

## **Coping with empty nest when the kids clear out**

Here's how to accept your feelings and find constructive ways to fill the void

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### **Saying goodbye to college-bound kids**

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Peggy Nardini was so sad when her twins left for college last year that she kept the doors to their rooms closed. When she recently dropped them off for their second year away, she felt the same pull at her heart.

"That initial moment when you give them that hug goodbye, when you walk away from the dorm and back to the car without them — that was awfully hard," said Nardini, 48, a secretary in Madrid, Iowa.

Her son and daughter go to different colleges about two hours away from home. "You want to teach your kids to fly out of the nest, but you don't want them to actually do it."

What can parents do when children leave the nest? The house is suddenly quiet, the vibrancy of children gone. The days seem empty without soccer games, school plays and bake sales. The job you've been doing every day for 18 years is over.

### **Here's how to cope:**

Accept your feelings: It's natural to feel a sense of loss, whether you are married, single, a career woman or a stay-at-home mom or dad, said Natalie Caine, founder of Empty Nest Support Services.

"Parents feel a lot of guilt and shame about really crying," she said. "My child isn't dead, they are not in the service. We're just saying goodbye.' The word to drop is 'just.' Who wouldn't cry when you love someone and have to hug them goodbye at the dorm?"

Besides the closeness and connection with your children, you are also mourning the passing of an era, said Arthur Kovacs, a psychologist in Santa Monica, Calif. You are no longer young parents raising kids.

See this as an opportunity: Set some goals as a couple and as an individual, said Thomas Olkowski, clinical psychologist in Centennial, Colo. Are there things you want to do now that the kids are gone? Places you want to go, things you want to learn? Remember that you are an adult who deserves to have some fun, he said.

Single mom Jackie Silver, 50, of Tampa, Fla., said she is moving to New York. Her son started college this year. "Being an empty nester, the world is my oyster now," said Silver, an anti-aging and beauty expert. "I'm excited to see what's next."

Rediscover yourself: You have been defined by the role of parent for so long. Caine suggests asking yourself: Who are you beyond being a mother or a father? Who did you want to be before you got married?

"What naturally had to go dormant to raise a child?" she said. "Let's wake up those dormant parts."

Nardini does scrapbooking and reads a lot more books. She and her husband go to dinner together more often.

Be active and try something new so there is some energy and enthusiasm, said Lisa Tager, lead clinician for the Family Resource Center, part of the Community Health Centers of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Kids leaving is a sign that you are reaching the middle or end of your life, she said.

Give yourself some love: Plan some TLC once a week, whether it's a massage, a pedicure, a golf game or meeting someone for dinner, said Caine.

"Treat yourself like you would treat a friend who was feeling off balance, sad, a little bit lonely," she said.

Fill the void: Kovacs recommends stay-at-home moms especially do something heartfelt and important, such as volunteering or going back to school to get a degree.

Single parents also need to find something else really precious and sustaining, he said. They are more likely than couples to cling to their children once they are gone. For them, raising children alone becomes such a passionate project in their lives, he said.

"There's a real sense of confusion and loss and just puzzlement," said Kovacs. "What now am I to make of my life?"

Reconnect as a couple: Research shows that marital quality improves once children leave the nest, said Laura Kastner, a psychologist and co-author of "The Launching Years: Strategies for Parenting from Senior Year to College Life." The stress of raising children is no longer there.

But couples who were "biding their time" are likely to face trouble, she said.

Find things you like to do together — riding bikes, gardening, she said. However, don't feel pressure to do this right away. It's OK to drift for a while.

Let the kids lead: Leave much of the calling to them, said Caine. They are trying to become more independent. If you are really aching because you haven't heard from them, Caine said, ask them for what you need (a once a week phone call, for example).

Nardini said texting has been her saving grace. She is able to keep in touch with her children (her daughter calls more often than her son) without being intrusive.

Reach out to others: Nardini said she started renewing her adult friendships when her children started looking at colleges. She was used to a busy schedule; her son played five sports and her daughter played four.

"You lose this community you have had for years, so there is a grieving," said Caine. "You are losing a social connection."

For singles, go out and meet new people, whether it's through a book club, church, a singles organization or the hiking club, said Olkowski.

When to seek help: Be aware of the symptoms and signs of clinical depression, said Tager. If it's been six months and you are still feeling sad, crying and hopeless, consider seeking professional help.