

EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

What do the words 'Empty – Nest – Syndrome' evoke in you?

The word 'Empty' suggests a vacuum needing to be 'filled' again. When a colleague leaves the office, we talk about the 'replacement'. We cannot replace the 'person' we replace the 'post'. When a young person leaves home, there is no replacing the irreplaceable. That vacuum remains.

Let's look at the word 'Nest'. What is that? Birds carefully build their nests, to birth and take care of their young until they are ready to leave. Parents build homes for their children. We often talk of a nesting instinct in mothers in late pregnancy who go around the house cleaning everything (I don't remember that bit!!) preparing for the birth of a baby.

'Syndrome' – Let's drop that word. Everything does not need to be a syndrome. This label suggests an illness or medical condition. Young people leaving home and our sense of loss when they go, is not an illness, it is the normal sense of grief and sadness we feel when we close the door on a(nother) empty bedroom, worsened when we need to go back into that room again.

Children growing up and leaving home is natural. When we say that something is natural we tend to think that should make it easy. Birth is natural, death is natural. They are not easy.

During the years our children are growing up we focus all our attention on them. They are always number one. The practical things we do like cleaning, washing and shopping depend on their needs. The length of the shopping list particularly indicates how many people are 'at home'. This routine becomes a habit.

Signs that someone has left home are often leftover food with out of date labels, saggy vegetables and a fat dog!! Recently a friend spoke to me about this and said 'but they're not here anymore' having shopped after two of her sons had left home.

We have to accept that our CHILDREN are not coming back. That does not mean that the person themselves will not physically return, sleep in their bed, eat the food in the fridge (supplies now greatly diminished you will notice the empty fridge 'syndrome'). The person who returns to the nest, is not the same person who left, neither are we. This is the time for building different relationships with adult children. It can be painful. Our feeling towards our (now adult) children do not change, parental instinct to nurture and protect does not change, but our role does. We now have to move from being the 'doer' and the 'fixer' to becoming the mentor and the listener (when we are allowed!!) as we get to know the new adult in our lives and develop a different type of relationship.and we have changed too. Life has gone on since they left home and we have unconsciously adjusted to a new normal, even if we haven't noticed.

There will be tension. Expect that the homecomings will be happy occasions but will also bring some frustration and upset. This is also normal. We are getting to know each other again.

What next? – Live your OWN best life. Children leaving home affords the opportunity, as any change does, to do something different. With less cleaning, cooking and household chores to do, time can be spent on more pleasant things. Think about all the things you said you would do when you had time. Actually DO at least one of them. This will give you a different perspective. Counting the days until they come home will prevent you from living the only life you have –your own!!

Life is short. Enjoy it!!

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