

The Importance of Communication For Empty Nesting Couples

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

As the last child leaves home, it is a time of significant change for parents. While many couples anticipate the parental liberation of an empty nest, others struggle with loneliness and depression. The partners may find themselves alienated and uncertain about how to reconnect as the once-shared sense of being a team or a couple has dissipated.

One of the most vital aspects of navigating this transition is communication. When you have stopped talking about what is happening in your life, it can feel threatening to open up again. Couples, busy with navigating the daily challenges of raising kids, may have lost touch with one another as marital partners. The partners once had an identity of "Us." After children, the partners and the kids constitute "Us." Sometimes the couple identity gets lost all together and it may take some work to rebuild a new "Us" identity.

With the kids gone, couples may suddenly become aware of one another and feel awkward and self-conscious, not knowing what the other is thinking or feeling. Anxiety may set in about what to do with their time now that the kids are no longer around. Will they be expected to spend more time and attention on their partner? Do they have anything in common? The thought of spending so much time together can be anxiety-producing. They may feel pressed to talk, but what will they talk about? What remains within the relationship? In the absence of any diversions, what might transpire if they discover themselves sharing a wordless moment, their gazes filled with anticipation?

Wondering whether you are going to have anything to talk about or whether you have anything left in common is not all of it. Another area of concern is the couple's sex life. With all this privacy, there may be questions about the partner's expectations regarding their "new" sex life.

Many people discover that they don't know what they feel about their marriage or their partner. Without the kids as a diversion, the vulnerability of their marriage comes glaringly through. Couples focused on childrearing may have avoided important marital issues for decades. Having to deal with those issues now can bring on a sense of despair. The way forward is through communication. Talk and keep talking.

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