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We hope you find the information in this newsletter valuable. Please feel free to call us if you have any questions or concerns. We look forward to speaking to you soon.

Jim, Brad, Stan, Carolyn, Ashley and Jessica.

The Fed's Great Unwind and Your Portfolio

After more than five years of unprecedented support for the economy, the Federal Reserve Board has begun to reduce its purchases of bonds. And though the Fed has said interest rates may stay low even after unemployment has fallen to 6.5%, higher rates increasingly seem to be a question of timing. Both of those actions can affect your portfolio.

Bond purchases: the tale of the taper

In the wake of the 2008 credit crisis, the Fed's purchases of Treasury and mortgage-backed bonds helped keep the bond market afloat, supplying demand for debt instruments when other buyers were hesitant. Fewer purchases by one of the bond markets' biggest customers in recent years could mean lower total overall demand for debt instruments. Since reduced demand for anything often leads to lower prices, that could hurt the value of your bond holdings.

On the other hand, retiring baby boomers will need to start generating more income from their portfolios, and they're unlikely to abandon income-producing investments completely. Those boomers could help replace some of the lost demand from the Fed. Also, the Fed's planned retreat from the bond-buying business has roiled overseas markets in recent months; when that kind of uncertainty hits, global investors often seek refuge in U.S. debt.

Rising interest rates

When interest rates begin to rise, investors will face falling bond prices, and longer-term bonds typically feel the impact the most. Bond buyers become reluctant to tie up their money for longer periods because they foresee higher yields in the future. The later a bond's maturity date, the greater the risk that its yield will eventually be superseded by that of newer bonds. As demand drops and yields increase to attract purchasers, prices fall.

There are various ways to manage that impact. You can hold individual bonds to maturity; you would suffer no loss of principal unless the borrower defaults. Bond investments also can be laddered. This involves buying a portfolio of bonds with varying maturities; for example, a five-bond portfolio might be structured so that one of the five matures each year for the next five years. As each bond matures, it can be reinvested in an instrument that carries a higher yield.

If you own a bond fund, you can check the average maturity of the fund's holdings, or the fund's average duration, which takes into account the value of interest payments and will generally be shorter than the average maturity. The longer a fund's duration, the more sensitive it may be to interest rate changes. ***Note:*** *All investing involves risk, including the loss of principal, and your shares may be worth more or less than you paid for them when you sell. Before investing in a mutual fund, carefully consider its investment objective, risks, fees, and expenses, which are outlined in the prospectus available from the fund. Read it carefully before investing.*

For those who've been diligent about saving, or who have kept a substantial portion of their investments in cash equivalents such as savings accounts or certificates of deposit, higher interest rates could be a boon, as rising rates would increase their potential income. The downside, of course, is that if higher rates are accompanied by inflation, such cash alternatives might not keep pace with rising prices.

Balancing competing risks

Bonds may be affected most directly by Fed action, but equities aren't necessarily immune to the impact of rate increases. Companies that didn't take advantage of low rates by issuing bonds may see their borrowing costs increase, and even companies that squirreled away cash could be hit when they return to the bond markets. Also, if interest rates become competitive with the return on stocks, that could reduce demand for equities. On the other hand, declining bond values could send many investors into equities that offer both growth potential and a healthy dividend.

Figuring out how future Fed decisions may affect your portfolio and how to anticipate and respond to them isn't an easy challenge. Don't hesitate to get expert help.

April 2014

What's New in the World of Higher Education?

The appeal of MOOCs

The combination of quality courses, robust online learning technology, and the wide availability of broadband, coupled with the very high cost of a traditional college education, makes it likely that the popularity of MOOCs--which stands for "massive open online courses"--will only grow in the future, whether people enroll to earn serious credentials or simply for their own enjoyment and curiosity.

Whether your son or daughter is expecting college decisions any day now or whether you're planning ahead for future years, here's what's new in the world of higher education.

Costs for 2013/2014

Question: What goes up every year no matter what the economy at large is doing? Answer: The cost of college. The reasons are many and varied, but suffice it to say that this year, like every year, college costs increased yet again.

For the 2013/2014 year, the average cost at a 4-year public college is $22,826, while the average cost at a private college is $44,750, though many private colleges charge over $60,000 per year (Source: The College Board, Trends in College Pricing 2013). Cost figures include tuition, fees, room and board, books, and a sum for transportation and personal expenses.

What's a parent to do? For starters, check out net price calculators. Now required on all college websites, net price calculators can help families estimate how much grant aid a student might be eligible for at a particular college based on his or her individual academic and financial profile and the school's own criteria for awarding institutional aid. You'll definitely want to spend some time running numbers on different net price calculators to see how schools stack up against one another on the generosity scale.

New rates on federal student loans

Last summer, new legislation changed the way interest rates are set for federal Stafford and PLUS Loans. Rates are now tied to the 10-year Treasury note, instead of being artificially set by Congress. For the current academic year (July 1, 2013, through June 30, 2014), the rates are:

- 3.8% for undergraduate students borrowing subsidized and unsubsidized Stafford Loans
- 5.4% for graduate students borrowing unsubsidized Stafford Loans
- 6.4% for parents borrowing PLUS Loans

The rates are determined as of June 1 each year and are locked in for the life of the loan.

A renewed focus on IBR

Federal student loans are the preferred way to borrow for college because they offer a unique repayment option called "income based repayment," or IBR. Under IBR, a borrower's monthly student loan payment is based on income and family size and is equal to 10% of discretionary income. After 20 years of on-time payments, all remaining debt is generally forgiven (loans are forgiven after 10 years for those in qualified public service).

Enrollment in the program has been relatively modest, but last fall, the Department of Education contacted borrowers who were having difficulty repaying their student loans to let them know about IBR. The department also put the IBR application online and has made it possible for applicants to import information from their tax returns.

A government push for information

Last summer, as part of his push to make college more affordable, President Obama announced a proposal that would require colleges to report the average debt load and earnings of graduates (in addition to the information on tuition costs and graduation rates that they already report), with the availability of federal financial aid being linked to those ratings. In response, most colleges have cried foul, claiming that average debt is not a valid indicator of affordability because colleges have vastly different endowments and abilities to award institutional aid, and that post-graduation salaries can depend on variables outside of a college's control. No reporting requirement has been finalized yet, but the trend is clearly toward the government requiring colleges to make their costs and return on investment as transparent as possible so families can make more informed choices.

The growth of MOOCs

You may have heard the term "MOOCs," and going forward, it's likely you'll hear it a lot more. MOOCs stands for "massive open online courses," and these large-scale, online classes have the potential to revolutionize higher education. One of the earliest MOOCs was a course on artificial intelligence at Stanford University in 2011, which attracted 160,000 students from all over the world (though only 23,000 successfully completed the course, earning a certificate of recognition).

Today, hundreds of MOOCs are offered free of charge by many well-known, leading universities. The piece of the puzzle that has yet to be solved is what credit or degree will be given when courses are completed and how pricing will work. But the combination of quality courses, robust online learning technology, and the wide availability of broadband, coupled with the very high cost of a traditional college education, makes it likely that the popularity of MOOCs will only grow in the future, whether people enroll to earn serious credentials or simply for their own enjoyment and curiosity.

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A Financial Life By Design℠

Saving through Your Retirement Plan at Work? Don't Let These Five Risks Derail Your Progress

Keep in mind that no investment strategy can guarantee success. All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of your contribution dollars.

As a participant in your work-sponsored retirement savings plan, you've made a very important commitment to yourself and your family: to prepare for your future. Congratulations! Making that commitment is an important first step in your pursuit of a successful retirement. Now it's important to stay focused--and be aware of a few key risks that could derail your progress along the way.

1. Beginning with no end in mind

Setting out on a new journey without knowing your destination can be a welcome adventure, but when planning for retirement, it's generally best to know where you're going. According to the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI), an independent research organization, workers who have calculated a savings goal tend to be more confident in their retirement prospects than those who have not. Unfortunately, EBRI also found that less than half of workers surveyed had actually crunched the numbers to determine their need (Source: 2013 Retirement Confidence Survey, March 2013).

Your savings goal will depend on a number of factors--your desired lifestyle, preretirement income, health, Social Security benefits, any traditional pension benefits you or your spouse may be entitled to, and others. By examining your personal situation both now and in the future, you can determine how much you may need to accumulate to provide the income you'll need during retirement.

Luckily, you don't have to do it alone. Your employer-sponsored plan likely offers tools to help you set a savings goal. In addition, a financial professional can help you further refine your target, breaking it down to answer the all-important question, "How much should I contribute each pay period?"

2. Investing too conservatively...

Another key to determining how much you may need to save on a regular basis is targeting an appropriate rate of return, or how much your contribution dollars may earn on an ongoing basis. Afraid of losing money, some retirement investors choose only the most conservative investments, hoping to preserve their hard-earned assets. However, investing too conservatively can be risky, too. If your contribution dollars do not earn enough, you may end up with a far different retirement lifestyle than you had originally planned.

3. ...Or aggressively

On the other hand, retirement investors striving for the highest possible returns might select investments that are too risky for their overall situation. Although it's a generally accepted principle to invest at least some of your money in more aggressive investments to pursue your goals and help protect against inflation, the amount you invest should be based on a number of factors.

The best investments for your retirement savings mix are those that take into consideration your total savings goal, your time horizon (or how much time you have until retirement), and your ability to withstand changes in your account's value. Again, your employer's plan likely offers tools to help you choose wisely. And a financial professional can also provide an objective, third-party view.

4. Giving in to temptation

Many retirement savings plans permit plan participants to borrow from their own accounts. If you need a sizable amount of cash quickly, this option may sound appealing at first; after all, you're typically borrowing from yourself and paying yourself back, usually with interest. However, consider these points:

- Any dollars you borrow will no longer be working for your future
- The amount of interest you'll be required to pay yourself could potentially be less than what you might earn should you leave the money untouched
- If you leave your job for whatever reason, any unpaid balance may be treated as a taxable distribution

For these reasons, it's best to carefully consider all of your options before choosing to borrow from your retirement savings plan.

5. Cashing out too soon

If you leave your current job or retire, you will need to make a decision about your retirement savings plan money. You may have several options, including leaving the money where it is, rolling it over into another employer-sponsored plan or an individual retirement account, or taking a cash distribution. Although receiving a potential windfall may sound appealing, you may want to think carefully before taking the cash. In addition to the fact that your retirement money will no longer be working for you, you will have to pay taxes on any pretax contributions, vested employer contributions, and earnings on both. And if you're under age 55, you will be subject to a 10% penalty tax as well. When it's all added up, the amount left in your pocket after Uncle Sam claims his share could be a lot less than you expected.

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Graph: The S&P 500 Month by Month in 2013

Past performance is no guarantee of future results, but stocks had an extraordinary run in 2013. The Standard & Poor's 500 set 45 new all-time closing records during the year and by November had surpassed 1,800 for the first time ever. Despite some stumbles during the summer, by the end of 2013 the index had nearly tripled since its March 2009 financial-crisis low. ***Note:*** *All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal.*

How much can I contribute to my IRA in 2014?

The amount you can contribute to your traditional or Roth IRA remains $5,500 for 2014, $6,500 if you're 50 or older. You can contribute to an IRA in addition to an employer-sponsored retirement plan like a 401(k). But if you (or your spouse) participate in an employer-sponsored plan, the amount of traditional IRA contributions you can deduct may be reduced or eliminated (phased out), depending on your modified adjusted gross income (MAGI). Your ability to make annual Roth contributions may also be phased out, depending on your MAGI. These income limits (phaseout ranges) have increased for 2014:

Income phaseout range for deductibility of traditional IRA contributions in 2014	
1. Covered by an employer-sponsored plan and filing as:	
Single/Head of household	$60,000 - $70,000
Married filing jointly	$96,000 - $116,000
Married filing separately	$0 - $10,000
2. Not covered by an employer-sponsored retirement plan, but filing joint return with a spouse who is covered by a plan	$181,000 - $191,000

Income phaseout range for ability to fund a Roth IRA in 2014	
Single/Head of household	$114,000 - $129,000
Married filing jointly	$181,000 - $191,000
Married filing separately	$0 - $10,000