Adapting to an empty nest when your children move out

You've changed the diapers, dealt with childhood demands, made it through the tumultuous teens and maybe even provided a drop-in centre for your young adults and their transient friends. The moment you've been waiting for, or secretly dreading, has finally arrived: Your kids are ready to spread their wings and fly the coop.



While many people are anxious to be free of the emotional, financial and time commitments of parenthood, many more have trouble letting go. By understanding the range of emotions you may go through and learning to handle the transition positively, you'll discover new ways to fill that empty nest.

What is empty nest syndrome?

Empty Nest Syndrome comes in many shapes and sizes. Common symptoms include a loss of purpose, depression and a feeling of identity loss when grown children leave the family home.

A short flight

Empty Nest Syndrome is not as common as it was before, perhaps because more young adults are choosing to stay at home, so you may not want to change that new spare bedroom into a library just yet. In fact, in 2006, Statistics Canada found 44 per cent of 20 to 29 year-olds still living with their parents.

Whether it's due to difficult job markets, high housing costs or later marriages, children are returning to their parents' homes in their twenties and thirties in increasing numbers—or are leaving at an older age. Like it or not, this may mean you'll have more time to prepare (or anticipate) your child's launch into independent living.

Maintaining a full life

It's natural to feel a sense of sadness and loss when a child leaves home. You may worry you'll lose that special relationship with your son or daughter, or fear you'll be bored with all your new-found free time. But this transition can be truly exciting and liberating: Finally, you'll have the time and focused energy to explore or rediscover your own goals and interests. You may also find that your relationship with your kids actually improves once they've left the home. For more tips on thriving in an empty nest, consider:

Celebrate success. Take pride in the fact that you've prepared your son or daughter for this major life step, and that your child is now ready to go out in the world and prove him or herself as a responsible individual.

Get involved. Reinvest your free time in volunteering, work or that class you've always wanted to take. These activities can help alleviate Empty Nest symptoms by offering a sense of involvement and purpose distinct from your role as a parent. Take this opportunity to be selfish and explore your own goals and interests.

Stay connected. One of the hardest parts of the transition to an empty nest is feeling a sense of loss of communication, or that you will miss out on your son or daughter's day-to-day life. Modern technology has brought communication tools that make it easier than ever to stay in touch. E-mail, instant messaging and social media outlets are great tools for keeping up with the kids. Remember, though, to leave kids space to explore their independence. Arrange a time to chat once or twice a week and—if you can't resist—send some fun, brief e-mails periodically about what's happening at home.

Reinvest in friendships. Now that there are fewer people to factor into your schedule, it's easier to make plans for getting together with friends and family you may have neglected or lost touch with over the years.

Schedule a reunion with school friends, visit your relatives or call up an old colleague and arrange to meet for lunch.

Reignite a relationship. Being alone as a couple for the first time in years can be a revealing experience. Many partners find a renewal in their sex life and in their relationship as whole as they rediscover each other. But what if this new-found alone time reveals a feeling of redundancy in the relationship? Becoming empty nesters is a big shift that can cause you to re-examine your commitment and feelings. If you find yourself arguing with your partner more or are plagued by feelings of apathy, boredom or disdain for each other, it may be time to seek out relationship support.

Get back in the game. If you're single, you may have made sacrifices along the way that have kept you from seeking out new friendships or even a new romantic relationship.

Look at expanding your circle of friends either through a club, activity or even a dating service. Start mixing and mingling and see what new opportunities arise.

Get help. If Empty Nest Syndrome is accompanying other setbacks in your life, it may be too much to deal with on your own. Consider seeking support from a professional.

Making the transition to an empty nest can be tough, but it can also be an exciting time in your life as you explore interests of your own and support your child's venture into the real world. Though the dynamic between you and your son or daughter may change, it can mark a positive beginning for your relationship—one that allows you and your child's lives to soar to new and exhilarating heights.