

Transcription details:

Host: Bill Coppel, First Clearing Chief Client Growth Officer
Guest: Sara Zeff Geber, LifeEncore Founder and Author

Transcription results:

Intro Welcome to The Next Frontier, where we examine what the role of the financial advisor will be in a world that's being disrupted by artificial intelligence and algorithms. Our mission is to spark new conversations that create stronger connections and build greater client confidence. Join us as we look at our industry and others through a new lens and explore the opportunities emerging at the intersection of high tech and high touch. It's time for a new conversation. Are you ready?

BILL COPPEL Hi, this is Bill Coppel and welcome to The Next Frontier. With longer lifespans coupled with an increase in the number of childless adults and the rise of gray divorce, many of us will be growing older solo. For people over the age of 65, 34% of women and 21% of men lived alone in 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the percentages increase with age. Among women age 75 and over, for example, 44% lived alone. With these realities as a backdrop, how do we help clients who are aging alone cultivate the support network they're almost certain to need as they grow older? That's the question our guest, Dr. Sara Zeff Geber, is here to help us answer. Before we start our conversation with our guest, let me tell you a little bit about Dr. Geber. She is a nationally known life planning expert who's developed a niche working with solo agers. Those are adults who are 50-plus with no children and those who are aging alone for other reasons. Sara believes solo agers have unique needs later in life that warrant greater foresight and a more robust approach to planning to help them prepare for a safe, secure, and enjoyable future as an older adult. Sara is the author of Essential Retirement Planning for Solo Agers, which was named a 2018 best book on aging well by The Wall Street Journal. She's been featured and quoted in major media, and received the 2018 Influencers in Aging designation by PBS' Next Avenue. Sara holds a PhD in organizational behavior and counseling. A solo ager herself, she lives with her husband and their canine companion in Santa Rosa, California. Sara, welcome to The Next Frontier.

SARA GEBER Thanks, Bill. Glad to be here.

BILL COPPEL Let me start with this simple question. Help our listeners understand the term solo ager. So from your perspective, what does this really mean?

SARA GEBER I coined the term solo ager initially to mean anyone who didn't have children because what I discovered is that almost 20% of Baby Boomer women never had children. And that has huge implications as we get older. Now, how did that happen? Well, it's actually 20% is actually a doubling of the childlessness rate from all previous generations. And when I thought about that, I realized there were several very prominent things that happened to and with and for Baby Boomers in the '60s and '70s. The first really dramatic one actually is the development of the pill. And Baby Boomer women were the first women in history to have truly reliable birth control, so that was one. And then we had strong movements in the late '60s and early '70s toward women's liberation. The doors to education, the doors to careers just really started to open wide for women. And for the first time ever, women had choice as to whether they became mothers or wives and/or built a career, and many chose to do all three or at least two out of the three. But sometimes women chose those two to

not include having children. And I, myself, am a solo ager. I had a very serious career, still have a very serious career, and there just didn't seem to be room for children in that. And I have many, many colleagues in the same boat. So that's where solo ager comes from. I now consider it to include anyone who's aging alone for any reason because they have certain challenges that people who have a support system do not have.

BILL COPPEL

Okay. So as I understand it, you spent a good portion of your career working with Baby Boomers on life planning and transitions related to what we traditionally call retirement. How did you become so interested in the needs of the solo ager?

SARA GEBER

Well, it was actually a sort of a personal revelation. About the time that I started thinking about retirement, which was probably in my late 50s, early 60s, I looked around me and my contemporaries, who were all similar age, I saw spending a tremendous amount of time taking care of their aging parents. They started calling us the sandwich generation because so many Baby Boomer women, if they did have kids, had had them late and were still in the process of trying to get those kids launched, and at the same time, they were taking care of 80-something and 90-something-year-old parents. I didn't happen to have that particular need for caregiving because my parents had died when I was considerably younger. But so many people did. And as I watched them spending tremendous amounts of time and resources and energy trying to make sure that their parents had a good life, whether they were living closeby or not, I thought to myself, "Who's going to do that for us?" And us meaning those of us who don't have children. So that's when I really got interested in it because that's when I dug up the statistic that almost 20% of Baby Boomer women did not have children, and realized that this was going to be a major, major challenge. So I got very interested in it and started talking about it in retirement and aging circles, people that I was starting to hang out with, and a lot of other people became interested as well. So I think I had hit on something that was really quite important for later research.

BILL COPPEL

Sara, as a life planner and someone helping people with transition, most of us think of that in terms of retirement. In fact, you just shared with us this notion that sort of this revelation occurred around the time you were thinking about retirement. Share with us, share with our listeners how do you approach retirement? What do you think about? Do people really retire, or do they transition?

SARA GEBER

Baby Boomers don't seem to be retiring in nearly the numbers that were expected. About 15 years ago, we started seeing talk about this silver tsunami and this avalanche of people retiring. And what has happened is Baby Boomers in many respects at least those that are still relatively healthy and strong don't want to have a classic retirement like they saw their parents do. They want to continue to be vital and strong and have a meaningful life. So they're looking at transitioning to a third phase of life, a different career, something to give back, maybe a kind of an avocation of volunteering or pursuing a cause that they're passionate about. Baby Boomers are doing all kinds of things other than classic retirement. And I think we ought to retire the word retirement, but nobody can seem to come up with anything else. We only really think of retirement being somewhere in the 60s because that's when Social Security starts. And back when Social Security was initiated in the '40s, we didn't really have any notion of people living productive lives any further out than that. And now, we are living so much longer, and people want to continue to be productive and do things that are meaningful or purposeful for them.

BILL COPPEL

So continuing on that train of thought for a moment. As a life planner, how did you approach helping people with this transition? Because I would tell you my experience

with financial services have been largely around this notion of creating a paycheck, so at the end of your career, you can continue to have income [crosstalk].

SARA GEBER

Yes.

BILL COPPEL

Yeah, it's just not a lot of conversation about what's next. How did you approach that?

SARA GEBER

I approached it initially from a standpoint of being the non-financial side of retirement planning, and then it kind of morphed into the non-financial side of transitions and life planning. And for the most part, we stopped talking about retirement and talking about what's next, what's next for you as you transition in this next phase of life. I think it's very important for financial planners and advisors to think about life planning more than they think about financial planning because that's what it's going to be all about for people as they get older. It's all well and good to help people make sure that they accumulate a sizable amount of savings that they can afford to live without making their midlife income and that's a worthy goal. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't make it and need to continue to work well into their 70s and sometimes 80s. But the financial planners that I know today and the ones that I work with, when they do a classic "retirement plan" and use the software - that is so wonderful today about figuring out how much money we're going to have and how long it'll last - they run things out to either 97 or 103 because that's how long we might live.

BILL COPPEL

So that's really interesting because, as you point out, it is not that we want to stop, we want to continue to feel productive, we want to be engaged, we want to be purposeful, want to continue our mission, whatever that is as you described it [crosstalk]. It's an area that creates an opportunity at least from where we sit at The Next Frontier for advisors to begin to embrace that and start to look at how they can help effect a very productive, as Joe Coughlin from the MIT AgeLab would say, the next 8,000 days. So planning isn't a one size fits all. It's not creating that sum of money. It's more complex. And I want to go down this line of questioning with you because, in your book, you diagram the network of a solo ager versus the network of someone with, say, a nearby supporting family. Talk to us about the differences between these networks and how it impacts the decisions they need to be thinking about making today and perhaps the ones they make tomorrow.

SARA GEBER

Well, in those two network diagrams that I have, I've attempted to illustrate how rich and full a social network of a parent can be. Many times, parents get to know their children's friends. They certainly, in most cases, get to know their children's spouses, and then grandchildren come along, and they get to know their grandchildren and their friends. And all of a sudden, you have this growing network of family and we see it when we look at a family reunion. I see family reunions happening in the parks all around me during the summer with people getting together with multigenerations, three sometimes four generations of people, along with friends sometimes of grandchildren that came along to make sure the grandchildren didn't get bored during the family reunion. So it expands exponentially with the number of children and grandchildren that are spawned from any two parents.

SARA GEBER

With solo agers that don't have children, they have to rely on-- and do rely happily in many cases, on a social network made up of friends, people in their community, sometimes their nieces and nephews. A lot of solo agers have sisters or brothers that went on to have children, and some of them very close to them. I have one very good friend who is the youngest of five girls, and those girls of course are all women in late middle age at this point. And my friend never married or had children. She was a scientist. She actually lived in the Galapagos for 13 years, and her lifestyle just wasn't

conducive to raising children. But she's extremely close to her nieces and nephews and all four of her sisters who are still living. So she has that robust social network through family that a lot of solo agers don't have. So there's a huge range from solo agers who do have that kind of very complex network that they can rely on to solo agers who really don't have any family at all.

BILL COPPEL

So when you think about this, the importance of the social network, and you just identified this, what comes out of that perhaps is something we could call social capital. And we think about an individual's balance sheet, their life balance sheet, we tend to gravitate to the assets as being real estate or investments or cash or things of that nature. But perhaps another important asset is this thing called social capital. Talk to us about social capital and why it's particularly important as we age.

SARA GEBER

Yeah. I wrote an article on that recently because I think social capital is a concept that a lot of people who aren't in the social science world can understand. It is a very important part of what people amass as they get older, and their social capital has to do with the social network that they've built. What kinds of relationships have you built in your life that you can rely on? Those relationships can and will be a lifesaver as you get older. So for financial planners and their work with clients, understanding the kind of social capital that clients have built up is just critical in helping them figure out how they're going to be cared for and supported later in life. The analysis of that social capital is, in my mind, just as important as the analysis of any kind of other assets that that person might have.

BILL COPPEL

So I would see a diagram of someone's social network, if you will, actually as a component of their plan.

SARA GEBER

Absolutely.

BILL COPPEL

So where does technology fit into this whole mix? Today, we're living with much more technology than we ever could possibly imagine. And it's actually in many respects helping us bridge the gap sometimes as it relates to support. What are your thoughts around how technology fits into this whole discussion?

SARA GEBER

It's a great question, and I think we don't fully know the answer to that yet. People aging today, and I mean the generation actually older than the Boomers, the Korea generation or whatever we're going to call them, people now who are in their 80s, 90s, and early 100s, are just starting to build in technology to their lives. I think once the Boomers get to that point, technology will be firmly entrenched as part of our method of staying vital and connected. It certainly is allowing us to do that. We're discovering through all the different tools we have today how well connected we can all be to the people that aren't immediately around us. I, personally, am involved in several Facebook groups. One of them is for my high school, and I've been in touch with dozens of high school friends that I would never be in touch with without that technology. And most people I know have those kinds of connections built through social media. So those are important. How much of our social network is going to depend on technology and how effective that's going to be, I think only time will tell. I have probably a relatively healthy dose of skepticism about it because I believe that face-to-face interaction and touching is very important for people, and we don't have that with the technologically enhanced communication. But it's certainly not-- I can't see any negatives to it. I just don't know how big a positive it's going to be.

BILL COPPEL

Well, we also know, Sara, that if you look at the Blue Zones around the world, those areas where we have a disproportionate number of centenarians, they credit almost 50% of that to the fact that they live in an environment that really promotes social networks. And that if you look at that or the research coming out of Harvard's 75 or

80-year-old study of how we develop as human beings, so much goes back to this notion of relationship and the importance of having a network and having a solid base of social capital. So it makes sense to me. But there's a lot of talk today about aging in place and how technology can help older people stay in touch with each other and stay in their homes longer and so forth. What's your perspective on that?

SARA GEBER

Well, I have a pretty strong perspective on the whole idea of aging in place as it relates to solo agers. I am not a fan of aging in place for solo agers. I think it can be a recipe for loneliness and isolation. And I encourage the financial planners that I work with to start early, to talk to their clients about the best place for them to age. And I think a lot of planners neglect to get into that aspect of the planning, and it's so important. Where we age has so much to do with how successful we are. And when I say successful, I mean successful in keeping a social network, staying vibrant and connected to people. It all feels like it's going to work just fine when people are in their 60s and still driving, and they can go meet a friend for lunch and drive a couple hundred miles to see a friend who moved away. But what happens in 10, 15, 20 years when so many of us are going to have to give up our driver's licenses. Yes, we all hope for those self-driving cars, but that may not be the reality in our lifetime, and all of that takes money. So to the extent that anyone working with Baby Boomers today can begin early to talk to them about where they're going to age and how they're going to stay connected, I think, is very important.

SARA GEBER

I've given a couple of keynote talks to financial advisor associations recently, and one of the things that I strongly encouraged them to do, all of them on their own, is get out and visit all of the senior housing options in their area, know what a continuing care retirement community looks like, know where the life plan communities are, know where the skilled nursing facilities are. These are important things for financial planners to know because sometimes you're first line of defense for a client who goes into crisis. And it's really important to be able to advise knowledgeably on the where as well as the how.

BILL COPPEL

So let me ask this final question, if I may because I think that what I want to get to is the mindset that's required here is a little bit different than we would traditionally have. As an advisor, we think about planning, right? It goes beyond sort of the retirement window. It goes on for that third chapter. And whether a client makes a conscious decision to live solo or finds themselves solo due to circumstances, what should advisors be thinking about, and what can they do to help them, meaning the client, plan to optimize that third chapter of their lives?

SARA GEBER

There's a lot that they can do, and I've developed a couple of tools that I think will be helpful for financial advisors. Because it's not often their strong suit to talk about the social aspects of growing older and who their clients are going to depend on and where their support is going to come from. So using a kind of a worksheet to help clients identify who and where their friends are, who and where other family members, maybe extended family members are, who the neighbors are. Identifying those potential connections and encouraging them to get out and strengthen and nurture those connections is important. It's also important to encourage clients to talk about it. So one of the best things that any financial advisor can do is to begin those conversations and get their clients a little more comfortable talking about the next phase of life, what has sometimes been called that deep aging phase. So because you're talking about it with them, can mean that they might be comfortable enough to talk to the neighbor that they've known for 20 years or a niece and nephew. It can be very important to really nurture and develop relationships with nieces and nephews, maybe even the grown children of friends. It's going to vary from person to person. But entering into that conversation about who is in your support system is

going to be critical for talking about that next phase of life because it is as important as talking about where they're going to age as who's going to be there for them as they age.

BILL COPPEL

And what's interesting that you point out here, Sara, is the fact that the implications of this conversation go farther than simply the solo ager. It's multigenerational. It can impact a lot of people at different points in their life in terms of how they can support a solo ager, as you point out, that may be a friend or a distant relative. But one of the things that I wanted to mention was the fact that, do you think it's a good idea that for an advisor where this is a bit foreign, maybe they just start with themselves and their own situation and their own family? They are a solo ager themselves, or they know someone within their family that's a solo ager.

SARA GEBER

That's a great idea. Great idea.

BILL COPPEL

So to learn more about what you're doing and the work you do in this area, how can our listeners reach out to you and get more advice or guidance from you on this concept of helping people plan who are solo agers?

SARA GEBER

I can be reached through my website, which is sarazeffgeber.com. People can also reach me by email, sara@lifeencore.com, and of course, my book is available on Amazon and any other bookseller, online bookseller that you can find and in some book stores.

BILL COPPEL

And, again, the name of Sara's book is Essential Retirement Planning for Solo Agers. Sara, I want to take a moment to say thank you very much for spending time with us today. I know I got a lot out of it, and I'm sure our listeners did as well. And we look forward to having perhaps a conversation with you again in the future.

SARA GEBER

Thank you very much, Bill. It's been my pleasure.

BILL COPPEL

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