

Empty Nest Support Services

By Natalie Caine

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20 Tips for Empty Nest Parents and Those Struggling with Empty Nest Syndrome

1. There is a true loss when children leave home. It is normal to feel sad, anxious, disoriented, fatigue, lonely, awkward. Professional help is there as needed. Let people help you.
2. Every parent experiences it differently so the habit of comparing won't serve you. "But Alice was fine after three days and I was still crying and tired after three months," said a tearful mom on the phone. We are who we are for now.
3. Having a career or not, you will feel the sadness because the role you have loved playing requires you to change. This was your favorite "job," most of the time, and you don't want the requirements to change. You had a friend and a deep kind of love that parenting births. That doesn't change just because someone said to turn in your key.
4. You will be learning how to be in the background, not managing ... but mentoring. They are trying to figure life out for themselves so support them in their courage.
5. You won't instantly be able to change. In a new city you need the maps, the research time, the rest, the support, and the adventures. You get tired, too. You get to discover what you like and don't like as you travel with your new self.
6. I believe in the past few years baby boomer parents have had a different kind of relationship with their children than before. Part of the difference is technology and the role modeling of parenting. Parents and kids are more connected, making more time to "raise children and be involved." Instant messaging, emails, cell phones, and text messaging are so easy that it keeps everyone in communication. It is not easy to let go.
7. Remind yourself you taught them enough or they wouldn't have the skills to leave.
8. Mistakes and poor decisions are part of growing into independence so expect those calls where something didn't go as planned. Listen and throw it back on them to see how they want to handle it. Yes, you still help them out, but let them be the first thinkers and you the back up.
9. Your adult child is learning time management. In high school there was structure. College has free time and sometimes they feel the call of the sun. They go toss a Frisbee. They didn't do the reading assignment and fall behind. Let them figure it out rather than you emailing them and nagging. The goal is for them to manage their lives now.
10. You are their anchors and they need you. Here is the paradox, which you have probably lived before "I've got it. You don't have to tell me." Ring, ring, sounds the phone, "I, I need help. I lost my IPOD. I even went to campus security and no one turned it in. I was in the gym. Sorry, Sorry. And, don't be mad, but somehow my checking account only has three dollars and I need money." We will always be their parents and they will be calling for help.

11. Sometimes, they will feel left out and overwhelmed with choices; organizations, clubs, relationships, parties, social life, academic responsibilities, weekend get away to friend's houses, not being special or the smartest like back home in high school, comparing their looks to others as well as the not knowing what they want to be when they grow up, the 15 pound college freshman weight gain, drugs, alcohol, smoking. Talk to them about these issues before they leave home. Just bringing it up makes it easier if they need to call and ask for your help or to cry with a safe person. This keeps the door open. The key is to empower them by asking what they think it will be like and letting them know, no matter what happens, you are there for them.
12. You are and were a good role model and they will hear and see you as they are leaping forward, moving into their own voice and shoes. You did a good job so believe in them. Trust. It isn't easy because you are used to seeing who they are hanging out with, meeting their relationships, and knowing where they are. Change is scary for them and you. Your concerns are normal, but they aren't interested in your worries.
13. Plan something just for you, whether you are a single parent or married. If you can, stay near by at a spa or hotel and relax, get pampered with clean sheets, room service, and nature around to help your healing. If you have to get home, plan for support. Enjoy lunch the next day with a friend or dinner out with your partner in a comfortable setting . . . with comfort food. My choice is always french fries well done.
14. Do what you must do. I would not cry at work, but I let myself know that I could fall apart and just be in my soft pajamas in bed as soon as I got home. If I did get tearful at work, which is not something one can plan, I talked to myself in a comforting way: "Of course you miss her. She will be home soon, so hang in there."
15. Have a frozen meal ready. There will be times you just don't want to cook or go out.
16. Begin journaling ... Tonight, I feel ... I could deal with this by ... A dad told me he would journal and let his wife read it because he just didn't feel like talking about it out loud.
17. Be gentle and patient with yourself. A new you is on the way. You will find happiness and freedom. Get out that wish list and dream list you wrote of everything you would do if you had free time and lots of money.
18. If you never wrote lists, put thoughts to paper now. It will take your mind off your child and may open your eyes to new endeavors.
19. Sleep and eat healthy. Stock the refrigerator with foods that enliven you. Exercise. One woman got a dog so she would have to go for a walk and have something to come home to. She sat with the idea for a month before adopting a dog. It does limit your getaway time unless you have someone to care for your pet.
20. Celebrate all that you are by writing yourself a letter called "What I like about me is..." or "People say I am good at ..."