Al and Sue are breathing a little easier these days. Their youngest is in her last year of college, so that cost will be gone soon. Sue is happy to be back at work, after being laid off a few years ago, and Al is feeling more secure in his job. Plus, they’ve settled in with current market conditions.

They’re tempted to take a break and relax. But the recent upheaval also reminded them how important it is to be prepared for the unexpected. And retirement is getting closer. Al is thinking about it a lot more these days. Sometimes it brings a smile to his face, and sometimes he starts to worry and thinks: Will we be ready?

Sound familiar? Keep reading!

Make Smart Decisions About Your Contributions

Just 15 years from Social Security? Don’t panic. That’s still 15 years to work on your nest egg.

Consider increasing your pre-tax contributions to your 401(k) plan. Make every effort to contribute to the maximum (the IRS limit is $17,500 for 2014) or at least enough to get your company’s full match, if they offer one. Starting the year you turn 50, you may be eligible to contribute even more through “catch-up contributions” — as much as $5,500 more in 2014. And beyond that, you can contribute to an IRA. Put all these opportunities to work for you, and the total could really add up over the next 10 to 20 years.

Reassess Your Investments

If your returns are pretty good right now, shouldn’t you stick with your portfolio? Staying the course isn’t always the best course of action. As your age and your circumstances change, it’s important to reassess your investments. Consider your risk tolerance and how long you have until you’ll need to tap the account for income. They’re both key factors when determining which investments are appropriate for you, and in what percentages.

Ask yourself: Is your portfolio right for you now, as opposed to 5 or 10 years ago? And have your allocations — the percentages in stocks, bonds and “cash” — veered from your intentions because of the markets’ moves? If so, you could be facing more or less risk than you want. It may be time to adjust.

Don’t Touch Your 401(k)

That may be one chunk of change in your account. But even if you’re permitted to take loans from your 401(k) plan, you should carefully consider all the implications of doing so. Remind yourself that the money is there for a purpose, and that purpose is still in your future. If you take out a loan, the money won’t be invested in your account until you pay it back, so you’ll be missing any opportunity for growth. Plus, you may face undesirable tax consequences if you change jobs or are laid off and can’t pay the loan back in full.
Maintain (or Replenish) Your Emergency Fund

What’s a rainy-day fund for if not a rainy day? And there have been some real storms these past few years. The right size of your emergency fund will vary with your circumstances, but many experts recommend that you squirrel away 6 to 8 months’ worth of expenses in a liquid, interest-bearing savings or money market account.

If you depleted your emergency fund over the last few years, consider making replenishing it a top priority — even before paying down debt. You never know when tough times might strike again, and you should make sure you won’t have to dig into long-term investments. Your emergency fund is a buffer to help keep those long-term plans on track. If a crisis hits, you don’t want to have to sell securities or incur hefty additional taxes for early withdrawals from retirement plans.

Scope Out Retirement

No one’s suggesting you take up daily mall walking or dye your hair blue. But if you’re 50, you’re not too young to start asking yourself when you expect to retire and whether you’re on track with that goal. And ask yourself what you hope to do in retirement — and where you’d like to do it. This gives you plenty of time to plan, and also to work toward your goals, or to change them if you want to.

Rethink Your Housing Needs

When the nest starts to empty, it’s time to take a look at the nest itself. This can be one of the most emotional issues you face. Are you paying to heat empty rooms? Does it make sense to downsize? You may be able to eliminate your mortgage payment, or tap some of the equity in your home for income in retirement. Then again, are you ready to say good-bye to the home and neighborhood you’ve known for years? People understandably come to different answers.

If you decide to stay put, there may still be ways to save on household expenses, such as cutting back on premium cable services and extra phone lines. Keep in mind that any cost savings on the housing front can free up even more money to pay off debt and save for retirement.

Check Out Benefits You May Be Passing Up

You mean there’s more than the 401(k)? Many times, yes. You may be passing up optional company benefits like disability and life insurance that you should consider. Are there discounts on products or services available through the company?

And what about missed opportunities outside of work? Do groups you belong to offer special deals? Does your local government offer free programs — maybe concerts — you’re passing up? Such opportunities can make saving painless and effortless. And while saving is good at any time, it can feel especially rewarding when you’re trying to catch up with your financial goals.