

Dawn Kaffel Blog Archive: Navigating Change in a Couple when the children leave home

The summer holidays are over and the kids are back at school. Many parents up and down the country are bracing themselves for the inevitable when in the next few weeks their children will be leaving home for university.

Adjusting to children leaving home, whether its your first child or your youngest child for some couples, poses very little difficulty, whereas for others it presents such a major milestone that it can de-stabilize even the securest relationship. When a first child leaves, there is some comfort that there are others at home to help with this period of readjustment. When the last child leaves the nest is empty and it's just the two of you. For some the feelings of heartache and loss are overwhelming and like a mourning period. For others it welcomes a period of change and excitement that is free from the daily stresses of parenting and an opportunity to enjoy doing different things as a couple and to focus positively on their relationship.

Often couples struggle to identify that children leaving home can cause such difficulties between them, so accepting that this can be a difficult time for relationships rather than denying it is vital.

Children are often the glue in their parents' relationship and when they leave there can be a sense of dislocation as a huge void is now present which can be scary and unmanageable. Shifting back to being a couple again can often trigger a *"What's my role now?"* It can often feel lonely and scary.

Worrying about your children leaving home is part of the letting go. Feeling sad they are leaving doesn't mean they shouldn't go!!

Here are some problems that couples can struggle with at this stage:

1. Communication breaks down
2. Finding faults with each other
3. Increase in arguments
4. Taking on more work to try to fill the gap left by children
5. Staying at the office later to avoid having to spend time just the two of you
6. Finding yourselves spending more time doing things separately
7. Using social media and texting more regularly is easier than talking
8. Seeking out alternative experiences like excessive drinking, drugs or affairs

Couples don't have to fall apart when the nest becomes empty. It can be an important time to reconnect and to start adjusting to new roles and responsibilities by spending more time focusing on being a couple than you have done for years.

Here are some suggestions to help you work on your relationship and restore what may have been neglected between you:

1. **Can we be friends again?** Do we still have things to talk about? Do we have enough in common? Will I be enough for you? Do you still love me? It may be surprising that you both have similar anxieties and will relish the chance to talk it through with each other in a way you haven't done for a long time.
2. **Memories of being child free** Enjoy the opportunity to share with each other how it was before children arrived and took over your lives. Use humour and examples to reminisce. Take pride and delight in sharing your accomplishments as a couple.
3. **Notice your spouse as a partner not a parent** You may have been so busy working and being a parent that noticing each other as partners and what you need and how you nurture that precious relationship may have been way down the list of your priorities. Focus on being two equals. Show each other you are equally invested, equally involved and equally responsible.
4. **Refocus and rethink life and fill gaps left by children** Start accepting each other for who you are, start putting each other first and learn to see each other as partners again. When did you last compliment each other? Practice talking to each other about shared plans, your hopes, your concerns and what you are both looking forward to. Discuss together what you need and what you don't need from each other? What you like and what you don't like?
5. **Start thinking about yourself and what you need** It's an important time for you two as individuals. Discuss what you would like to do that you have been putting off for years. What new challenges would you like to take on? It's important that you feel fulfilled yourself in order to bring the best you can to the relationship.
6. **How do we look after our relationship?** Start to enjoy each other's company again. After years of neglect the relationship needs to be prioritised. When was the last time you planned an evening out together? When was the last time you had a holiday just the two of you? Do you enjoy doing things separately as well as together?
7. **When was the last time you had sex?** It may have been a while since you both felt very close and connected to each other. The more you talk to each other about how you feel and what you would like and start focusing more attention on each other the intimacy and affection will start to grow and sex should begin to feel more exciting as you explore what you need from each other sexually. You now have more quality time to spend together.

Hopefully you will start to feel that although one chapter has ended another has just begun and what feels like the end is often just the beginning.

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If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or **(020) 8959 9528**. Alternatively you can contact me by email dawn.kaffel@couplescounselling.com.