

Wealth and Aging in a Pandemic

Family Wealth Report

By Charles Lowenhaupt

May 13, 2020

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The COVID-19 pandemic has given many wealth holders and wealth inheritors an unexpected lesson in how to age with wealth and, with it, a fundamental strategy to prepare for old age.

In a word, that fundamental strategy is “technology.”

Since early March, most aspects of life have been turned upside down. Before March, wealth could buy a flight to Paris for lunch or a jaunt to Hong Kong to see your tailor. The only challenge in putting together a family dinner, reunion or family meeting was coordinating calendars. Today, wealth cannot even buy a meal at a neighborhood restaurant, a trip to a local department store, or a conference room at a resort.

The limitations are obvious and too plentiful. But technology *is* making life tolerable in lockdown and easier to navigate in this crisis. Zoom, Instacart, mobile banking, email correspondence, Internet shopping, and telemedicine all open the world in ways we could not have imagined 20 years ago.

The New Age of Aging

What does this mean for aging? It means updating your original plan for aging.

Twenty years ago, you might have worried about mobility, but would not have considered that the world would shut down entirely. You might have worried about disability and home care, but you would not have considered that facilities for the aged might become death camps. Or, that household help would be excluded from your private apartment. Or, that your children and grandchildren could not stop by for hugs and visits. Isolation would have meant something completely different than it does under COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders.

Thus, a key question in the age of pandemics is the same question it would have been decades ago: What is your wealth for? And today we can answer that question with certainty: To help maintain independence safely. And a core strategy to allow that purpose is capability in everything technologic.

Life is *Very* Different Now

Just think about how much different life is today than it was just a few months ago.

For aging wealth holders, travel is no longer an option, and it won't be for the foreseeable future. Commercial air travel, even in sparsely crowded aircraft, is too dangerous, and non-commercial flights are still risky. For those with a pre-existing condition or are immuno-compromised, travel of any kind will be prohibited.

Even for the more intrepid global traveler, who would want to be stuck in a foreign country while undergoing COVID-19 treatment? You wouldn't see your own doctors, and the quality of the healthcare would be unknown. Even if you are healthy, it may be difficult to return to your home country, as we saw after travel was suspended from Europe and China to the U.S.

Visiting with family is now also problematic, if not impossible. Aging wealth holders have largely been cut off from congregating with their children, grandchildren and extended family. We are warned that COVID-19 deaths for people 55 and older are disproportionately higher than for other age groups. Understandably, family and friends don't want to risk exposing an older person to the coronavirus. Many family outings and travel – which reinforced legacy and shared values across the generations – are no longer possible.

Medical care is also vastly more complicated. Wealth holders with in-home care have suddenly been confronted with a number of potentially life-threatening issues. How safe am I from infection by my in-home caregivers? How do I ensure that asymptomatic workers don't inadvertently give me the coronavirus? What happens if my caregivers can't come to my home because of quarantine or their own family responsibilities – caring for a school-age child or an elderly parent? If my trusted, reliable caregiver needs to be replaced, what is the evaluation and COVID-19 testing process? Separate from in-home care, how do I engage with my doctors? Going to hospitals or a doctor's office may be considered dangerous. What is the best way to get the care I used to receive by visiting my physician or a specialist?

For those living in a facility, the choices are also quite difficult. Does the wealth holder remain in a densely populated location where there is a significantly greater risk of getting COVID-19? Nursing home and senior care facilities have accounted for a large number of COVID-19 deaths. If you consider whether to move to an assisted facility, is the trade-off of minimizing COVID-19 exposure worth a life-threatening fall or other emergency without medical care in the same building? And what about those needing memory care? The considerations are very complex for these wealth holders, their families and their team of advisors.

Technology Can Help

For all of the issues, technology helps in a time of crisis and isolation.

For example, Zoom and other video-conferencing capabilities now enable aging wealth holders to see and talk to their family members. Video cocktail parties and virtual game nights are as common today as dinner parties used to be. Video can allow connection even when it cannot replace in-person relationships.

For medical care, telemedicine has become a new, highly effective way to treat illness and ongoing medical conditions. It's also a time saver and eliminates the need to arrange transportation for an office visit. Blood pressure monitors, pulse measurements, smart phone apps can now take many of the vital signs. Clearly, many health care interactions require in-person care, but many do not. Although some aging wealth holders appreciate the bonding from an in-office visit and the social interaction with their physician, telemedicine doesn't mean the client-patient rapport is gone. It's just different.

For food and dining, technology has brought your favorite restaurant and grocery store closer to you than ever. Using a smart phone, wealth holders can order meals from many of their favorite restaurants.

Once the crisis began, many food purveyors realized that take-out was the key to survival because no one was willing to eat in a restaurant. Likewise, Amazon, Instacart and many other services can deliver groceries from gourmet markets and supermarkets. All you need to do is go online or use a smart phone app to fill up your virtual shopping cart.

For entertainment, Netflix, Amazon, Showtime, HBO, Hulu and cable TV providers are offering more quality content than ever. Home theater, projection and big screen TVs can convert any living space into a viewing experience on par with a movie theater. And, while you can't visit a museum, opera or symphony, you can see or visit them virtually them on TV or your computer. There are hundreds of thousands of podcasts on every imaginable topic to be downloaded and played on headphones or a speaker system in your home.

For portfolio analysis and communication with investment advisors, family office executives, lawyers and accountants, there are any number of technologic tools available and being developed.

Call-To-Action

What does it take to avail yourself of all of this? It takes planning and a willingness to spend money on keeping yourself fully abreast of emerging technology.

Consider the following experiences we have seen in the past two months:

- "I am receiving encrypted documents and have no idea how to open them."
- "My family office executive wants to go on my computer to install programs I need for family office communication. I have no idea how to open my computer so the family office can go on it."
- "My grandchildren want to Skype (Zoom or FaceTime) but I don't know how to do that."
- "I keep all my books and records by hand and now I cannot pay my bills unless they come in the mail and cannot review portfolios with my investment advisor since we cannot meet."

These are all statements from people 80 and older who never wanted to learn technology because they believed that service providers would always be "around" to take care of them. They were as wrong as my grandfather. When he was in middle age, he decided he never needed to know how to drive, since his wife would learn and he could have a chauffeur. As it turned out, they missed a lot of events when his wife couldn't drive, and chauffeurs became hard to find.

Too many of us have wallowed in "technidiocy" and laughed at the geeks we know in our age group. That leaves us helpless now.

Tech Savvy: A Problem Money Can Solve

Nothing will ever replace human interaction and personal service and attention. By nature, we are social creatures, and we get so much from being in the presence of others. Personal service and attention are indeed more pleasant than do-it-yourself technology. It is much nicer to have a housekeeper vacuum than to learn how to use a robo-vacuum or the latest cleaning equipment.

While money can't buy freedom when government orders people to shelter in place, it can buy the technology and training to give you more freedom than you might otherwise enjoy. Whether you are middle aged or elderly, now is the time to use your money to make yourself technology savvy and to plan your life so that you are always comfortable and knowledgeable about technology.

Why not use your time at home now and your money to lift yourself out of technidiocy and into geekish comfort powered by technology?

Charles A. Lowenhaupt is Chairman and Partner of [Lowenhaupt & Chasnoff](#), LLC, a law firm founded in 1908 that develops wealth strategies and provides counseling to individuals and families of significant wealth.