The *empty nest*

When children grow up and leave home: understanding the mixed feelings, the shift in identity and relationships, and how to find your way into a new chapter.

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

For many years, family life may have been shaped around children: school runs, meals, routines, worries, noise. When children leave home, for university, work, a partner or a new city, parents can be surprised by the strength of their feelings. The house is quieter, the days have a different shape, and the question can arise: **"Who am I now?"**

The term **"empty nest syndrome"** is often used, but it isn't a medical diagnosis. It describes a common and natural set of feelings, including sadness, loss, restlessness and uncertainty, that many parents experience when children leave. Many also feel pride, relief and excitement. **All of these can be true at once.**

You might be feeling…

LOSS

- Missing everyday closeness
- Sadness in their empty room
- Grief for a stage that's ended

UNCERTAINTY

- "What's my purpose now?"
- Too much time, not enough structure
- Not sure what you want

WORRY

- Are they safe? Eating? Happy?
- Waiting for messages
- Fear of being forgotten

RELIEF AND PRIDE

- Pride in who they've become
- More time and freedom
- Guilt for feeling relieved

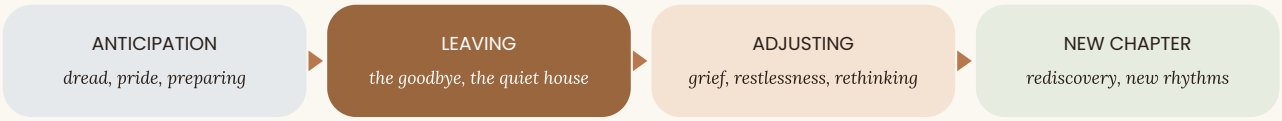
IT'S NOT ONLY MOTHERS

Fathers and partners feel the empty nest too, sometimes later or less visibly. Single parents may feel it especially sharply, and so may parents whose child leaves suddenly, moves far away, or leaves in difficult circumstances.

A PROCESS, NOT A DAY

The shape *of the transition*

The empty nest rarely happens in one moment. Many parents describe a process that starts long before the leaving day, and continues long after.



Not a straight line: many parents move back and forth, especially as children come and go.

Why it can hit so hard

REASON	WHAT IT MEANS
Parenting has shaped your identity	For years, much of your time, energy and sense of purpose may have centred on your children.
Routines disappear	The structure of daily life, such as meals, lifts and school terms, can vanish suddenly.
It's a loss that isn't always recognised	Others may say "but they're only at uni". Psychologist Pauline Boss calls this kind of loss **ambiguous**: your child is here, but not in the way they were.
It brings up your own past	Your own experience of leaving home, or being left, can resurface.
It often coincides with other changes	Perimenopause or menopause, ageing parents, career shifts, and changes in your relationship.

THE "SANDWICH" YEARS

Many parents meet the empty nest while also caring for ageing parents, going through menopause, or facing their own health or work changes. If it feels like a lot, **it is a lot**. Be gentle with yourself.

IDENTITY

“Who am I, *if not mum?*”

Being a hands-on parent can become such a central part of who we are that, when it changes, we can feel unsure of our place. Psychologist **Erik Erikson** described midlife as a time of **generativity**: a need to nurture, contribute and create something meaningful. Parenting is one powerful way of doing this, but not the only one.

The parts of you that waited

Many parents find that interests, ambitions and parts of themselves were put on hold while raising children. The empty nest can be a chance to ask:

- What did I love before I had children?
- What have I always wanted to try?
- What do I value now?
- Who do I want to spend time with?
- What would feel meaningful in this next chapter?
- What does rest look like for me?

Grief and growth

Author **William Bridges** described every transition as having three parts: an **ending**, a confusing **neutral zone** in between, and a **new beginning**. The empty nest often involves a time of not knowing, before a new sense of self emerges. That in-between space can feel uncomfortable, but it is also where new possibilities take shape.

You haven’t stopped being a mother. Your mothering is changing shape.

Common thoughts, and kinder truths

WHAT YOU MIGHT THINK	A KINDER TRUTH
“I’m not needed any more.”	You’re needed differently. Adult children still need a safe base to return to.
“I should be happy for them, not sad.”	You can be proud and sad at the same time. Both show your love.
“I’ve wasted years not doing things for me.”	Those years mattered. And there is still time for what you want.
“Everyone else is coping better.”	Many parents struggle quietly. You are far from alone.

From parenting *to companionship*



A shifting role

Your role gradually moves from **manager** of a young child's life, to **coach** of a teenager, to **consultant** and companion to an adult.

This shift can feel like a loss of closeness, but many parents find it brings a new kind of relationship: more equal, often deeply rewarding.

TEMPTING TO…	MIGHT HELP MORE TO…
Message constantly to check they're OK	Agree a rhythm of contact that works for both of you
Solve their problems for them	Listen, ask "What do you think you'll do?", offer help if asked
Keep their room exactly as it was	Let the space evolve, while keeping a sense of "home" for them
Hide your feelings to protect them	Share honestly but lightly: "I miss you, and I'm so proud of you"
Feel hurt when they don't call	Remember that independence means the relationship is working

When children come back

Many young adults return home for a time: "boomerang" children. This can bring joy and also friction, as everyone adjusts to living together as adults. Talking openly about expectations, contributions and space can help.

Couples, friends *and you*

Couples after the children leave

When children leave, couples may find themselves facing each other in a new way. For some, this is a chance to reconnect; others discover they have grown apart. Research by **Sara Gorchoff and colleagues** (2008) found that many women's satisfaction with their marriage **increased** after children left home, largely because couples had more quality time together.

Get to know each other again. Ask questions as if you'd just met: "What are you hoping for in this next stage?"

Create new rituals. A weekly walk, a new hobby together, a regular evening out.

Talk about the change. You may feel the empty nest differently. Share your experiences without judging.

Seek support if needed. If distance or conflict has grown, this can be a good time to look at your relationship.

See also our handout *Couples and identity shifts*.

Single parents

For single parents, children leaving can mean coming home to a truly empty house, and losing a daily companion as well as a role. Investing in friendships, community and your own interests can be especially important.

Friendships

Friendships built around school gates and children's activities may fade, and that can be another loss. The empty nest can also be a time to reconnect with old friends, deepen current ones, and build new connections around your own interests.

TECHNIQUES

Finding your way *forward*

1 · ALLOW
Let yourself feel the loss. Tears are a natural part of letting go.

2 · MARK IT
Acknowledge the transition: a meal, a letter, a walk, a photo album.

3 · REBUILD STRUCTURE
Create new routines so days don't feel empty.

4 · EXPLORE
Try something new: one small step towards who you are now.

Plan ahead. If you can, think before they leave about how you'll fill the space and support yourself.

Look after your body. Sleep, movement and good food help, especially if you're also going through menopause.

Reconnect with old interests. Return to things you loved, or try something you've always wanted to do.

Volunteer or learn. Contributing, mentoring or studying can bring meaning and connection.

Stay in touch, kindly. Regular, relaxed contact with your child, without needing every detail.

Be patient. Adjusting can take months. There's no deadline for feeling settled.

Things to say to yourself

WHEN YOU FEEL LOST
"This is a transition. I don't need to have it all worked out yet."

WHEN YOU MISS THEM
"Missing them shows how much I love them. They're still my child."

WHEN YOU FEEL GUILTY
"It's OK to enjoy this new freedom. I've earned it."

WHEN YOU LOOK AHEAD
"What would I like this next chapter to be about?"

TOOLS

My *next chapter*

What I'm grieving	
What I'm proud of	
Parts of me I'd like to reconnect with	
Things I'd like to try	
People I'd like to spend more time with	

A week of new rhythms

DAY	ONE THING JUST FOR ME
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

REFLECTION

1. What would I like my relationship with my adult child to feel like in five years?

Why therapy *can help*

Sometimes the empty nest brings more than sadness. It can stir up old losses, unresolved feelings about your own childhood, relationship difficulties, or a deeper sense of emptiness. Therapy offers a space to grieve, explore who you are now, and shape a next chapter that feels meaningful to you.

If you would like support as your children leave home, you are welcome to get in touch at **velvetcouchtherapy.co.uk**.

Recommended reading



Transitions
William Bridges
Making sense of life's changes: endings, the neutral zone and new beginnings.



Ambiguous Loss
Pauline Boss (1999)
Learning to live with unresolved grief.



Self-Compassion
Kristin Neff (2011)
Being kind to yourself through change.



The Empty Nest
Karen Stabiner (ed.) (2007)
Parents tell the truth about relationships, love and freedom after children leave.



Menopausing
Davina McCall & Dr Naomi Potter (2022)
Helpful if the empty nest coincides with menopause.

Useful websites

Mind
mind.org.uk
Information on loneliness, low mood and wellbeing.

The Menopause Charity
themenopausecharity.org
Information if you're also going through menopause.

Carers UK
carersuk.org
Support if you're also caring for ageing parents.

Looking after you

If sadness or emptiness persists, or you feel very low or hopeless, 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 Pauline Boss; William Bridges; Erik Erikson; Gorchoff, John & Helson (2008), *Psychological Science*. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.