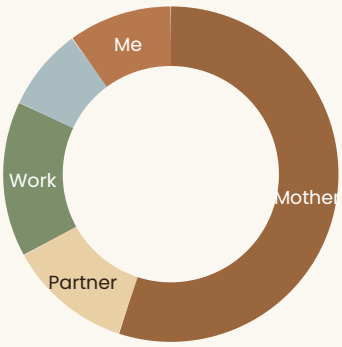
Motherhood, identity *& the empty nest*

How motherhood shapes who we are at every stage, and finding yourself again as children grow and leave home.

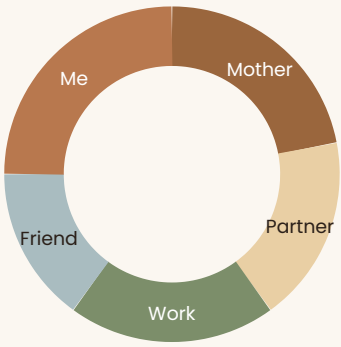
MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Motherhood reshapes identity again and again. In the early years, being "Mum" can fill almost every hour, and other parts of who you are may be set aside. Then, often gradually and sometimes suddenly, children grow more independent, start school, become teenagers and eventually leave home. Each shift asks the question again: **who am I now?**

Anthropologist Dana Raphael coined the word **matrescence** for the transition into motherhood, and psychologist Aurélie Athan describes it as a lifelong process as significant as adolescence. When children leave home, many women experience a second great reshaping: some call it the **empty nest**.



Early motherhood



As children grow

Your identity pie

One way to picture this is as a pie of the roles that make up your life. In early motherhood, the "mother" slice can take up most of the pie. As children grow, that slice shrinks, and space opens up, which can feel freeing, empty, or both.

Illustrative only. Everyone's pie looks different.

The empty nest can feel like...

FEELINGS

- Sadness, loss, longing
- Pride and relief
- Loneliness
- Guilt for feeling free

BODY

- Restlessness
- Tiredness
- Disrupted sleep
- Often overlaps with menopause

MIND

- "What's my purpose now?"
- Worrying about them
- Reflecting on the past
- Thinking about the future

RELATIONSHIPS

- A quieter house
- Rediscovering your partner
- Friendships shifting
- A new adult bond with your child

Becoming, *again and again*

Psychologist **Erik Erikson** described midlife as a stage of **generativity versus stagnation**: a time when we look for ways to nurture and contribute beyond ourselves. For many mothers, caring for children has been their main way of doing this. When children leave, generativity doesn't end; it can be expressed in new ways, through work, creativity, community, friendships or caring for yourself.

Each stage, a new mother

STAGE	WHAT MAY BE LOST	WHAT MAY BE GAINED
Baby and toddler	Freedom, sleep, your old routine	Deep bond, new purpose, new strengths
Starting school	Being their whole world	Time back, a little independence
Teenage years	Closeness, being needed in the same way	Conversations, watching them become themselves
Leaving home	Daily presence, a full house, a clear role	Space, time, freedom to rediscover yourself
Adult children	Being central to their decisions	A new, more equal relationship

A transition, not just an ending

William Bridges described every transition as an **ending**, an uncertain **neutral zone**, and a **new beginning**. The in-between, when the old role has gone but the new one isn't yet clear, can feel empty. It is also fertile ground.



time → (the phases overlap, and we can move back and forth)

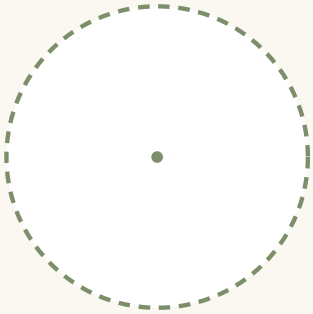
TOOLS TO TRY

Rediscovering *you*

Draw your own identity pie as it is now, then as you'd like it to be in a year. What would you like more of? What could you let go?



My pie now



My pie in a year

Parts of me

	BEFORE CHILDREN	NOW	WANT TO GROW
Interests and passions			
Friendships			
Work and purpose			
My body and health			
Fun and play			

Useful websites

Matrescence
matrescence.com
Aurélie Athan's resources on the transition to motherhood.

NHS Every Mind Matters
nhs.uk/every-mind-matters
Practical tips for looking after your mental wellbeing.

Women's Health Concern
womens-health-concern.org
Reliable information on midlife and menopause, which often overlaps.

National Careers Service
nationalcareers.service.gov.uk
Free advice if you're thinking about returning to work or retraining.

What can *help*

Let yourself grieve. Missing them is a sign of love. Sadness and pride can sit together.

Build a new kind of bond. Agree how you'll stay in touch, and let the relationship grow more equal.

Reconnect with old interests. What did you love before? What have you always wanted to try?

Invest in friendships. Many women find their friendships deepen in midlife.

Rediscover your relationship. If you have a partner, get to know each other again.

Look after your body. Midlife often brings hormonal changes too. Be gentle with yourself.

REFLECTION

1. Who was I before I became a mother, and which parts of her do I miss?

2. What would I love this next chapter to hold?

Recommended reading



Matrescence
Lucy Jones (2023)
A powerful exploration of how motherhood transforms body, mind and identity.



Women Rowing North
Mary Pipher (2019)
Wisdom on navigating life's changes and finding joy as women age.



The Middle Passage
James Hollis (1993)
On the midlife search for meaning and a truer sense of self.



What No One Tells You
Alexandra Sacks & Catherine Birndorf (2019)
Two psychiatrists on the emotional journey of becoming a mother.



This Too Shall Pass
Julia Samuel (2020)
Stories of life transitions, including children leaving home.

Looking after you

If you feel low, lost or hopeless for more than a couple of weeks, please speak to your GP. Samaritans: **116 123** (free, 24 hours). NHS 111, mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Draws on Dana Raphael and Aurélie Athan's work on matrescence, Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages, and William Bridges, *Transitions* (1980). © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.