

Coping with Empty nest syndrome

The kids are gone...now what?

BY KENYA MCCULLUM



It's the paradox of parenting: For years, you fantasize about how wonderful it will be when your children finally grow up and you can have some time to yourself again. And after years of stress, breakneck

schedules and the ups and downs of raising your children, it's finally happened — the kids have gone away to college and the nest is empty. But instead of feeling the elation that you fantasized about it, it's quite the opposite — you actually feel sad about not having your children at home anymore.

WHAT THE HECK IS THAT ABOUT?

If this is how you're feeling, you're not alone. Empty nest syndrome is a common experience among parents, especially mothers, which manifests itself through deep feelings of loss and sadness after children have left the home. In addition, many people feel a loss of identity, purpose and routine, which can exponentially increase the grief they feel.

But just because the nest is empty doesn't mean your life can't be full. The following tips can help you get through your sadness and enjoy this new phase of your life.

Pamper yourself. Have you focused so much energy on your children that your self-care has fallen by the wayside? If so, now is a great time to do things like join a gym, get a facial or have your nails done. Not only will you look great, but these acts of pampering can go a long way toward lifting your spirits.

Similarly, doing the relaxing things that you never had time for — like taking a nap in the middle of the day, going to a matinee, curling up with a good book or

taking a long, hot bubble bath — can help you feel good about yourself and give you relief from your sadness.

Fill the void. You have a lot more free time now, but what should you do with it? When Natalie Caine of Empty Nest Support Services works with parents who do not know how to fill the void they feel after their children have left home, she asks them what they really enjoyed doing before they got married and had children. This often helps parents tap into a side of themselves that they had long forgotten.

But if you can't think of anything like that, there are other ways to discover the things you love to do. For example, it wasn't until Caine had an empty nest that she realized how much she loved photography.

"I got a digital camera, and no matter how busy I was, I would start my morning outside with a black cup of coffee and my camera, just photographing nature in my yard," she said. "It's a total passion of mine, and I never knew that before."

Rekindle romance. It's not uncommon for parents to find their relationship strained because romance often gets put on the back burner behind the day-to-day realities of raising children. But now that you have an empty nest, it's a good time to refocus your energy on your partner and rekindle the romance that you may have lost. This can help you overcome problems in your relationship, as well as give you both the opportunity to lean on each other to get through your grief.

Get extra help. In some cases, empty nesters may actually fall into a deep depression. If this is the case, it's a good idea to talk to a psychologist about what's going on in order to get extra help with handling those feelings.

"People who get clinically depressed have a tendency or predisposition to either depression or anxiety problems," said Dr. Friedemann Schaub, author of "The Fear and Anxiety Solution." "If your feelings really interfere with your life — if you can't get out of bed, if you feel you cannot function normally, or if you become antisocial — you should get help from a therapist." ❖