

FACTORS IN FOCUS

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Here's The Prescription



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As much as I value the unfettered access to information the internet provides, I recognize the potential harm that too much information can cause. Take, for example, a friend of mine, who was experiencing some troubling medical symptoms. Typing her symptoms into a search engine led to an evening of research and mounting consternation. By the end of the night, the vast quantity of unfiltered information led her to conclude that something was seriously wrong.

One of the key characteristics that distinguishes an expert is their ability to filter information and make increasingly refined distinctions about the situation at hand. For example, you might describe your troubling symptoms to a doctor simply as a pain in the chest, but a trained physician will be able to ask questions and test several hypotheses before reaching the conclusion that rather than having the cardiac arrest you suspected, you have something completely different. While many of us may have the capacity to elevate our understanding to a high level within a chosen field, reaching this point takes time, dedication, and experience.

My friend, having convinced herself that something was seriously wrong, booked an appointment with a physician. The doctor asked several pertinent questions, performed some straightforward tests, and recommended the following treatment plan: *reassurance and education.*

Not surgery. Not drugs. But an understanding of why and how she had experienced her condition. The consultative nature of a relationship with a trusted professional—both when a situation arises and as we progress through life—is one of the key benefits that an expert can provide.

There are striking parallels with the work of an independent financial advisor. The first responsibility of the doctor and the advisor is to understand the person they're serving so that they can fully assess their situation. Once the plan is underway, the role of the professional is to monitor the person's situation, evaluate if the course of action remains appropriate, and help to maintain the discipline required for the plan to work as intended.

Like my friend's doctor, I have experienced conversations with clients that are triggered by news reports or informed by unqualified sources. In some cases, all that is required to help put the client's mind at ease is a reminder to focus on what is in their control as well as providing reassurance and (re)education that they have a financial plan in place that is helping them move toward their objectives. The benefits of working with the right advisor is evident in the ability to both help clients pursue their financial goals and to help them have a better and less stressful experience along the way.

Trouble might arise when we confuse simple and complex conditions. Probably no harm is done when a person, recognizing the onset of a common cold, takes cold medicine, drinks plenty of fluids, and rests. But had my self-diagnosing friend not made an appointment with a specialist, and instead moved from self-diagnosis to self-medication, she may have caused herself real harm.

Similarly, thinking that all aspects of your own financial situation can be handled through a basic internet search or casual conversation with a friend might result in a less than optimal financial outcome.

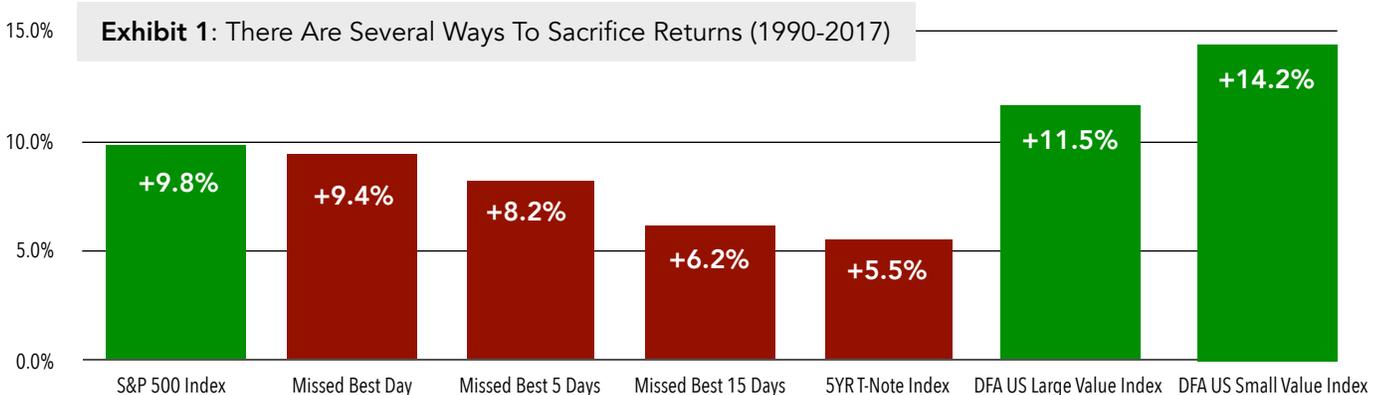
Without the guidance of an objective, independent advisor, the self-medicating investor might overreact to short-term market volatility by selling some of their investments. In doing so, they risk missing out on some of the best days since there is no reliable way to predict when positive returns in equity markets will occur.

One might think that missing a few days of strong returns would not make much difference over the long term. But, as illustrated in Exhibit 1, had an investor missed the 15 single best days in the world's biggest equity market, the US, between 1990 and the end of 2017, their annualized return would have dropped from +9.8% to +6.2%.

The return that is left is more in line with the return on much safer bonds (Five-Year T-Notes, +5.5%) than stocks. Such an outcome can have a major impact on an investor's financial "treatment" plan.

Missing good days isn't the only way to sacrifice long-term returns. Exhibit 1 also shows that avoiding exposure to what have historically been the highest returning stock asset classes, large and small cap *value*, have also impaired results. Compared to the S&P 500, the DFA US Large Value Index outperformed by +1.7% per year, the DFA US Small Value Index outperformed by +4.4% per year.

Improving someone's financial health is a lot like improving their physical health. The challenges associated with pursuing a better financial outcome include diagnosis of the current situation, development of the appropriate course of action, recommending the best and most complete course of action, and sticking with the treatment plan. An independent advisor is trained on the intricacies of complex financial situations and works to understand how their clients feel about money and how their clients might react to future events. By providing the prescription of reassurance and education over time, I believe the right advisor can play a vital and irreplaceable role in your life.



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