

Daily Union
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Are You an Empty Nester?

March is here, spring break is around the corner, and graduations will quickly follow. For many of you, this means your last child is going to be launched and you will embark on a new journey – being an “empty nester.” The packed calendar and the empty bank account may see significant overhauls. The one time long list of auto insurance policies to cover all your drivers may diminish to a mere two. The grocery and electric bills will perhaps be nearly 1/3 of what they were just last month. You find yourself taking a deep calming breath and sigh with relief.

Now don't get too cozy with the idea of being an empty nester. What used to be the “empty nest” of old – where kids of middle-aged parents grow up and launch into independence isn't nearly as common as it once was. Instead, this phase of life has a significantly different look in the United State than it once had. Kids can't leave the home because of the heavy burden of college debt, inability to find a job, or due to aging parents who need help themselves.

In a 2013 study conducted by Oregon State University, researchers found that the stage of life known as “empty nest” has all but faded away. Why? The slow—to-recover American economy has largely contributed to this change. Add to that the tough job market that has made it hard for young adults to make their own independent start in a career. These recent graduates are also experiencing the extended life span of their parents and grandparents – who have needs that demand more attention from the younger generation.

As the family dynamics change, the “empty nest” stage often gets put on hold. How can you adapt to this challenge and still enjoy this stage of life like you have planned for the past 18+ years?

Look at the newly defined roles in your family realistically. It is important to recognize that being a parent in a very important role that contributes a lot to your identity and provides a significant amount of satisfaction. Even if your child is not able to launch at the anticipated time, it is wise to begin the transition from being an active parent to creating a stronger identity outside of being a parent. Look for opportunities to become re-involved in activities that were pushed aside during the parenting years. Re-visit or develop a hobby that you have always been interested in.

Invest in your marriage. Raising children is known to be one of the most difficult tasks in a marriage or relationship. All too often, children have created (or sadly, provided) a diversion to remaining invested in the relationship. Sometimes old hurts come to the surface and become an obstacle. However, with the kids gone, marital satisfaction can also improve. Couples should take a fresh look at what they want for their future and make re-connecting a priority. In their publication, *What Happens Now? The Children are Gone*, John Merrill and Dr. Charlotte Shoup offer these questions to help a couple reflect on where they are at:

- 1) How well do we know and understand each other? Do we know each other's like, dislikes, dreams and goals?

- 2) How do we show our fondness and admiration for each other?
- 3) Do we turn toward each other rather than away from each other in going about our daily lives?
Do we share everyday thoughts and happenings?
- 4) Do we accept influence from each other?
- 5) How do we solve our problems?
- 6) How do we deal with issues in which we will never agree?
- 7) How do we have fun together?

By exploring these questions, you may find it easier to begin making small and gentle changes – shifting from the child-rearing focus to the couple-centered focus in your relationship.

Reflect on your job satisfaction. Where are you and your spouse at in your careers? Research shows that women often become more assertive during their middle age years. Perhaps this stage of life presents itself with some career modifications. Challenges and promotions that may have been pushed aside in the past may now become opportunities to reach for. It is important to recognize the changes that will be required should this kind of shift in career occur.

What are the new caregiving demands you might be facing? Parents typically look forward to the day when they are able to do things for themselves rather than focusing on their children's needs first. However, it is common that just as you launch your children, your aging parents begin to need more caregiving attention. Look at ways to provide for their needs while still recognizing your own need for more independence. If you have siblings, work with them to identify ways you can distribute some of the responsibilities of care-giving for your parents. Even with the shrinking existence of the "empty nest" stage of life, you still need to take a slice of time for yourself.

Invest in your own health and well-being. Becoming an empty nester also means you are becoming older. Your health may become more of a concern and now you can make it become more of a priority, too. Talk with your doctor to find out what area of health you should work on first. Once you have made a plan, take time to implement any needed changes.

Whether you fall into the genuine category of "empty nester" or if you are still housing some of your fledglings, it's important to take care of YOU! For more information on healthy living, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!