

Dawn Kaffel Blog Archive: What happens to couples when the children leave home

Watching the mesmerising and compelling performance of Gina Mckee in Florian Zeller's production of 'The Mother' at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn last week left me questioning long after the final curtain. Gina Mckee plays the role of a mother floundering between reality and hostility as her family starts to fall apart and move away from her. She captures the longing and desperation of a mother desperate to hold onto the memories of her life and children as it used to be. She portrays a mother on the brink of madness as she sees her 'little boy' grow up, leave the nest and find a girlfriend.

As a couples counsellor we often find ourselves working with couples who present with relationships that have grown distant and disconnected. This is often blamed on poor communication when really, underneath the presenting problem, there are couples who are struggling to come to terms with children leaving home and the difficulties with having to be just the two of you. For some couples, when children have been the glue in their relationship, when they do leave, there is a sense of dislocation as a huge void is now present which is often scary and unmanageable. We know in theory that as parents we bring our children up to let them go as adults to make their own way in the world and to seek out their adult relationships. In practice this can play out in a very different way as parental addiction to children manifests. Strong feelings of grief, loss and rage can be projected on to our partners as we struggle to come to terms with this incomprehensible life transition, especially as this time can also coincide with menopause, ageing parents and impending retirement.

I often see couples who struggle to realise that children leaving home can cause such difficulties between them. What often manifests is their communication breaks down and they stop spending time with each other, seeking out alternative experiences. Feelings of sadness and loss of role for a mother who may have given up work to care for her children, who has spent most of her life doing everything for them may make her more vulnerable to depression and marital conflicts. It can be very difficult for a partner who may still be busy at work to acknowledge the acute sadness and loss that the mother is going through, when all he may be experiencing is her hostility and turning away from him. Couples don't have to fall apart when the nest becomes empty. For some it is an important time to reconnect and spend more time focusing on being a couple than they have been able to do whilst the children were at home. Rather, it is an opportunity to work their relationship and restore what has been neglected between them. I see many clients during this important transition in their lives and it is normal and important for children to feel that they are leaving behind a secure and solid home base to return to. According to psychologists, for some couples, the transition from being an actively involved parent to being two independent individuals can take up to 18 months to 2 years. So it's important to talk to your partner about your feelings. You may be surprised that they have similar feelings and will relish the chance to talk it through.

Dawn Kaffel

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on 07976 403741 or (020) 8959 952