

School leadership to retirement:

how to prepare mentally
and take care of yourself



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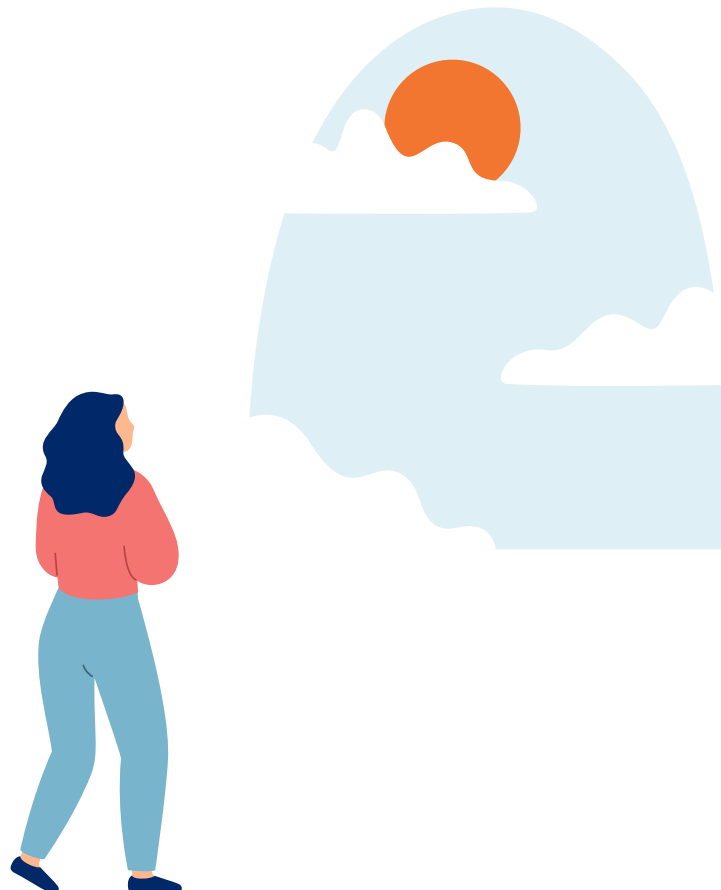


Introduction

Retirement is a significant milestone in the life of any school leader, but the path to it will look different for everyone. For some, retirement will be a carefully planned transition, shaped by years of preparation and planning. For others, it may come unexpectedly, due to health issues, personal circumstances, or organisational changes, leading to an early or sudden exit. Or some leaders may choose a phased retirement, gradually stepping back from full-time responsibilities while still contributing to their school community in a reduced capacity.

Even if your journey to retirement mirrors that of a colleague, it's important to recognise that your emotional and psychological experience of the transition can vary greatly. While one leader may look forward to the freedom and opportunity for new adventures, or simply space to relax, another may feel a sense of loss or concern for the uncertainty of what is ahead.

In this guide, we will explore a range of advice designed to help you prepare for retirement and stay mentally well when it arrives. Whether you're planning your departure in advance or adjusting to an unexpected change, we'll offer practical tips and advice on how to take care of your emotional wellbeing during this significant life change and beyond.



1. The challenges

We spoke to NAHT Life Members to understand the challenges they faced as school leaders before and during retirement — and what helped them — take a look below to see what they shared.

While not everyone will experience all of these challenges, it may help to consider any that feel relevant to you and take a look at our suggestions for managing their impact.

Lack of time to prepare

Many found they haven't had the mental space or set aside enough time to truly prepare for retirement.

Financial adjustments

Regrets about not planning for retirement earlier and not feeling clued on the nuances of teacher pensions before entering retirement.

Loss of identity

School leaders found that their identity had been closely tied to their roles in the education sector, so transitioning out of their role left them feeling uncertain about who they were outside of their professional identity.

Loss of purpose

After years of having a clear purpose or focus, many found it difficult to replace the sense of purpose that came with leading a school and impacting pupils' lives. The loss of this daily drive can lead to feelings of aimlessness.

Loss of influence

With retirement, many experienced a sense of losing influence or authority, which they had previously held in their professional roles. This shift sometimes made retirement difficult if transitioning into a more passive role in personal life.

Change of pace

Adjusting to a slower pace can be challenging or even boring, especially if you're used to working in a busy school environment. Some who took early retirement reported struggling with how to channel their energy productively.

Change of routine

Retirement can feel like a sudden lifestyle shift where the structure of a workday disappears suddenly. Retirees said they struggled with how to fill their days and slow down their minds after years of full schedules.

Additional life changes

Shifts in life commitments that often come around the same time as retirement and can be just as impactful. The main ones were children moving out, caring for parents and navigating bereavement.

2. Preparing for retirement

Each school leader has a unique relationship with their career and therefore each approach to preparing for retirement will look different. Below we list some practical things to consider, along with strategies to consider dependent on your situation.

Acknowledge how you feel

Whatever your feelings about your upcoming retirement, it can help to allow yourself time to process your emotions around this change. Some leaders may experience a sense of grief or loss — perhaps crying or feeling sad. Others may feel relief, happiness or something else entirely! There is no right or wrong way to feel about your retirement, however, it can help to simply notice and acknowledge what you are feeling. It may help to talk it over with a trusted friend, colleague or family member if you are struggling.

Education Support 24hr Helpline Tel: 08000 562 561

Anyone working in education can call the free and confidential helpline on **08000 562 561** and speak to a qualified counsellor.

NAHT members

If you are an NAHT member you can call the dedicated support line for NAHT members. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The number is **0800 917 4055**.



Dealing with change and transition

As school leaders, you will be familiar with change (curriculum, budgets, staffing, the list goes on!). We all respond to change and transition in different ways. Even when you are aware a change is coming, it can feel difficult to 'prepare' for the impact it has on your wellbeing.

Change and transition are often used interchangeably, but it can be helpful to consider the distinction. According to author and speaker, William Bridges, change refers to a situation or external factor (i.e. retirement), while transition refers to the psychological factors or internal experiences we go through in response to the change.

Bridges says that change can happen quickly, while transition usually occurs more slowly. **His model on transition** highlights three stages of transition that people go through when they experience a change:

1. Ending, losing, and letting go



2. The neutral zone



3. The new beginning



Bridges says that people will go through each stage at their own pace; those who are comfortable with the change will likely move ahead to stage three quickly, while others may take longer to get there.

Ways to manage change and reduce its impact on your wellbeing



1. How are you managing stress?

Change can trigger feelings of stress or worry. Learn about 'the stress cycle' and how to complete it using these **7 evidence-based strategies** readily available to teachers and school staff.



2. What can you control?

The circle of **control, influence and concern** is a useful tool to help you consider what you can influence and what is out of your control when it comes to changes associated with retirement.



3. How do you interpret change and your ability to cope?

Learn about the **Transactional model of coping and stress** for an insight into your own responses and behaviours when it comes to navigating change.



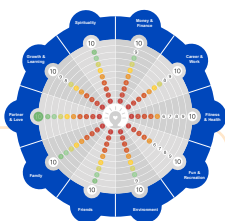
4. Who is in your support network?

Use this **circle diagram tool** to help you consider anyone in your life you can turn to for advice and support during the transition.



5. Are you aware of external support?

As well as the free helplines mentioned above, Education Support also provide a range of free mental health and wellbeing guides on various topics such **phases of grief and coping with bereavement**, **getting a good nights sleep** and **spotting the signs of depression**.



Create a wheel of life

The **Wheel of Life** tool allows you to get a snapshot of how satisfied you are in your life at this moment in time. We suggest completing it before you retire, then again one year into retirement — perhaps adjusting some of the questions to make it relevant to your current situation — to see how you are doing.

Financial preparation

Financial concerns were reported as a top concern of NAHT Life Members. Many reported feeling regret about not spending more time researching the nuances of teacher pensions or planning for a change in their financial situation before retirement. We suggest setting time aside to start financial preparations as soon as you are able to do so.

Wesleyan offer a range of **free guides** on pensions. You can also download the **NAHT guide** covering pensions.



Reflective questions: to ask before you retire



Grab and pen and paper and set aside 10-minutes to complete this reflective writing exercise. You may find after completing it you need to set aside some more time to complete any actions that arise from it:

- Whose retirement have you admired? What were your parents or family members' retirements like? Did they look appealing to you, or the opposite?
- Can you name one goal you would like to achieve during retirement? How will you achieve it? (date, method etc).
- What skills do you possess or want to develop that can give you fulfilment?
- Does the free time of retirement feel freeing or daunting?
- Is there anything you've always wanted to try, explore or a skill you've wanted to build?
- What is one step can you take now to help you feel more prepared for retirement?

3. During retirement: practical strategies and advice

We spoke to NAHT Life Members about what helps them navigate retirement and stay mentally well. Here are some of their suggestions and practical advice that can help support your mental health and wellbeing:

Find a sense of purpose

As school leaders, having a clear sense of purpose is central to your role. And when your career is central to your life and gives you meaning, it's important to reflect on how changes to it may affect your self-worth and self-esteem, particularly if you have previously felt valued. The demands of school leadership can sometimes leave little room for other interests, making it harder to find new sources of purpose outside of school. It's normal to need time and multiple attempts to discover what brings you fulfilment beyond your leadership responsibilities. Be patient and kind to yourself during this process. Reflecting on the questions we've provided above may help you explore new avenues for personal growth and new meaning.

Consider staying connected to the sector

Some retired leaders and teachers choose to take a more active role with their Union, volunteer in schools or support young people in some capacity. Others might volunteer with charities or other education organisations. It can really help to smooth the transition away from the fast paced and meaningful work of headship.

A simple way to stay connected to the education sector is to **sign up** for the Education Support newsletter and sign up to their **Supporter Magazine**.



Anne Neville,
a retired teacher of 30 years said:



“ I was very lucky to have an outside interest I was passionate about — amateur dramatics — so when I retired I still had that and devoted more time to it. Retirement gave me the time to direct — and I even became the artistic director of the biggest amateur theatre company in the country.

I would recommend that all teachers develop an outside interest that they can focus on and spend time doing away from school. This is true for teachers and education staff throughout their career, but particularly as they near retirement. ”

Take a look at this excellent **blog and video** where Anne talks more about how to have a happy and fulfilling retirement.

John Gadd,
a retired head teacher of 38 years said:



“ I stayed on as a Governor at my local primary school and on the committee of my NAHT Branch, joined a gym, bought a new bike, and set to on my allotment. As time has gone on (I'm now two years into retirement) I've steadily added areas of interest — I'm now a Governor in two primary schools and a Trustee of a MAT; I host the annual West Sussex Leadership Conference; and I'm the (very part-time) Locality Lead Director for West Sussex's Teaching School Hub. ”

Take a look at this excellent **blog** where John shares his journey into retirement and the ways in which he stays connected to his role.

Don't put too much pressure on yourself

While it's great to hear about John and Anne's experience of retirement, remember, it's okay if you have a gentler transition. You don't need to put pressure on yourself to achieve or do anything in particular. Taking time for yourself and resting in a way that feels right for you is just as valid and important.

Retired NAHT Member



“ Be prepared to slow down and get used to a different pace of life 'beyond the silo' of school life. Be curious to discover new places, meet new people and try new activities. Most importantly, be curious at your own pace and on your own terms. ”

Retired NAHT Member



“ Your skills and experience, especially in committees and meetings, may result in requests from various groups to become more involved after you retire. Think carefully about how much time you can devote, especially in the early months and first year. ”

Retired NAHT Member



“ Three pieces of advice I was given, which certainly resonate with me still:

- Do something for yourself
- Do something for your family
- Do something for your community ”

Consider the importance of social connection

Loneliness and social isolation can make later life hard for many people. Creating connections with others in the same situation as you — such as those who are available during the hours you are that share a common interest (walking, reading, travelling?) can be a big help in feeling connected and happy during retirement. If you had friendships and socialised through school, will you stay in touch with colleagues when you retire? Or will your social connections dry up? You may find that school friends were great when you shared common problems, but that the friendship changes when you no longer work together.

Emma Seppala, a researcher in mental health and social connection, highlights the critical role social connections plays in overall wellbeing.

She explains that social isolation can lead to increased stress, depression, and physical health issues. Her research focuses on how meaningful connections with family, friends, and supportive communities improve cognitive function, reduce stress, and even promote longer life expectancy. Seppala also emphasises that social support can positively impact the immune system, reduce inflammation, and enhance cardiovascular health, aligning with a growing body of research on the powerful influence of social relationships on both mental and physical health.

It can be helpful to know that loneliness is not the same as being alone; it is a feeling of disconnection. Loneliness can occur regardless of being alone. You might find yourself in a room full of people and still feel lonely if you do not feel connected to them. There is also nothing wrong with being comfortable in your own company. Everyone will have a different 'social battery' and it's okay to only have a few social connections if that makes you feel content. However, if you do want to increase your social connections in retirement, you can read [**Seeking Social: a quick guide to making friends later in life**](#) for practical advice on making new connections with links to a range of UK wide groups to explore.

Plan structured activities

Structured activities can help mitigate feelings of isolation, boredom and a loss of purpose. Planning meaningful activities in advance can also provide a sense of fulfilment and continuity. If you don't already have one, you might want to get a wall calendar and put it up somewhere you will see it every day. As you fill it in, consider leaning into joy and experimentation. Retirement offers you more time to try new things, build new skills, or explore passions that were previously put off. This could be learning a new skill, taking up a new hobby or resurrecting an old one!

If you're struggling to fill your calendar, try writing down 3-4 of your core values and structure your activities around them. Importantly, remember to leave time for rest and that rest looks different for everyone! This is your opportunity to explore what activities brings you joy, and even develop new facets of yourself that might have been overlooked during your years in headship.

Three important considerations

Everyone can do three things for good mental wellbeing: exercise, eat well and sleep well.

Exercise



Eat well



Sleep well



The benefits that come with all three are powerful and, combined, can also help ease symptoms of mental health struggles. In some cases, they can even prevent disorders from developing. Take a look at Education Support's guide [**The building blocks of good mental wellbeing**](#) for practical tips and advice.



4. Further support

Remember, If you are an NAHT member you can call the dedicated support line for NAHT members. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The number is 0800 917 4055.

Who is Education Support?

Education Support was established nearly 150 years ago. We were set up by teachers, for teachers. We're here for everybody working within education, across all four nations of the United Kingdom. Our mission is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and education staff. We believe that better wellbeing leads to better education. This leads to better life chances for everyone. We provide high quality, evidence-led, support across the sector. We offer support at three levels:

- **Individual:**
We work with individuals to prioritise their own mental health and wellbeing, recognising that everything can't be fixed at the individual level but that people can be supported to make positive change where possible, as workplace and system change take time.
- **Workplace:**
Plenty of evidence indicates that cultures in schools and colleges has a real impact on staff experience, their wellbeing and effectiveness. By helping leaders create great cultures, we increase the number of workplaces where staff thrive.
- **The whole system:**
Individual educators and workplaces exist in a wider system that is facing many challenges. We are working to influence sector stakeholders and the government to create the conditions that support good staff wellbeing across education. Our research activity helps us build evidence around key challenges of national importance, such as staff retention in schools.

Find out more about us at [educationsupport.org.uk](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk)

Sources

1. [How to look after your mental health in later life](#)
The Mental Health Foundation
2. [Mental Health of older adults](#)
World Health Organisation
3. [Making the most of retirement](#)
British Heart Foundation
4. [20 Tips for a happy retirement](#)
British Heart Foundation
5. [How to maintain a healthy mind and culture during periods of challenge](#)
NAHT
6. [The power and science of social connection](#)
Emma Seppala



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