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Finding the Best in an Empty Nest

A couple of years after Sheryl Lynn and Curtis Johnson sent their younger son off to college, they had a slightly awkward phone conversation with him. “Connor called and said, ‘I think I’m going to come home for spring break,’” Curtis recalls. “But we had to tell him, ‘No, you’re not.’”

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“Connor called and said, ‘I think I’m going to come home for spring break,’” Curtis recalls. “But we had to tell him, ‘No, you’re not.’”

It turns out that Connor had forgotten a small detail: His parents had recently sold the family home in Moorpark, California, and moved into a recreational vehicle on a nearby avocado ranch they’d purchased years earlier. Curtis, 59, an executive pastor at a large church, and Sheryl Lynn, 56, a Realtor, ended up living in that RV for more than two years while building their new dream home there.

In other words, once they had an empty nest, they flew out of it themselves—and into a new phase of life.

“We didn’t sit around and mope,” Curtis says. While the couple loved raising their sons, now ages 28 and 25, they were excited to “pursue the things we wanted to pursue,” he says.

Not everyone leaps into the empty nest years with such gusto. Many shed at least a few tears when their last child leaves home. Some struggle with the adjustment. Still, experts say full-blown *empty nest syndrome*—characterized by depression, loneliness, and yearning for the lost joys of the child-rearing years—is more a media invention than a widespread reality.

Another common belief is that marriages fall apart after kids leave home.

It's true that some do. But studies show that couples who stay together actually tend to get happier once they have the house to themselves.

Still, happy or sad, the transition is big. And, experts say, it pays to do some planning and soul-searching before the day you find yourself sitting in a quiet house and wondering, "What's next?"

Time for You to Take a Back Seat

More than a decade ago, Natalie Caine went to a meeting at her daughter's high school. The headmaster wanted parents to think about the fact that they "were all about to become empty nesters," Caine said.

That reality knocked her back on her heels. "I turned around to my friends and said, 'If I start a support group, will you come?'"

Caine, 68, who trained as a speech therapist, has since made a new career of helping others manage life transitions. She speaks about the challenges and joys of empty nesting at spas, corporate retreats, and other settings.

Along the way, she's learned that most parents still in the thick of carpooling, curfews, and family vacations are not very focused on what comes next. But they should be, she says, especially as children move through high school.

Among the essential tasks, she says, is starting to let go. "It's time for you to begin to take a back seat," she says. "Let your child lead more." That means cheering them on and offering support, rather than telling them what to do. It means commiserating, rather than criticizing, when they make mistakes.

Equally essential, she says, is to think about "what matters to you now," and to prepare for new possibilities.

Susan Gross, a career coach and human resource manager who lives in Cape Coral, Florida, agrees: "Wouldn't it be beautiful if parents would take a minute to say, 'Life is about to get crazy. What am I doing to prepare myself?'"

Gross, 58, who is the mother of sons ages 24 and 26, is the co-author of a book of advice and personal stories called *The Empty Nest Companion*. She says she was not prepared when her first son left for college.

"I fell apart dropping off my child" at a college just a few miles from home, she says. She remembers thinking, "Life will never be the same; this is the beginning of the end."

But what if "never the same" isn't so bad? Gross and her co-author, Briget Bishop, 62, a professional life coach who lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, agree with Caine that the best way to deal with change is to embrace it.

Do you have a social life built around kids' activities? Maybe it's time to make some new friends. Do you have a job you kept because the hours worked with parenting? Maybe you could think about a new career. Did you leave the workforce? Maybe it's time to get some training and jump back in. Have you let physical fitness, old hobbies, or spiritual practices fall away in the chaos of family life?

Guess what? You are about to have another chance.

"It's a chance to explore parts of you that went dormant," Caine says.

What About Your Marriage?

One of the things that can go dormant, especially in our kid-centric times, is marital bliss. While it's true that most marriages improve once the kids move along, the years when your children are in high school are prime time for assessing the state of your union, says Daniel Dashnaw, a marriage and family therapist with Couples Therapy, Inc., in Boston.

The key to navigating any predictable transition as a couple—whether it's retirement or empty nesting—is talking about it for at least five years in advance, he says.

"You have to start envisioning everything, from what you will do to where you will live," he says. Couples with a "shared dream," vividly imagined, he says, are more likely to invest in making that dream a reality.

Of course, some couples will discover that they don't share the same vision.

At that point, some "decide they will stay together for the sake of the kids, then get a divorce" once the kids leave home, Dashnaw says. But, he says, that strategy often backfires, because parents underestimate the effect a divorce has on grown children. Some come to believe "their whole childhood was a lie," he says.

Dashnaw urges couples to work on their issues, to divorce only for "hard reasons," and then to be honest with children, no matter what their ages are. He stresses that honesty does not mean using your grown children as sounding boards for your complaints about your spouse or ex-spouse.

For parents who make it through the transition, the key to reigniting or keeping the spark alive is novelty, Dashnaw says. "It's very important to have novel experiences together," he says, to build emotional bonds.

And the new experiences don't have to be big exotic vacations or cross-country moves. "It can be trying miniature golf," he says. "It can be going to a play if you always go to movies. It can be going to a rock concert if you usually go to symphonies."

Caine agrees. She suggests couples explore a new neighborhood in their town or a new aisle in their favorite bookstore.

For Curtis and Sheryl Lynn Johnson, the couple who built a new home soon after their children moved out, part of the fun of the empty nest is the ability to take laid-back vacations with friends. For each of the past six years, they've headed out with another couple—CAPTRUST Financial Advisor Mark Davis and his wife, Tricia—for an autumn empty-nesters trip.

"We do what we like to do," Curtis says. "We like to walk. We like to eat. We like to sleep. We like a nice glass of wine."

And, yes, the couples do discuss their kids, Curtis and Sheryl Lynn say, but only for about one day out of the week.

Change Is Inevitable

An empty nest does not mean the end of the parent-offspring relationship, especially in our age of

easy texting and cheap phone calls.

But it does change that relationship. Ideally, adult children become masters of their own lives, and parents take back seats. That can be tough at times, Gross says. Even today, she says, "I miss my daily routines of seeing my kids after school every day and knowing what they are doing."

But it helps, she says, that her younger son often calls her on his way home from work and shares news about his brother. The brothers, both launched on careers, own a home together. It also helps, she says, that she's made her own life in a new community, where she lives with her longtime partner, and has made new friends at her synagogue and elsewhere.

"Sometimes routines can be stifling," she says. "As long as you understand that change is inevitable, you can navigate this in a positive and exciting way."

Her co-author, Bishop, says she struggled after her two daughters, now in their early 30s, left home around the same time that her marriage fell apart. In an essay in the book, she remembers walking every Saturday morning with two friends going through similar issues: "We talked about our sadness and our difficult journey for the first two miles, then we turned around and took turns praying for one another during the second two miles."

Today, Bishop is happily single and lives near both daughters, one of whom has two children. She has found purpose and meaning in her family life and volunteer work. Her message for anyone struggling with the empty nest: "You're not done yet. There's life out there, and you have to go get it."



EMPTY NESTING ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

The empty nest isn't what it used to be. For better or worse, the experience of being a parent to young adults has changed dramatically in recent decades, according to research reviewed by Karen Fingerman, a professor of human development and family sciences and co-director of the Texas Aging and Longevity Center at The University of Texas at Austin. In a research paper published in 2017, Fingerman and her colleagues said that when compared with their own parents and grandparents, today's parents of young adults can expect:



More frequent contact with their offspring. In surveys conducted several decades ago, just half of parents said they had contact with a grown child at least once a week. In more recent surveys, most parents report contact at least once a week with at least one grown child, and half report daily contact. Cheaper phone calls, air travel, and new technologies, like texting, have made staying in touch easier.



More spending on grown children (and not just for college). Today's parents spend an average of 10 percent of their income on grown children, rivaling amounts spent by parents of young children and outpacing amounts spent on teenagers. By some estimates, more than a third of the financial costs of parenting occur after children reach age 18. And parents from the higher socioeconomic levels provide the most support.



More emotional and practical support of their children. Parents help young adults with everything from making doctors' appointments to filling out tax forms. Parents also are more available than in the past to offer emotional support about everything from romantic difficulties to job woes. When they become grandparents, many offer parenting advice and child care.



More children who stay in the nest—or come back. In 2015, young adults in the U.S. were more likely to live with their parents than with a romantic partner. As of 2016, 15 percent of 25- to 35-year-olds were living in their parents' homes. That's up from 10 percent in 2000 and 8 percent in 1964, according to a separate report from the Pew Research Center.

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