

Paying Attention to Your Empty Nesting Relationship
By Improving Your Communication Skills
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many people experience a tremendous sense of let down around the time of the last child leaving home. One or both parents can feel a loss of identity, a loss of structure or focus, and sense of the family breaking down. One or both can feel lonely and depressed.

Each spouse may be trying to unilaterally deal with this novel experience. They may have long ago stopped confiding in each other about their inner experiences and may feel foolish or fearful of sharing what they are going through with their partner. 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 marital identity may be all but lost. Each may feel alienated from the other partner.

Now that the kids are gone, they may develop a heightened sense of awareness of each other and feel awkward, not knowing what the other is thinking or feeling, and wondering if he/she is as lost. They may each be anxious about what to do with the time they used to spend focused on kids, and wonder if they will be expected to spend it with the spouse. If they are expected to pay attention to the spouse now, what should they do? Do they have anything in common, really? They may be getting nervous about the idea of too much time together. They will be pressed to talk. What will they talk about? Is there anything left of the relationship? Without the kids and their activities, will they sit in silence looking at each other?

Now that the kids are gone, they have all this privacy. Will they be expected to change in their sex life? Will the partner expect some new intimacy that you don't feel. What if you don't know what you feel about your marriage and about your partner. You keep hearing that marriages break up after the kids leave home. Since you have been focusing on the kids, their absence can sure show the signs of weakness or vulnerability in the marriage. There are things you have been avoiding dealing with in marriage for decades. You may feel despair about having to deal with those issues now.

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. You have a new freedom to enjoy your spouse, and the time to do it now that the kids are gone. You want the closeness and the attention and may fear that the spouse wants the distance and diversion of other things. 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. You look at the years that you probably have left together and want to start making some new plans and goals. You are in a transition phase and 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. It can sometimes be difficult to get the conversational ball rolling again. To not only help you make that transition to a new life together, but to also assist you in re-connecting, get some help to help smooth out the transition. Marital counseling or marital enrichment weekends, couple communication exercises, or marriage counseling can assist you. Local churches often sponsor or present marital enrichment groups, weekends, or retreats. Couple communication exercises can involve a daily Couple's Feelings Meeting, or a semi-structured exercise like "The Honey Jar"

Recommendations for A daily Couple's Feelings Meeting:
Set aside time daily for talking about feelings. This time should be regarded as a "Sacred time" so that nothing gets scheduled in its place. Fifteen minutes a day could be an appropriate starting place. Each partner takes turns, telling about the events of the day (in summary) and feelings that s/he has either about those events or others. Discussion of feelings should involve "I" messages and not "You" messages. Couple's feelings meetings should be not used as a problem solving session, but rather a daily opportunity to share the emotional experiences of your life. It is important to accept the other person's feelings and to not try to take them away or fix them. Practice active listening techniques such as, "What I hear you saying is..."

Use this feelings list:

fear
anger
shame
guilt
sad
lonely
helpless
joy.

Statements like "I feel like...", "I feel as if ...", "I feel that you..." are thinking statements disguised as feelings statements. It is ok to say what you think. It is important to differentiate between thoughts and feelings.

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