

# Empty nest syndrome — how to change your life once the kids have left

It's time to reconnect with your partner, says Anna Maxted

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With their teenagers off to college or work, parents are left in an empty nest — and they're stricken. A recent survey found that [almost a third are drinking to blunt their pain](#). Some are overwhelming the cat or remaining child with attention. Others fear depression or report grief-like symptoms: bouts of sobbing, sleeplessness and panic attacks. A lot are finding it particularly hard after having had their chicks around them in lockdown. So how do we better adjust and cope?

If your primary feeling on your children leaving home is grief, you need to reframe your perspective, says Dr Shadi Shahnava, the head of family therapy at the Soke, a mental health and wellness centre in London, and an empty-nester herself. "Both my children have left. I never felt it was a loss — I felt it was a gain," she says. "Our duty as parents is to bring up children who can contribute to and be happy in society." If you've given them the ability, strength and confidence to be independent, "that's proof that you have done what you were supposed to do. It's a time of celebration."

It helps to focus on what your child, and you as parents, have achieved, to ask: “What is my ultimate wish — is it that my child is happy?” If you’re too wretched and needy, your child will sense that and feel guilt, Shahnavaaz says. “You’re bringing them down. These are the young adults we see who find it difficult to adapt to university. They can feel that their parents have a sense of loss, and that somehow they’re not allowed to cut the umbilical cord.”

- **Empty nest anxiety — I have it, do you? (Go on, admit it)**

Of course it’s normal to miss them. “I miss my girls terribly, but if they’re happy, I’m happy,” she says. If we know our absent children are happy but feel inordinate and persisting sadness, it’s likely there are other reasons relating to us as individuals or as a couple that need to be worked on.

“A lot of parents that I work with are very frightened of finding themselves alone with their partner,” Shahnavaaz says. Often this is because the focus of many parents is on their children, even in older adolescence. “When the children leave it’s, ‘Oh gosh, we forgot about us.’ ” These couples find the empty nest very difficult, she says. “They start questioning, ‘Do we still love each other? Do we have anything in common?’ ” That’s usually a positive sign — it tends to mean you’re interested.

More good news: while your interests may have changed, you may have new interests in common, it’s just that “you’ve forgotten to check in with each other. Now you have the space to show interest in each other again.”

While some couples attempt “rediscovery” and realise they no longer connect, in most cases they do, Shahnavaaz says. “There’s a lot they have built and shared in common. If they haven’t had conflict in the family or couple, in general they can reconnect quite quickly.”

Reconnecting certainly doesn’t mean doing everything together — just some things. “Make dinner times special. Try to eat together.” Part of adapting well is to ask what kind of routine you want now. It means being curious, chatting about your individual interests, not just about the children.

To make that leap to greater intimacy, Shahnavaaz says, “one of you needs to have the courage to show your vulnerability and start talking about this difficult subject”. Never make accusations. Initiate this talk as an invitation to think about the relationship together. If your partner is in his or her study and you’re left alone to watch TV, you might say, “I’d really love you to join me.” If they constantly say no or are busy, then say, “I’d like to understand what’s going on as I feel you’re avoiding me or I’m avoiding you.” Why?

Remember, though, it’s never one person’s fault, she says. And if you’re angry, it’s usually because you feel lonely because you miss your partner. “If you miss your partner, you need to express that,” she says. Children leaving can often exacerbate our anxieties around ageing. Do discuss this with your partner too. Often, she says, their perspective will counterbalance those fears.

Take heart. “In my experience people do find each other again,” Shahnavaaz says. “They live a totally different life than they used to — and it’s lovely. You just need a period of adaptation.”

As for feeling redundant as a parent, you’ll soon realise that this is quite the misapprehension. “Your children need you as much as before, just in different ways. We are still their emotional support network and they will always need us.”