



King County

EMPTY NEST, NEW DIRECTIONS



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Evaluating Your Lifestyle After the Kids Move Out

The transition to an empty nest is often a time of uncertainty. You, like many empty nesters, may be asking such questions as “Who am I?” “What gives my life meaning?” and “Where do I go from here?” Careful evaluation of the many aspects of your life can help you to find the answers. Here are some areas to think about.

Housing and locale

Moving may be the last thing on your mind right now. But it’s important to consider when you’re in good health and have the time to review all your options. Your current residence may no longer feel the same without the kids, or perhaps it’s too difficult or expensive to maintain. Perhaps you stayed put so your kids wouldn’t have to change schools. Is there somewhere else you’d prefer to live? Maybe you have family or friends you’d like to be closer to. Do you have access to the type of recreational and social opportunities you see yourself enjoying in the coming years? Do you need to consider caregiving for your parents?

Changing jobs or going back to work

Are you in a rut at work? Have you reached a plateau in your career? The empty nest transition is a good time to weigh all your options. Many empty nesters have fewer financial obligations once children leave home, providing increased freedom and flexibility to change careers. If staying put is what you want, perhaps you can negotiate flexibility in hours to accommodate new interests and time for yourself.

Social network

You may have been so involved in your children’s activities and friendships that you’ve neglected your own social life. Now’s the time to make new friends and develop relationships. Being surrounded by people you enjoy can boost your self-esteem and empower you to achieve personal goals. Such a support network is useful when you need to make tough decisions or in times of crisis. Consider, too, that people who lack intimate relationships are more vulnerable to physical ailments and depression.

Seeking out new friends requires effort, however. Don’t wait for someone to approach you at church, a club meeting, or group outing, for example. Brush up on your communication skills so that you can ease yourself into casual conversation and be an active listener.

Hobbies and recreational interests

Finding ways to spend free time can be a challenge when you’re not used to taking time for yourself. You may try several things before finding an interest that brings meaning and pleasure to your life. And chances are, you’ll have more than one interest. If you’re married, consider activities that you and your spouse can enjoy together as well as those that you can pursue alone.

Volunteering

Volunteering is not only a great way to make a difference, spending time to help others will also provide a feeling of connectedness and sense of purpose, boost your self-esteem and heighten your emotional well-being. Volunteer opportunities are plentiful. Following your own interests will help ensure your time spent is meaningful. Consider opportunities in youth organizations; animal shelters; hospice, nursing homes and hospitals; civic organizations; museums; libraries; schools; or places of worship.

Physical health

Do you eat right, exercise? As you approach the golden years, you do not want health concerns to keep you from staying active and doing the things you enjoy. A healthy lifestyle not only improves your physical

ability and overall condition, it also decreases your risk for injury and many serious diseases, like heart disease, obesity, cancer, some types of diabetes and musculoskeletal problems. People who are physically fit also enjoy feelings of mental well-being and cope well with emotional stress.

By Christine P. Martin
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Preparing for an Empty Nest: Easing the Transition

All parents think ahead to the day when their children will leave home. Some do so in anticipation, especially if the adolescent and teen years were particularly challenging. Others dread losing their children to adulthood and the unavoidable change in the child-parent relationship. No matter what your expectations, however, taking steps to prepare for an empty nest will help you and your child maintain emotional balance through this bittersweet transition.

Preparing yourself by preparing your children

When the time comes for your child to leave home, your own anxiety will be eased if you know your child is prepared for living life without daily parental advice and intervention. Here are some strategies that you can begin when your child is young that will prepare your child for life without Mom and Dad.

Give responsibilities and set expectations, such as doing chores, being punctual, and keeping you posted of whereabouts.

Allow your child to make decisions. Your teen should be allowed to decide what extracurricular activities and interests to pursue, whether or not to take on a part-time job or even what college to attend.

Let your child make mistakes, which often present great learning opportunities.

Make sure your child understands money, including how to set a budget and stick by it and how to use a checking account and credit card responsibly.

Let your child know through words of encouragement and praise that you think he is ready for life away from home.

Self-preparation

No parent can predict how he will handle the many losses associated with a child leaving home. Although denying feelings of sadness and emptiness is unhealthy, preparing yourself for an empty nest will help you to avoid being overwhelmed and paralyzed by such feelings. Consider these ideas:

- Realize that you are not only a parent, but also a spouse, a friend, a co-worker and a person with interests outside your family. Invest time in all your roles to maintain life balance.
- Remind yourself of what good things are in store, such as the chance to pursue new interests, time to revitalize your marriage and opportunity for self-growth. Studies suggest that the transition to an empty nest is linked to an increase in parents' psychological well-being, marital happiness and life satisfaction.
- If you're married, nurture your marriage. If loving and healthy, your marriage can be a source of stability and comfort during this time of transition. Doing so is an effort; especially when the demands of child rearing seem to deplete all your energy and time.
- Plan for the day of departure by picturing how you would like the day to unfold. Build into the schedule an opportunity for family time—perhaps a celebratory family breakfast or dinner after the move.
- Agree on a way to regularly communicate with your child. Consider how, how often and where.

By Christine P. Martin
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Empty Nest Syndrome: Adjusting Takes Some Time

If you are like many women, the everyday care and lives of your children were a primary concern of yours for many years. It's the natural progression of life—your children will grow older and eventually move away to be on their own. Even though you've known this was coming, now that it's here, you're not sure how to handle the variety of feelings you are experiencing.

When your children leave your home, or nest, you may feel a sense of freedom, be happy to have privacy again, and have more time for yourself. At the same time, you miss having them around and doing things for them on a regular basis, and you probably worry for their safety. All of these feelings are normal although they may be stronger at times and not so apparent at others. If you find that you cannot accept the feelings of loss or worry, or they are overwhelming on a daily basis, you might want to seek professional counseling. Talk with your doctor or clergy person about your feelings so that you can work through them together.

Pursuing new opportunities

You can take action and turn this new period in your life into one of enrichment and fulfillment instead of loss. Now is the time for you to do for you. Think about the things you have always been interested in but couldn't pursue because your time was taken up with the children. Maybe you want to go back to school and get that degree that was put on hold, or you might want to study something brand new. Whatever you choose to do, it should be something that you want to do, not something someone else wants you to do or something you feel obligated to do.

This might be the time to go back to work, if you left your job to spend more time with your children. If you are married, talk with your husband about your feelings. Together you can discuss your options. Going back to the type of job you had before the kids, exploring a new career, or volunteering your time in various ways are just a few options.

This is also a good time to rekindle your relationship with your husband. So often couples get so involved in taking care of the children that they let their personal relationship dwindle. If this has happened in your life, now is the time to work on developing a relationship with your husband that is more like the one you had before the children arrived.

Don't feel pressured to decide right away what you want to do now that the kids are gone. Take some time to think things through and experiment with a few ideas. You can rest assured that just because your children have moved out of the house, they certainly have not moved out of your life. So in many ways, the nest is not really empty—the living arrangements have just been modified.

By Tanya Lochridge
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How an Empty Nest Can Change Your Marriage

After the last of Debbie and Allen's 3 children left home, the couple stared at each other from across the dinner table, each wondering, "Who is this person?" Like many couples, Debbie and Allen's marriage had been so child-focused for so many years that the transition to an empty nest was particularly disruptive to their relationship. Not only was each questioning their own identity and purpose now that parental roles were changing, they questioned how the absence of children would impact their marriage.

Children's affect on marital satisfaction

As worthwhile and gratifying as parenting can be, studies repeatedly show that children negatively affect marital satisfaction. Let's face it; children take time and energy and cause conflict. Couples focus on family concerns and often neglect the marriage. When children finally leave home, many empty nesters realize:

- They no longer know each other.
- They are no longer compatible.
- Their marriage lacks vitality.
- They no longer hold affection for one another.
- They no longer know how to relate.
- They have attained different levels of personal growth, perhaps causing one partner to resent the other.
- Issues that were of concern before having children are now resurfacing.

Faced with more time together, empty-nest couples are commonly challenged by such issues as how to resolve conflict, how to communicate, intimacy, health concerns, what to do for fun and recreation, how much time to spend together and alone, money, aging parents, and retirement planning.

Opportunity for change

Although this picture looks bleak, research links increased marital happiness to the transition to an empty nest. Change provides opportunity for marital growth. Plus, the one thing couples have going for them at this stage of life more than ever before is that they have the know-how and experience to confront challenges and come out ahead. For these reasons, the empty nest presents the perfect opportunity to repair weak marriages or take pleasure in healthy ones.

To deal with changes faced as individuals and as a couple, however, each partner needs to spend significant time in self-exploration. Accepting oneself, defining needs and setting expectations and goals are necessary before individuals can work as a couple to adjust the marriage.

Partner-focused marriage

Shifting focus away from the children and onto each other can be a challenge. Each partner must respect the other's needs and goals and be willing to support each other's efforts. Doing so requires acceptance of each other, readiness to move beyond past marital disappointments and overlook individual flaws, adjust one's own life to accommodate the other's, willingness to communicate and work through conflict, and enthusiasm to take on new roles and responsibilities.

By Christine P. Martin
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Managing Change With Resilience

Resilience is the ability to return to the original state or form after being stretched, compressed or bent. It is the ability to recover from adversity. Needless to say, developing resilience is a highly desirable quality in today's ever-changing world. In his book *Resilience: A Change for the Better*, Daryl R. Conner outlines 5 characteristics of resilient people: positive, focused, flexible, organized and proactive.

Positive

Resilient people are optimists. They display a self-assurance that is based on their view that life is complex but filled with many opportunities. Here are some tips to help you to become more positive:

- Maintain a list of daily accomplishments, no matter how small, related to your change initiatives.
- Accept compliments from others with a genuine "thank you" instead of discounting them.
- Concentrate on becoming better at a new task rather than perfecting it.
- Practice using positive "self-talk" phrases, such as "this too shall pass" or "I will only ask myself to do the best I can rather than never to make any mistakes."

Focused

The focused characteristic of resilient people has to do with having a clear vision of what they want to achieve. Focused people take the time to write down their goals, objectives, obstacles and the strategies for solving problems they face. Here are some ideas to help you become more focused:

- **Visualize yourself as you would like to be 1 year from now after successfully making the transition through the change.** Put a sign or picture on your bathroom mirror or desk to remind you of your vision.
- **Set specific short-, medium- and long-range goals for yourself relating to your change initiative.** Base your goals firmly on your personal values.
- **Ask someone you trust to review your goals and give you feedback and suggestions** on how you can further target the steps needed for successfully making the transition.

Flexible

Flexible people are those who demonstrate a special pliability or adaptability when responding to uncertainty. This resilient characteristic requires that you identify and compartmentalize your fears when facing new and intimidating situations. Here are some suggestions that may help you to develop flexibility:

- Swap sides in a discussion where you disagree with someone.
- Identify someone who typically approaches things differently than you do and ask them for input on a particularly difficult aspect of your change initiative. Listen to their ideas without interrupting them or passing judgment.
- Drive a new and unfamiliar route to a store or a friend's house. Make note of what you see that's different from your usual route.

Organized

Organized people have the knack for developing structured approaches to managing ambiguity. They creatively plan, carefully set priorities and engage in deliberate action steps in order to accomplish tasks. Here are some tips to help you become more organized:

- Purchase and use a day planner.
- Take a few moments to think through and list the key steps you need to take to accomplish a task before you tackle it.

- Put pieces of paperwork and important information in clearly marked files and put them in an accessible place.
- Break down a problem, any problem, into smaller pieces—then tackle the easiest piece first.

Proactive

The proactive characteristic of resilient people means that they engage change rather than simply defend against it. They are not reactive. They take the offense rather than the defense. They take calculated risks and then apply lessons learned from past experiences to similar challenges facing them. Here are some suggestions that may help you in further developing your ability to be proactive:

- Develop plans for managing the worst-case scenario that might result from the change.
- Practice assessing the risks about a change initiative by listing all of the pros and cons you can think of. Ask yourself: What if...?

Developing these resiliency characteristics takes time and practice. Give yourself the gift of time and reward yourself generously for your successes and efforts.

By Karen S. Dickason, LCSW, CEAP
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Finding Relaxation Through a Hobby

Working, going to school, raising children, fighting traffic ... trying to strike a balance in life can sometimes seem overwhelming, but finding time to relax and release tension plays a critical role in daily life. Relaxation can help reduce fatigue, improve performance, raise a person's pain threshold and make it easier to manage stress. A hobby can provide this outlet and improve both your mental and physical health.

Health benefits of hobbies

People should make hobbies a top priority, some university researchers say. Making time to do the things you enjoy can significantly affect your mental health by reducing anxiety and depression, and helping you keep a positive attitude.

Stress reduction also affects physical health. An Ohio State University study demonstrated how stress slows the healing of wounds. Stress has also been shown to affect heart disease risk factors and behaviors, such as overeating, inactivity, smoking, high blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Research has found that stress can weaken the immune system and make a person more susceptible to infectious diseases and illnesses such as asthma, psoriasis, cancer, multiple sclerosis, inflammatory bowel disease and rheumatoid arthritis.

Hobbies can have long-term health benefits. For example, researchers from Case Western Reserve University discovered that keeping active through hobbies such as gardening, woodworking or completing jigsaw puzzles might help prevent Alzheimer's disease. Less active people were 3 times more likely to have the debilitating disease, the study showed. More passive activities, such as watching television, probably will not have the same health benefits as an engaging hobby, researchers believe.

Experiment with several activities

If you have a hobby, make time each day or each week to enjoy it. If you do not have one, try several until you find an activity you like. Hobbies can be tailored to any interest or budget. It is easy to experiment or find others with similar interests.

Websites offer information and fellowship for people interested in everything from bird watching to ham radio to soap making. Some online services allow people to join club sites or start their own. Community centers, parks and schools often offer art courses or other activities at night and on the weekends. Consider taking an aerobics class or starting an exercise routine with a friend. Or, try finding a club in your area that could foster your interests. Ski clubs, book clubs and other groups often meet regularly and schedule activities.

Volunteering is another way to take a break while helping others. Some communities have volunteer coordinators and many newspapers list volunteer opportunities. You also can ask about volunteering at a place that appeals to you, such as a hospital, animal shelter or nursing home.

Learning to relax may take a while. But finding time for a hobby can help you stay healthy, both physically and mentally.

By Kristen Knight
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Resources

Print resources

10 Great Dates for Empty Nesters by David Arp and Claudia Arp. Zondervan, 2004.

The Empty Nest: 31 Parents Tell the Truth About Relationships, Love, and Freedom After the Kids Fly the Coop edited by Karen Stabiner. Hyperion, 2008.

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The Parental Experience at Midlife edited by Carol D. Ryff and Marsha Mailick Seltzer. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

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Internet resources

American Association of Retired Persons, www.aarp.org

American Diabetes Association, www.diabetes.org

American Heart Association, www.heart.org

American Psychological Association, www.apa.org