

IRA MISSTEPS

A lack of knowledge can lead to problems and disappointments for your heirs.

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Be vigilant, and be knowledgeable. Do you want to hand your heirs big tax problems? Would you like to hand the IRS a sizable chunk of your wealth? Probably not. But if you misunderstand the rules when it comes to inherited IRAs, you just might. Here are some missteps that IRA owners and IRA heirs often make - financial choices you might come to regret ...

Thinking that a will or a trust can facilitate the transfer of IRA assets. Most IRAs don't pass to heirs through wills or trusts (a few rare exceptions aside). The beneficiary form takes precedence - the form the IRA owner filled out and signed when opening the account. Problems arise when:

- The IRA owner dies without designating a beneficiary
- The designated beneficiary has also passed away
- No one can find the beneficiary form (not even the IRA custodian, i.e., the financial institution that hosts the IRA)

In these circumstances, IRA heirs commonly end up playing by the IRA custodian's rules. The resulting beneficiary may be the IRA owner's estate - a very undesirable tax consequence. It might be a contingent beneficiary - perhaps a very undesirable emotional consequence. The lesson here is to keep the beneficiary form handy and to let your heirs know where it is.¹

Taking lump-sum distributions. Too often, non-spousal beneficiaries of a traditional IRA see the inherited assets as money to spend. They withdraw the entire traditional IRA balance in one fell swoop. Bad idea: all that money will be subject to federal income tax. Due to this move, they may lose a sizeable portion of the IRA assets.²

The alternatives? Non-spousal beneficiaries can open an inherited traditional IRA and simply take Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs) from that inherited traditional IRA under the appropriate schedule:

- *Traditional IRA:* within five years of the account holder's death if the account holder was under age 70½, or over your projected lifespan according to IRS tables if the account holder was over age 70½.

This decision can allow the invested traditional IRA assets to keep compounding with the added benefit of tax deferral.²

Not realizing your four options when you inherit your spouse's IRA. If a spouse dies, the surviving spouse that inherits an IRA has some choices. He or she can

- Rollover the assets into a beneficiary IRA
- Convert the inherited IRA into your own IRA

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- Take a lump sum distribution
- “Disclaim” up to 100% of the deceased spouse’s IRA assets

There are compelling reasons to go with the first option and rollover the assets into a beneficiary IRA. The widowed spouse can set up an RMD schedule based on his or her life expectancy. This second point is really important, because the rollover allows the surviving spouse to put off the RMDs that would otherwise soon need to happen. In fact, the surviving spouse can wait until the year in which the original IRA owner would have turned 70½ to start taking required withdrawals from the IRA.²

If the spouse converts the IRA into his or her own IRA, the surviving spouse can name a beneficiary for the inherited assets, keep contributing to the IRA, and potentially avoid RMDs until he or she turns 70½.³ But there is also a compelling tax reason *not* to convert the inherited assets into your own IRA if you want to take distributions from the converted IRA before age 59½. If that is the desire, those withdrawals will be slapped with the nagging 10% early withdrawal penalty plus the requisite income taxes.²

Alternately, a surviving spouse who doesn’t really need inherited IRA assets can “disclaim” them, meaning that they will go to a contingent beneficiary. Sometimes this can be a wise move for tax purposes.⁴

Non-spousal beneficiaries fail to reregister an inherited IRA in a timely manner. If this isn’t done in the year following the year in which the original IRA owner passed, then there can be no direct rollover of the inherited IRA assets and no “stretch” for those assets.^{2,5}

What happens if a non-spouse beneficiary just rolls the inherited IRA assets into an IRA they own, one that isn’t reregistered? Then it is not a direct rollover. The IRS treats those inherited IRA assets like a fully taxable cash distribution - 100% of it is subject to income tax.⁵

Ask for help, and don’t be afraid to ask questions. Many families and couples have only a hazy understanding of the rules governing IRAs, and few really know all the options. Make sure your beneficiary form(s) are up to date and schedule an appointment to make any necessary changes.

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Citations.

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