

Voya Life MattersSM

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Happy New Year! It's been another wild trip around the sun and we hope that all is well with you and yours. Resolutions are abound, and along with the customary "health and wellness" promises, my family is resolving to do more things together this year. One of those is skiing!

We are fortunate to live in a region surrounded by great ski areas – big and small. No matter your ability, you can find a mountain (or hill) that fits. While my wife and I have skied in the past, my young children have not. It'll be a learning experience for them, for sure. I have found that skiing, believe it or not, is just a microcosm for life, in its simplest of forms. To be a good skier, you need a strong foundation, plenty of balance, and lots of practice. It's also best not to go at it alone. But once you gain confidence and navigate the slippery spots, it's all downhill from there.

Voya Financial Lifeline can help you navigate the moguls, too. If you have any questions regarding your account, please contact us at any time. We're happy to assist you with those slippery spots.

Matthew D. Lynch, Product Manager Voya Financial Lifeline, Phone: 866-906-1362 option #2, Email: FinancialLifeline@voya.com, <http://financiallifeline.voya.com>



Welcoming an elderly relative to move in

The pandemic may have delayed getting together with family members last year. A parent, uncle or grandparent who appeared so active the last time you saw them may now show signs of physical or mental infirmity. This may be a wake-up call that a change in living arrangement is required.

Sometimes a move to senior housing or an assisted living facility is an appropriate option. However, moving in with relatives may be the only viable option given the potential health risks for those with compromised immune systems, the possible wait lists to find suitable housing, and the considerable costs for many facilities.

Multigenerational living arrangements have positive aspects. Young children can learn from older relatives and develop a strong bond while the elders get the joy of seeing kids on a day-to-day basis. The elder family member may be able to help with caregiving. You can find satisfaction in knowing that your loved one is getting proper care and attention. On the other hand, such living arrangements often can pose stress for the entire family. Inviting a parent or other elderly relative to move in with you requires thoughtful family discussion. Consider the following:

- Is the move intended to be permanent or short-term—until recuperation from surgery or until an opening arises at an independent facility?
- Is your family able to afford the additional expenses of another person under the same roof?
- Are you prepared for lifestyle changes – everything from mealtimes to weekend activities, vacations and the sharing of living spaces? Establish boundaries and discuss topics such as bedtimes, TV volume, smoking, chores, etc. Sometimes small issues can become the source of major contention.
- How likely are the changes to cause or exacerbate marital problems with your spouse? Anticipate other family squabbles with children or siblings.

- Calculate how finances will be handled, including additional utility and food bills. Who will pay for any necessary home remodeling changes?
- Reach an agreement with siblings regarding their willingness to share the necessary financial burdens and time requirements. Would they object to using mom's money to pay for her care? An estimated 70% of caregivers miss some time from work to provide for at-home care or to take a relative to medical appointments. Will siblings pitch in to help with the caregiving duties or provide financial support, run errands, or pay bills?
- Will the medical care in your area be adequate, accessible and affordable for your relative's needs?
- Be realistic about what you can do and what assistance you will need from outside caregivers if your loved one has a serious medical condition. Expect to pay over \$4,000/month for a home health aide.
- Make the living space elder-friendly with grab bars in bathrooms and adequate lighting to help prevent falls.
- Create a welcoming and homelike environment with privacy, favorite furniture and photos.
- Treat your relative with dignity and encourage independence. Assign chores that won't be overwhelming but will also make her feel part of the family, whether cooking, laundry, gardening or grocery shopping online.
- Find things to assist your relative to remain physically and mentally active with a social network including clubs, adult day activities, gyms, classes and volunteer groups.

Welcoming a family member into your home can be mutually beneficial so long as careful consideration went into making the decision. It will certainly take patience—allow time for everyone to adjust to new routines.

What to know about condo safety

The tragic collapse of the Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside, Florida in June 2021 left 98 people dead. This seemingly unthinkable disaster made many people who live in high-rise buildings or condominium communities nervous.

Approximately 25% of the nation's population live in private settings that have condominium, co-op, or homeowner's associations. The majority of these communities are run by volunteer owner-directors with little training or qualification to manage finances. There typically is little to no government oversight regarding the physical condition and financial health of the building.

Here are some things for condominium owners and prospective buyers to consider:

- Is the building managed by owners or by an outside investor? The residents living there may want to maintain the building to a higher standard than an investor who wants to save money and may cut corners.
- Most condo board members are not structural engineers or financial experts qualified to make important decisions regarding upgrades and maintenance. Insist on seeing a copy of all financials and have an accountant review the documents if you aren't comfortable with numbers. Try to attend the board meetings or read the minutes—are there issues that are noteworthy or that come up repeatedly?

- In addition, make sure that a “reserve study” was conducted within the past few years. A reserve study is done by a professional building inspector who evaluates the entire building and makes recommendations. The study will outline how much should be set aside for repairs and provide a realistic calculation of what assessment levels should be. If you are considering the purchase of a condo, ask the seller to provide this information before you make an offer. A large assessment down the road could wipe out any equity gain in your investment.
- If you notice a crack or leak in a structural part of the building, contact the board. If they don't respond, reach out to the municipal building officials.
- Low homeowner association fees could be a red flag. Are fees keeping up with inflation to cover proper maintenance? Is there an adequate reserve fund to cover major repairs? Knowing this will eliminate surprises, as costly special assessments – which can run to five figures or more – are becoming increasingly common.

Condominiums can provide a great living arrangement and have many benefits, but there are potential downsides. Remember that a condo is a shared ownership agreement, not a single family home.

Passport scams

We've all experienced inconveniences and changes since the pandemic began. As life begins to return to some sense of normalcy, many people are making plans to travel abroad. The US State Department's backlog for processing two million passports has led to delays and long lines for would-be travelers.

Those desperate to obtain or renew a passport before an upcoming trip may seek to pay a fee for expediting the process. Unfortunately, scam artists are taking advantage of the situation and are exploiting unsuspecting travelers. Beware of purported “passport consultants” who guarantee a fast turnaround. In reality, the scammers just pocket the hefty fees paid and don't deliver on their promise. Additionally, the information provided on the passport application contains critical personal information that can be used for identity theft. Other scammers sell access to “urgent travel” online appointment slots that simply don't exist.

Neither the US State Department, local county clerk offices, nor the US Postal Service will charge a consulting fee for their services or sell timeslots for appointments. They will not ask for any banking information.

Don't take any chances. Start the process to renew your passport at least six months before it expires. Take a photo or scan your current passport before submitting it with the renewal request. Consider paying the State Department its \$60 fee for expedited mail-in service. Even with expedited service, the wait can be four months or more.

If you do need a passport for urgent travel needs due to an emergency, contact the US State Department at 877-487-2778 or contact your Congressional representative for assistance.



Filing hints for the recently widowed

As the year draws to a close, this can be a good time to gather financial paperwork to prepare for the tax filing season starting in January. If you have recently lost a spouse, you may have some important tax decisions to make.

If your spouse died during the 2021 calendar year, the IRS allows you the option of filing a “married filing jointly” return for the 2021 tax year, even though you weren’t married for the entire year. So long as you didn’t remarry before the end of the tax year, you can file a joint return for yourself and your deceased spouse.

A surviving spouse may only file jointly for the tax year in which the spouse died. After that, you can file as a “qualifying widow or widower” for two years following the death if you remain unmarried and can claim a child or stepchild as a dependent.

The IRS offers taxpayers a third filing option – “head of household.” To qualify, the taxpayer must be unmarried and provide more than half of the payments of maintaining a home for the filer and another qualified dependent who is a relative.

These filing options typically provide a surviving spouse with a lower income tax rate and a higher standard deduction than filing as a single.

As expected, there are some qualification limitations for each tax status. Before selecting a filing status, consult with a tax professional. For more information, go to [IRS.gov](https://www.irs.gov) and search for IRS Publication 501.



Lessons from Luminaries

Supreme Court Justices Scalia and Ginsburg – an unlikely friendship

Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg were the original “odd couple.” They were opposites in many ways—he was an outspoken towering figure, brash and bold. She was shy and just five feet tall. Scalia was a staunch conservative constitutionalist; Ginsburg was revered as the leader of the court’s liberal wing. In an era of bipartisan bickering, despite their differences, the two renowned Supreme Court justices were the best of friends.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was born in Brooklyn in 1933. She dedicated her career as a women’s rights activist who recognized the difficulties women faced as she did when she was a young mother and law student. After a career in teaching law and publishing articles on equality and discrimination, she was appointed to the federal appeals court and later became the second woman to serve on the Supreme Court. She died from pancreatic cancer in 2020 at age 87.

Justice Scalia, born in New Jersey in 1936, was raised several miles from Justice Ginsburg in neighboring Queens, New York. After graduating from law school, he had a career in law and teaching. He was nominated to the US Court of Appeals in 1982 and then to the Supreme Court in 1986. He died in 2016 at age 79.

The two New Yorkers met when they were federal appeals court judges for the D.C. Circuit in the early 1980s. The bond was immediate, and they became “best buddies.” They served together on the Supreme Court for 22+ years until Scalia’s death. They both loved opera, teaching, travel and were extremely passionate about the law. In their early days, they were both considered outsiders compared to the typical lawyers at the time. He was an Italian Catholic of Sicilian ancestry, and she was a Jewish female.

They shared March birthdays. Their families celebrated New Year’s Eve together each year. Their spouses shared their love of cooking at regular dinner parties. They even traveled together, riding on an elephant in India and parasailing in France.

What made their friendship possible was that the two justices—at the opposite ends of the political spectrum who seldom agreed on legal questions—understood that they only disagreed on their ideas. The friendship remained rooted in mutual respect for their opinions, intellect and shared interests. Their debates were always civil, remained intellectual, and were in good spirit. As Ginsburg admitted, she “tweaked” one of her majority opinions after reading Scalia’s “spicy” dissenting opinion that he presented to her before she completed her draft.

In honor of the passing of Scalia, Ginsburg said that while they differed in their “interpretation of written texts,” they were one in their “reverence for the Constitution and the institution we serve.”

Lessons:

- 1) It’s possible for friends and relatives to put aside major political and philosophical differences while remaining civil and caring toward each other.
- 2) We can learn from our opponents. Ironically, their published judicial dissents made each of the justices more resolute in their opinions.
- 3) It’s possible, through hard work, to overcome one’s humble beginnings and become successful.
- 4) It’s not necessary to lose one’s identity by being silent about one’s beliefs if there is a true friendship and mutual respect.

Make sure your pets are safe in an emergency

Recent hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, and floods have left beloved pets stranded. Planning ahead can give you peace of mind that your pet is safe should something happen.

If it's not safe for you to shelter in place during a natural disaster, it's not safe for your pets either. When making an evacuation plan, identify hotels, shelters, or out-of-town friends or relatives who will accept animal guests.

Well before an emergency strikes, assemble an emergency kit with a one-week supply of pet necessities. This should include water and food in water-tight containers; medicine; leash or harness; cat litter/pan; favorite toys, treats and bedding; and a carrier to transport the pet safely. Store a copy of medical and vaccination records and prescriptions on your mobile phone, in the cloud, or in a waterproof container for easy access. Upload your emergency contact information (including a backup contact) and photos of your pet in case they get lost.

Make a list of your pet's feeding schedule, medical conditions, any behavior issues, and the name of your veterinarian in case someone has to care for your pet in your absence.

Exchange keys and pet information with trusted neighbors or friends.

Pets should always be up-to-date with vaccinations and wear a securely fastened collar with current contact identification. Have your pet microchipped by a veterinarian to ensure that you are reunited if you are separated.

For larger animals, make sure that you are prepared with vehicles, trailers and handlers to transport them safely.



How clean is your home office?

Working from home can certainly have its upsides – no commute, more time with the family and pets, less of a need to dress up. Many of us don't have a separate home office and, instead, we share the kitchen counter or dining room table.

Clearing the clutter and excess paperwork can provide a sense of peace and enable you to be more productive. Have you considered your work area's cleanliness as well as its neatness? Chances are, most of us are not sanitizing our work areas each day. Dust and mold can trigger allergies, coughs and a runny nose. If you eat at your desk, food particles can contaminate the surface of furniture or electronics with bacteria.

To keep your workspace clean and safe, avoid working from your bed, on a couch, or in the kitchen, as these areas tend to harbor the most germs in the house. Get a protective cover for your keyboard. Keep cats and dogs off the desk to limit the buildup of dander and fur on surfaces. Avoid eating at the desk.

Once a week, thoroughly clean your mouse, keyboard, phone, monitor, printer, and other frequently touched surfaces. Soap and water, sanitizing wipes, and disinfectants can be effective – just check your user manuals to make sure that the components won't be damaged. Use a damp paper towel, microfiber cloth, canned compressed air, a Q-tip, or soft bristle paintbrush to get into small crevices and corners. Vacuum or dust the desk chair, floor, filing cabinets, light fixtures, and bookshelves.



Sources used in this issue include: *San Francisco Chronicle*, *National Council on Aging*, *Caring.com*, *The New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *WBUR*, *NPR*, *Essex County (NJ) Clerk*, *AARP*, *Washington Post*, *Fast Company*, *IRS*, *USA Today*, *ABC News*, *SupremeCourt.gov*, *CNN*, *Britannica.com*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Real Simple*, *HGTV*, *Ready.gov*, *American Red Cross*, *CDC*, *RedRover.org*

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