accounts, it can make sense to coordinate those with your RMD so we are not pulling from multiple places unnecessarily.

Reinvest the after-tax portion

Even though RMDs must come out of retirement accounts, you do not have to spend them. If you do not need the cash, we can reinvest the after-tax portion into a brokerage account, tax-efficient portfolio, or other vehicles that keep your long-term goals intact.

Use RMDs for gifting and family support

Many clients like to use RMDs to help children, grandchildren, or other family members. This could mean helping with education costs, first homes, or simply easing financial pressure. When gifting is part of the plan, RMDs can be a very natural funding source.

Fund charitable giving in a tax-smart way

For charitably inclined clients, Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs) are often one of the most powerful RMD strategies available. A QCD allows you to send up to \$100,000 per year directly from your IRA to a qualified charity. That amount counts toward your RMD but is excluded from taxable income. This can reduce your tax bill, potentially lower Medicare premiums, and still accomplish your charitable goals.

Use RMDs to leverage a tax-free inheritance through life insurance

In some cases, clients choose to use the after-tax portion of their RMDs to fund life insurance premiums. This can be a powerful way to reposition taxable dollars into a tax-free death benefit for heirs, especially when estate planning, legacy goals, or tax efficiency for beneficiaries are priorities. While not appropriate for everyone, this strategy can meaningfully improve the after-tax outcome for families in the right situations.

Rebuild or strengthen emergency reserves

Some retirees enter retirement with most of their net worth tied up in investment or retirement accounts and less in liquid cash than they would like. RMDs can be a good way to gradually rebuild emergency reserves or set aside funds for upcoming large expenses without disrupting the broader investment strategy.

Coordinate with Roth conversions and tax brackets

RMDs create a taxable floor each year, but there is often room above that floor to do thoughtful planning. In some cases, we may pair RMDs with Roth conversions, charitable strategies, or capital gains planning to better manage tax brackets over time. While RMDs themselves cannot be converted, they absolutely affect how much flexibility we have elsewhere in the tax picture.

Think multi-year, not just year by year

One of the biggest mistakes we see is treating RMDs as a one-time annual task instead of part of a multi-year strategy. The way distributions are handled today can impact future tax brackets, Medicare premiums, estate outcomes, and charitable planning. When we model RMDs in advance and integrate them into the broader plan, they become much more of a tool and much less of a burden.

RMDs are unavoidable, but poor planning around them is not. Whether the goal is spending, saving, gifting, giving, or legacy efficiency, there are almost always smarter ways to deploy those dollars.

THE GOOD LIFE

The Art of Connection: Staying Social in Retirement

How you start your morning shapes the hours that follow. Instead of falling into old habits or rushing through the morning, embracing a thoughtful ritual gives you control and a chance to focus on what matters most, whether that's hobbies, health or personal connections. With a purposeful start, you're more likely to enjoy the day ahead and make the most of every moment during this rewarding chapter of life.

SIMPLE RITUALS TO TRY

You don't need a lot of time -- often, just 10 minutes can make a real difference. Here are three examples of morning rituals that can help you tackle the rest of your day.

1. Mindful Reflection: Before checking your phone, spend five minutes in silence. Do some meditation or simply focus on your breathing. This creates a buffer between sleep and the noise of the digital world.

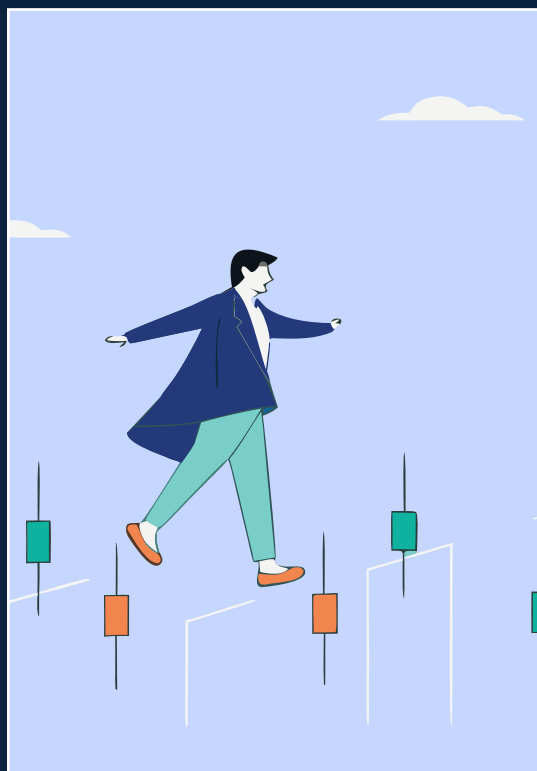


2. Gentle Movement: Wake your body up. Five minutes of stretching, a quick yoga flow or a brisk walk around the block gets your blood flowing and energy up. This keeps your body active, improves flexibility, and boosts energy levels without being too strenuous.

3. Plan It Out: Identify your "Big Three." What are the three absolute must-do tasks for today? Write them down. This gives you a clear roadmap for the day and prevents decision fatigue later.

START SMALL

The key to building a rewarding new habit is consistency. There's no need to transform your full routine overnight. Choose just one of these rituals and try it for a week. You may find it brings a greater sense of calm and satisfaction to your mornings.



HOW TO ...

Staying Financially Fit During Market Volatility

Market fluctuations can feel unsettling for retirees. But staying financially fit is possible with the right strategies.

Start by diversifying your portfolio. Spreading investments across stocks, bonds and other assets helps reduce risk. Focus on long-term goals and avoid reacting to short-term market swings.

Maintain a cash reserve covering six to 12 months of expenses to avoid selling investments during downturns. Reassess your risk tolerance and adjust your portfolio as you near retirement. Budget, cut spending and free up funds for savings.

Avoid emotional decisions and consult a financial professional before making significant changes. Stay informed with credible sources, but don't obsess over daily news.

Lastly, consider dividend-paying stocks for steady income, and review your retirement withdrawal rate to preserve savings.

These steps can help protect you in a volatile market.



DOLLARS & SENSE

The Hidden Costs of Investing: What Retirees Need to Know About Fees

As you approach retirement, you're likely focused on your portfolio's growth. But what if hidden costs are quietly eating away at your savings? Even a 1% fee could reduce your nest egg by more than 20% over several decades, potentially costing you hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Understanding and managing these fees is a powerful step toward improving your financial future.

COMMON FEES EVERY INVESTOR SHOULD KNOW

Most investment fees fall into a few categories. Awareness is the first step toward minimizing their impact.

- **Expense Ratios:** This is an annual fee charged by mutual funds and exchange-traded funds (ETFs) to cover operating costs. Index funds typically have low ratios (0.05%-0.20%), while actively managed funds can charge 0.75% or more.
- **Advisory Fees:** Financial advisors often charge around 1% of assets under management annually. This ongoing cost may be worth the information and advice they provide.
- **401(k) Administrative Fees:** Workplace retirement plans have record-keeping and administrative fees. These are often small percentages, but they add up over time.
- **Sales Loads and 12b-1 Fees:** Some mutual funds charge a sales commission ("load") on buys or sells. Additionally, 12b-1 fees are marketing costs passed on to you that don't benefit your portfolio's performance.

UNCOVERING FEES THAT FLY UNDER THE RADAR

Less obvious fees include bid-ask spreads on ETFs, transaction fees for buying certain mutual funds and

complex, layered fees within annuity products. While individually small, their combined effect can create significant drag on your returns.

Find out if you are paying these fees and assess whether they're justified.

ARE SOME FEES WORTH PAYING?

Not all fees are bad. The goal is to feel you're getting value for what you pay.

A fee-only advisor provides personalized planning, tax strategies and behavioral coaching that can be worth far more than their fee. Similarly, the fee for a low-cost annuity might be justified if your goal is guaranteed income. Weigh the cost against the benefit for your specific financial strategy.

WAYS TO KEEP MORE OF YOUR HARD-EARNED MONEY

You've worked diligently to build your savings; preserving it is crucial.

Choose low-cost index funds and ETFs for your portfolio's core. Select an advisor with transparent fees who prioritizes your interests. Always review the fee disclosures for your 401(k) and IRA, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Avoid funds with high sales loads or marketing fees when possible.

By staying informed and proactive, you can make decisions that align with your retirement goals.

Unlock Savings With Medical and Dental Deductions

Medical and dental bills can be a significant financial strain, but the IRS offers a way to ease that burden. By deducting qualified medical and dental expenses, you can lower your taxable income and keep more money for what matters most: your health. This guide will show you ways to optimize these valuable savings.

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

The IRS allows you to deduct qualified medical expenses that exceed 7.5% of your adjusted gross income (AGI) when you itemize deductions. This includes costs for treatments, preventative care and prescriptions. It's like getting free money just for taking care of yourself!

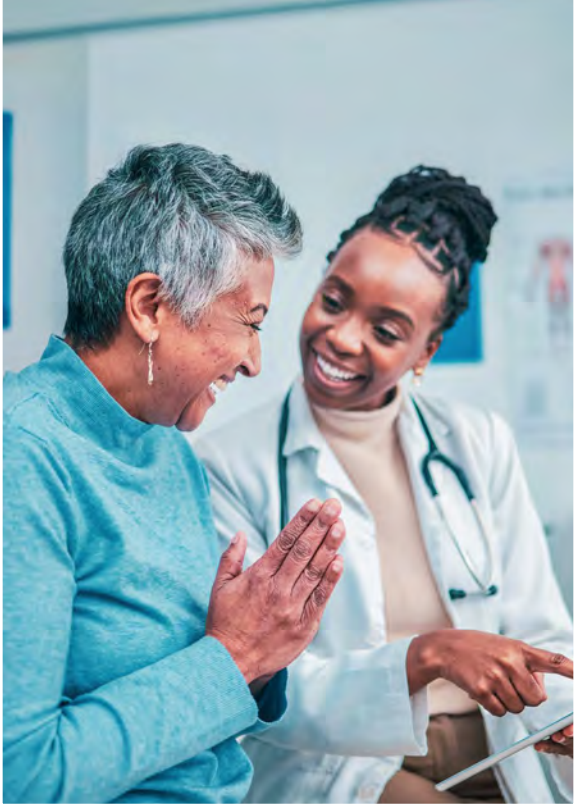
- **Qualified Medical Expenses:** Deduct doctor visits, hospital stays and prescription drugs.
- **Dental Care:** Routine cleanings, fillings and even dentures count.
- **Insurance Premiums:** Premiums for medical, dental and long-term care insurance are often deductible.

OVERLOOKED DEDUCTIONS

Don't miss out on these commonly overlooked expenses:

- **Transportation:** You can even deduct mileage, parking fees and tolls for trips to your appointments.
- **Home Modifications:** Medically necessary improvements, such as wheelchair ramps or stairlifts, can be deducted.

To claim these, keep detailed records, including receipts and invoices. Make sure your records are well-organized. Keeping them in a simple folder or digital tool can make tax time much smoother.



YOUR HEALTH IS YOUR WEALTH

Staying on top of your doctor and dentist appointments is not just vital for your physical health; it's a savvy financial move. By tracking your expenses, you can reduce financial stress and focus on your well-being. Investing in your health is truly one of the best investments you can make.

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BRAIN GAMES

Str8ts

Game Rules

Rows and columns are divided into compartments of white squares. Use single numbers to complete a straight for each compartment. A straight is a set of numbers with no gaps and in any order. No single number can repeat in any row or column. Clues in black cells remove that number as an option in that row and column, and are not part of any straight

THISTLE BE GOOD:

Easy Spring Flowers To Brighten Your Garden

Fresh spring blooms are one of the simplest ways to add color and joy to your garden or patio. If you're dreaming of a cheerful outdoor space — but prefer flowers that don't demand much time or fuss — these tried-and-true favorites will help your garden thrive easily and beautifully.



Daffodils

Why they are easy

Daffodils are incredibly tough. These deer-resistant and self-multiplying plants reward you with more blooms each year.

These sunny yellow blooms are like little bursts of sunshine. No flower says spring quite like these cheerful trumpets.

Simple care tip

Let foliage die back naturally to nourish bulbs for next year.

Pansies

Why they are easy

You can buy pansies as small plants ready to pop into the ground or a pot for instant gratification.

With their vibrant, expressive “faces,” pansies thrive in early spring's cool air — perfect for containers or borders and popping instant color into any spot.

Simple care tip

Water regularly, but let the soil dry slightly between waterings. Pinching off the spent blooms (deadheading) will encourage them to produce even more flowers



Hyacinths

Why they are easy

These low-maintenance bulbs return every year with little effort.

These are dense, starry clusters with an intoxicating fragrance that fills the air. Plant hyacinths near walkways or windows to enjoy their sweet perfume up close.

Simple care tip

Place in well-drained soil, and soak up the scent as you stroll by.

Primrose

Why they are easy

Primroses thrive in partial shade and moist soil, making them ideal for areas where other, sun-loving plants struggle.

These bouquets of vibrant color bring life to shaded corners and window boxes, often brightening things up while the air is still crisp.

Simple care tip

Keep the soil moist for consistent blooms throughout the season.



JACOB WOODRUM, CFA, CFP®

HW-Prime Growth: Growth Without Overpaying

I’ve been car shopping lately. After years of driving my Honda Accord, it’s time for something bigger. With two boys under three, getting them both in and out of car seats in a small sedan feels like a daily workout. An SUV makes sense.

But here’s the catch: I’m not buying brand new.

Why? Because the moment you drive a new car off the lot, it depreciates. It’s still a great vehicle, but the price you paid no longer reflects its value. So instead, I’m looking for a three-or four-year-old SUV. Same quality. Same reliability. Just not at sticker price.

That’s exactly how we’ve been thinking about HW-Prime Growth.

This portfolio is built for long-term growth with 100% equity exposure, roughly 85% U.S. stocks and 15% international. We still own many of the market’s strongest companies, including some of the “Magnificent Seven.” They remain innovative, profitable, and important.

But over the last few years, we’ve intentionally reduced our concentration in the high-flyers and broadened our exposure to areas trading at more attractive valuations.

This shift isn’t about abandoning great companies. It’s about valuation discipline, risk management, and diversification. We want exposure to proven leaders, while remaining responsible stewards of your capital.



BRAIN GAMES

ANSWER KEY:

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RECIPE
ALMOND-TOPPED FISH

This easy baked fish recipe features tender cod or haddock layered over buttery onions, topped with a creamy Parmesan-lemon spread and finished with crunchy toasted almonds. Simple, flavorful, and perfect for a quick weeknight meal.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 small onion, thinly sliced
- 4 cod or haddock fillets (6 ounces each)
- Seasoning blend (1t. seasoned salt, ½ t. dill weed, and ¼ t. pepper)
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- ¼ cup reduced-fat mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 2 tablespoon sliced almonds, toasted

HOW TO MAKE IT:

1. Place butter in a 13x9-in. baking dish; heat in a 400° oven until melted.
2. Spread butter over bottom of dish; cover with onion.
3. Arrange fish over onion, sprinkle with salt, dill and pepper seasoning blend.
4. Combine the Parmesan cheese, mayonnaise, and lemon juice; spread over fish.
5. Bake, uncovered, at 400° until fish flakes easily with a fork, 18-20 minutes.
6. Sprinkle with almonds.



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UPCOMING DATES

MARCH

08 - Daylight Saving Time

17 - Educational Workshop -Matthews
Community Center

31 - Medicare Advantage Open
Enrollment Ends

APRIL

03 - Good Friday (Office Closed)

05 - Easter

15 - Tax Day

15 - Deadline to make 2025 IRA
Contribution



Clients **Wayne and Patty Merrifield** on
their travel to Antarctica - our 7th
continent...

“ Earlier this year, we completed our goal of visiting all seven continents while on an adventure cruise aboard the Atlas World Navigation, sailing from Ushuaia, Argentina, across the Drake Passage to the Antarctic Peninsula. We spent eight unforgettable days below the 66th parallel exploring waterways, making Zodiac shore landings, experiencing the abundant wildlife and even spending a night off the ship sleeping in an ice hole we dug ourselves. Waking up to see penguins had joined us, resting nearby, was something we'll never forget. Hard to put into words - an experience we'll cherish forever! ”

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