

Avoiding "Empty Nest" Syndrome

The chicks have grown, become independent, and left the nest. Momma (and sometimes Papa, too) is feeling lonely and depressed.

This is what the "empty nest" syndrome is all about. After spending years bringing up children - going to school events, hosting birthday parties, tending to colds - parents of young adult children suddenly seem to have a lot more time and a lot less company. For some parents, the newly found freedom when a child leaves for college, goes into the service, marries, or just decides to live on his or her own, can be exhilarating. While children are missed, parents have time to pursue their own interests, travel, and even go back to school. For other parents, a child's leaving the house is experienced as a tremendous loss. Some parents feel at "loose ends," others try to hold on to the same relationship with the child they had before, others find themselves feeling sad, useless and depressed.

The "empty nest" syndrome has usually affected more women than men. This is not surprising since until recently, a large number of women either never joined the workforce or left it in order to raise their children. Some never pursued higher education or acquired important job skills. In two-parent families, while mothers stayed at home, fathers developed careers and a life outside of the house.

Some women who have spent most of their adult years focused on the home find themselves divorced by the time their children are old enough to live on their own. Others have raised their children without a father present since the children were very young. In both instances, when children grow up and leave, Mother is all alone.

Now that more women are in the workforce, have found professions and not just jobs, and have moved to find greater satisfaction outside of the home, we may find that the "empty nest" syndrome will decrease overall or affect as many men as it does women. Whether you are a mother or a father, however, there are some things you can do to avoid or address the painful feelings that may arise when children go off to live their own lives.

- **Plan ahead.** If your children still young, you undoubtedly have already given thought to their future. So why not give thought to your own future as well? We all know that children will be leaving home at some point in their lives so it's not too soon to think about what *you* plan to do when the nest begins to empty.

If you are already working, think about what you hope to be doing in 10 to 15 years from now (this may seem like a long time; it will go a lot faster than you think). Do you want to be in the same job? In the same occupational area? Do you need to get more education or training in order to get where you want to go?

If so, you may not be able to get that advanced degree right now, but you can start to plan for it.

- **Build your self-esteem.** We all love that wonderful feeling we get when a child says, "I love you," hugs us, or proudly hands over that special gift made in school. Having kids is a great way to feel self-esteem. However, if your children are the main way you are deriving your feelings of self-esteem you can be in for trouble. Not only do those lovey-dovey youngsters seem a different species when they become adolescents and teens, you also will find that you are less and less the center of their universe. So what then? If you develop other areas of your life, you'll handle children's emotional growth and separation well. So it's very important that you develop your interests, extend your social life beyond your family, and find additional things to feel good about.
- **Develop your relationship with your spouse/partner.** If you are a two-parent family, take a close look at your relationship with your spouse or partner. When parents are busy with childrearing responsibilities they can forget to work on intimacy with a spouse/partner, or even avoid recognizing that the relationship is not working for either of you. Assuming the two of you will be together after the children have left, plan ahead and build your relationship.
- **Use your energy in your community.** Feeling useless? No one to cook for or drive to soccer games? Wrong. Even if you don't choose to work (for pay, that is) after the children have gone, there are multiple ways you can use your childrearing talents to help others. Do you like sports? Why not coach a local community team? Enjoy driving? Volunteer to drive older adults to shop or visit friends. Like to cook? Bake cookies or cakes to raise money for community projects.
- **Recognize that children need to separate from parents.** Emotional growth can be a painful and difficult process for some, but healthy adults need to build their own lives. Be proud of your children for developing and growing - even though this may mean you won't see them as often or even often at all. Strong parent-child relationships remain strong, even at a distance. Keep in touch through mail, e-mail and telephone calls - but don't overdo it.
- **Respect your children's choices.** Competing for attention with your son or daughter's new girlfriend or boyfriend is a ploy doomed to failure. You will end up alienating both and feel even worse than you do now. Healthy adults have enough emotional room for multiple relationships, and the more inclusive the circle the greater the success.
- **Get help if you need it.** If you find that your feelings of sadness or depression continue, you may want to consider professional help to move on

with your life. Speak with your health care professional or call your EAP for counseling. The better you feel about yourself, the easier it will be to live your own life while still keeping positive relationships with those former "chicks" you have raised.

The ACFC hopes that you found this information helpful. If you would like more information on pursuing adult learning, contact [Future Link](http://www.vz-futurelink.net) (www.vz-futurelink.net). If you would like to talk to someone about issues you are facing, contact **VZ-LIFE** at 800-845-0632.