

2009, The Importance of Communication for Empty Nesting Couples
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

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An "Empty Nest" can leave a couple feeling lonely and depressed with a sense of loss of family and identity instead of the anticipated sense of freedom.

Partners may be trying to deal with these changes on his or her own. When you stop talking about what is going on with you, it can feel threatening in some way, to open up again. The marriage may have been focused on raising kids and the identity of "Us" may have only included the parents and kids, having lost the sense of "us" as a marital partnership years ago. The shared sense of "us" as a team or a couple may be gone. Both may feel alienated.

With the kids gone, you may suddenly be aware of your partner and begin to feel awkward, not really knowing what s/he is thinking or feeling. Couples that have been focused on kids may have anxiety about what to do about their time now. Am I going to be on the spot to spend more time and attention on my partner now? Do they have anything in common, really? It can be anxiety producing to think about spending so much time together. They will be pressed to talk. What will they talk about? What is left in the relationship? With no distractions, will they find themselves sitting in silence, looking expectantly at each other?

Now that the kids are gone, they have all this privacy. There is concern over the kinds of expectations the partner may have about their "new" sex life? What kinds of expectations will my partner have about intimacy. Many people discover that they don't really know what they feel about their marriage or their partner. We have all heard that marriage break up when the kids leave home. Without the kids as diversion, the vulnerability of your marriage come glaringly through. Important marital issues may have been avoided for decades. Having to deal with those issues now, can bring on a sense of despair.

On the other hand you may feel a sense of exhilaration about getting to spend the next half of your life with just you and your spouse. This can be an opportunity of new freedom to enjoy your honey. It may that you have time to do that for the first time in decades. While you want closeness, you may be afraid that your spouse wants distance. You don't know what he/she is thinking or feeling, but you want to devote the time and energy to get to know each other again. You want to rekindle the love and passion that you once had, and don't know how to get there from here. Looking forward, it seems appropriate to makes some new plans and goals. You can always look at it in terms of "the second half of your life with your honey is about to get really interesting".

Sometimes when you have been married a long time, the conversation between you and your beloved can get stale or you just run out of things to talk about. Sometimes it is hard to "just" start talking again. It is appropriate and common for many couples to get counseling or to get other help in reconnecting and making it through this awkward transition. Marital counseling, marital enrichment programs, couple communication exercises, or marriage counseling can assist you. You can often find a marital enrichment group, weekend or retreat at a local church. Couple communication exercises can involve a daily Couple's Feelings Meeting, or a semi-structured exercise like "The Honey Jar".

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If you find yourselves at a loss for topics of conversation, the "Honey Jar", can assist most couples with "breaking the ice" to begin to once again share themselves with each other. The "Honey Jar" is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each one serving as an open-ended prompt to discuss one of a number of individual or couple subjects. It was designed and "field tested" for couples in long standing and well established marriages. When it seems like you have run out of things to talk about, it can assist in generating conversation about oneself and about the relationship in a non-threatening way. Each numbered item is a sentence stem that can spark the revelation of information forgotten and as yet unknown about you or your significant other. The sentence stems are random in subject and depth. ***This is a digital product in a PDF format that you download directly onto your computer.***



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