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## Empty Nesting, What's Next?

Russell Morris, clinical/school psychologist and adjunct lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania led our discussion. Below are takeaways from Russell and the parenting adults in attendance.

### News You Can Use

Empty Nesting is not a clinical disorder or diagnosis, but a term used to describe a transitional period in life that includes loneliness and loss, but also new opportunities.

- Empty Nesting is often found to be harder on women and stay-at-home parents.
- Clear distinctions exist between empty nesting of the last child versus the only child.
- There is a qualitatively different empty nest experience with single parenting and couple parenting.
- Socialized stereotypes often make launching a son different than a daughter.
- Symptoms of Empty Nesting/Empty Nest Syndrome may include: sadness, a sense of loss, loneliness, distress, worry and anxiety, loss of purpose, depression, a potential increase in marital tension; if your symptoms rise to a high level, referral to a psychologist may be beneficial.
- During the pandemic, there was increased family time and fewer opportunities for teens to experience time away/independence before leaving home. This has made the empty nest transition much more challenging for both parents and children.

### Coping Strategies

Strategies suggested to deal with Empty Nesting:

- Remain in contact with your child.
- Find ways to refill your sense of joy and purpose: hobbies, travel, career goals, relationships with family and friends.
- Exercise and develop mindfulness practices.
- Change your mindset from "debilitate" to "empower."
- Find a community to lean on and keep connected.
- Prepare early-- often parents are so busy preparing their child that they forget to prepare themselves.
- Know that while your relationship with your child has changed, you never stop being a parent. It is a lifetime job!

## **Parenting an Older Child**

It is important to continuously evolve as a parent. However, parenting adults sometimes struggle to transition as quickly as their child needs. Here are some tips for parenting an older child:

- Switch from thinking of yourself as the provider and protector to mentor, consultant, and friend.
- Negotiate contact times with your young adult and share the type of communication you'd like. "I'm only asking for a minute or two, and it doesn't have to be every day." Consider that your child wants and needs this newfound freedom.
- Apologize for mistakes that you've made, for things that you've done or not done.

## **When You Notice Your Young Adult Making Mistakes**

Mistake making is part of the learning process. However, It's often difficult for parenting adults to avoid jumping in. Below are some suggestions from experienced parenting adults for navigating these challenges:

- Narrate out loud. Say things like, "Sometimes I worry if I prepared you enough," or, "I worry if you are doing ok and if I did enough."
- Try to share your experience, not your advice.
- If you want to share advice, ask permission, and call it "perspective."
- Share your advice as a story.
- Pick your battles.
- Keep in mind, when young adults overcome obstacles independently, they own their success.

## **When Your Young Adult Comes Home for School Break**

It is important to help your child re-navigate to a house where they no longer primarily reside. Consider the following tips to help with this:

- Remember that while your child was gone they had many new experiences and grew so much. They are not the same as they were a few months ago. And neither is the parenting adult!
- Ask your young adult to help you understand their new world.
- Find the balance between being honest about how you feel when they are away and burdening them. Share that you've missed your child, but that you want them to be happy and have fun where they are.
- Get clear on your own sense of values and boundaries- what will and won't you allow under your roof. Communicate them clearly, explaining that things may be different at school, but these are the expectations at home.

## Unexpected Benefits

While your child leaving home can produce a sense of sadness, parenting adults may also experience happiness and relief. While these feelings sometimes don't get as much attention, they are completely normal. It is important to remember some of the unexpected benefits of Empty Nesting:

- More time and attention for relationships with friends and family members
- A chance to accept experiences that will define you as more than just a parent
- An opportunity to rekindle your relationship with a partner
- The possibility of forming a different, but stronger relationship with your child- without the constant stress of daily parenting, you may find it is easier to get along!

We recognize that we are all at a different place in our journey. Below are resources to continue our journey in this process:

- Join the "Grown and Flown" Facebook Group
- Read the book, [Doing Life With Your Adult Children](#)
- [Click Here](#) to watch a short video on the SpeakUp! Mindset: 7 key ideas to create a safe, inclusive, and non-judgmental community of support.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255)  
Getting help is the answer. Call for confidential 24/7 support if you or someone you know is considering suicide. You can call if you are feeling hopeless or if you are worried about a loved one; and they can guide you on how to get help. You are not alone.

If anyone has any additional questions or needs help connecting to resources, please email Erica Talley at [etalley@speakup.org](mailto:etalley@speakup.org)

Be well,

Martie Bernicker & The SpeakUp! Team

[www.speakup.org](http://www.speakup.org)

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