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FAMILY

# Empty Nester

Preparing for this inevitable and sometimes difficult role

BY MICHELLE KELLEY, LCSW

Is your last child about to leave home? Maybe he/she has already relocated and you're feeling sad, worried, or lost. You may even feel excited and hopeful for what's to come. The next chapter of your life can be a time filled with new opportunities and experiences, or it can be pretty rough. It's common to experience mixed emotions during this transition period. The key to a smooth transition is to, first of all, emotionally prepare — even years in advance. Second, stay mindful of your emotions, and third, stay connected to others who have gone through or are getting ready to go through this transition period.

Empty nest syndrome is not a diagnosis but a phenomenon where parents experience sadness and loss when the last child leaves home — regardless of the age. Although you may be encouraging your children to gain independence, letting go can be painful. You may miss your children taking part in your daily lives as well as their companionship. For most, the empty nest transition period is short



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lived. It's important to create an atmosphere of hope and excitement for yourself and your child — remembering that your feelings will wax and wane and this is normal. It's a bit of a roller coaster ride. I know.

Currently, I'm experiencing this transition. My youngest child has one year left of high school and my oldest child left for college several years ago. As a mother, I want nothing more than for my children to launch into their future with excitement and confidence but at the same time, I feel apprehensive about the next phase of life for me. As a single woman, I have



an opportunity to make some real changes in my life. I struggle with questions such as: “Do I move?”, “Do I travel more?”, or “Do I work more?” I know it’s important to stay with the questions and not settle on an answer right away. I will need time and lots of self care. For many, self care during child rearing years fell to the bottom of the list, so now would be a good time to focus on your own needs and wants.

What else can we do to get through this difficult process?

Take time for self reflection — long before children depart. We all know it’s coming, so it’s best to emotionally prepare and not stick your head in the sand. My youngest daughter will leave in about a year and I started emotionally preparing for her departure last year. During self reflection, you will likely experience a range of emotions and thoughts. The key is to allow yourself to feel and think without judgment or pressuring yourself to come up with a solution. This is referred to as mindful meditation. Your children leaving is not a problem, so there is no solution. Transition periods are a natural part of life.

Keep in touch — even though they are off on their own (sort of), they will still appreciate texts and occasional video chats (thank goodness for technology). You will need to know your child; some may want more contact than others and it’s necessary to respect their desires. It’s also important for parents to remind themselves that their children are starting a new chapter, and lack of contact from their children should not be taken personally. You do not want to add to their emotional stress by making them feel responsible for your emotions.

Seek support from family, friends, or counselors. It’s normal to feel concerned, especially if you are not sure if your child can function independently. You may have strongly identified with your role as a parent and you will have a difficult time adjusting to an empty nest. Also, your child may benefit from support and reassurance before and after they leave.

Consider new possibilities. You may be thinking about going off in an entirely new direction, or finally enroll in that painting class you’ve been thinking about. It can also be

an opportunity for you and your partner to focus more on each other.

Converse with other parents who have gone through or who are experiencing this transition. If you feel you cannot shake your feelings of sadness or you’re finding it hard to move on, it may be time to speak with a counselor.

Although empty nest syndrome affects both parents, it primarily impacts women because it’s a time when women typically experience a shift in roles. Many women have spent the childrearing years being all things to all people — endless caretaking, doing, and hustling, always making others a priority. It can be difficult for many women to stop “caretaking.” The reality is that our children still need us when they leave home. They need us emotionally, and we still need them.

Role shifts are challenging. Stay open to possibilities. Remember to listen to yourself, your intuition, your needs, and to reflect, rejoice in your successes, and honor your mistakes. It’s important for our children to be assured that we will be okay when they leave. Many children worry about their parents, especially if they see a parent as unhappy or unfulfilled.

A benefit of being an empty nester is watching our children mature and gain independence as we learn how to interact with them in more of an adult-like manner. You will also have more time to focus on your own needs. There are endless possibilities: it can be a time for play, a time to change jobs/careers, a time to make a difference, and a time *for you*.

We can’t turn back time, but we can march forward with honesty, self compassion, courage, and an openness to what may come next. We don’t need to know exactly what the future holds, but we do need to start reflecting and start having this very important conversation with ourselves, our friends, and our family. Every transition period is a fresh start with an opportunity for growth. Now I’m getting excited, but if you ask me tomorrow, I may be sad again. ❖