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Mental Health Quick Notes

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Fall Transitions

The Empty Nest

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The empty nest syndrome is a term that has been used to describe the crisis that some families go through after the last child has left the home. Empty nest syndrome is no longer as common place because of the opportunities and changes in the lives of middle-aged people, but it still occurs in many couples to varying degrees. Below are the challenges that these families may face.

What are the challenges of empty nesters? While many empty nesters adjust well to their children leaving, albeit some temporary grief at missing their children, some empty nesters feel the change in the household acutely. Women who have lost their sense of identity, outside taking care of their children and partner, find the loss of identity and the company, a very scary proposition. The solution is for the woman to reconnect to her partner in a deeper way and, at the same time, develop her interests and dreams. Both endeavors will strain her as a person as well as shift the balance in the marriage. A couple who is used to having a certain division of labor and level of intimacy and now has to negotiate a change in both will feel the strains of change. Women sometimes negotiate these changes by becoming more involved in the care of their parents or become more active as grandparents. They also start new professions, discover new creative avenues that they have dreamed of exploring. The more in tune the woman is with own strengths before the decrease of the motherhood role, the more potential the woman has of negotiating the empty nest quickly. With a lack of focus and purpose, women are more susceptible to depression and substance abuse. (Pittman, 1987)

Men, or the other half have the couple, may have functioned more strongly in the work force. In today's families, men can and are as close and involved with their children as women are. This leaves men equally vulnerable for the loss of the daily relationship with the kids. Couple this with the men's concerns about their decline in physical conditioning, not accomplishing goals in the work force, and their partners sudden desire for more closeness, this can lead to a susceptibility to affairs. Men are also guilty of putting their children's activities and concerns in front of their own. Many men devote their time to

their children's sports lives. When this ends, men find themselves disconnected from their wives and for some couples this leads to a rather sudden divorce (Pittman, 1987).

What can empty nesters do to help in their adjustment?

Couples can look at their children's exit as an opportunity to grow and achieve personal and relationship goals. The pain of the transition propels some couples to have their best marriages and sex lives ever. Many books are devoted to the creative surge that many empty nest mothers experience after the children leave. Many men go on to pursue the careers that they always yearned to pursue, such as teaching, ministerial work, non-profit work, but never dared, due to money concerns. Many men start to enjoy their grandchildren like they never allowed themselves to enjoy their children. Many couples pursue classes and adventures that they first gave their children, like a month abroad to study Spanish or a college degree.

For those who find the exit of their children leads to a sudden dissatisfaction with their lives and their partners, therapy is an appropriate step. The dissatisfaction can be seen as a normal byproduct of moving into another stage in life and not necessarily as a faulty decision in choosing mates. It is definitely a time when most individuals and couples need to grow and change or risk feeling stuck and stymied.

What can kids do to help in their and their parent's adjustment?

Leaving home is also a frightening experience for the children, too. They worry if they will be able to succeed at school, a job, in a new town or with a partner. They may doubt their ability to succeed in what they have told their family and friends that they wanted to do. Some will get so scared that they will create a crisis at school necessitating them to come back home or attend a closer college, some will desperately cling to dead-end relationships creating emotional dramas that lead them back home. Some may interpret the parent's ambivalence about them leaving as they are not up for the challenge and they will sabotage their departure by not completing preparation tasks on time or suddenly finding themselves with their "true love". Others will leave and then fail at school, have a mental health crisis, get fired from a job, or become pregnant cutting short their flight from the nest.

Kids find it hard to know how to deal with their parent's ambivalence to leave on top of their own feelings of doubt. Getting connected at school or in the new com-

munity is important. A good roommate or a good professor or boss can save the day. Also the encouragement of the parent can make all the difference. Some parents, in an effort to make the child more independent may cut the ties too quickly, opting to call infrequently or refusing to visit the child. This can backfire as the child feels cut off from the steady support that they have enjoyed all these years. Actually the child needs the closeness when they leave.

Children, on the other hand, do have some personal control, over their independence. Some launched kids insist on their parents staying out of their personal business but think nothing of asking their parents for money to pay their credit card bill. Kids have to be consistent in their pursuit of independence. If they ask for help getting out of too many scrapes the parent may feel compelled to take back control. Parents and kids should deal with the rules of independence directly but setting out the rules of moving out and what the child can reasonably ask for when they are at college or, otherwise, out on their own.

What events can couples do to ease the transition of being an empty nester?

Couples, as well as individuals, can begin to explore their hopes and dreams that have been on the shelf. To buy themselves some time until they figure this out they can get back in shape physically, take a class and reconnect to friends or family members. As a couple they can pursue a more intimate relationship. This may entail some hard work of looking back and working through some old disappointments with the relationship. It may mean that each may have to look at their disappointments with themselves and how this new stage in life can be made more meaningful.

On the practical side, the parents may want to take advantage of the new space that they have and set up a home office. Or after some time to contemplate, the parents may want to downsize or move. As far as with the children, parents can plan trips to visit the launched children and planning activities that they can reconnect with over weekends or holidays. This can help convince the parents that they have not lost their children entirely but entered into a new and, most of the time, very enjoyable phase of parenting.

References

Summer cont.

Pittman, F. S. (1987). Turning Points: Treating Families in Transition and Crisis. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

For more information on The Empty Nest Syndrome check out some of these resources: