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Feeling a Sense of Loss?

Doctor offers tips for Empty Nesters

By **MARY STEVENS DECKER**
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Autumn is both glorious and bitter-sweet for parents whose young adult children are leaving for college. The term "Empty Nest Syndrome" was coined decades ago, when mothers traditionally stayed at home and many fathers weren't terribly involved with child-rearing. Back then, women stereotypically "fell apart" or "lost their sense of worth" when children went off on their own.

The concept of Empty Nest Syndrome may not be exactly the same today. Many moms now work outside of the home and plenty of dads are caregivers, as well. Still, parents of either gender may feel sad or anxious when their son or daughter goes away to college.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Dr. Rich Wemhoff, a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of [Emmaus Counseling in Redmond](http://www.emmauscounseling.com) offered insights from both personal and professional experience.

"We've been through this ourselves," Wemhoff nodded, when asked how parents can minimize pangs of loss. Wemhoff's wife Fran Regdos is also a mental health therapist at Emmaus. When their older daughter left for Gonzaga University, the freshman orien-



Dr. Rich Wemhoff

tation ended with a Catholic Mass, he explained.

Wemhoff recalled, "At the end of the Mass, the priest called all the new students up to the altar, gave them a blessing and then told them, 'Now go ahead and

keep going, don't turn back, because now you're leaving your parents and you're joining us. Our daughter followed the instructions, just marched right past us and kept on going. I wanted to jump up and grab her. I looked around and it was written all over the parents' faces — everyone was wrestling with that same sense of loss."

Wemhoff continued, "At this point in a parent's life, you feel pride, you feel fear, but the comfort is that we've taken our kids from the point of being one hundred percent dependent on us, as babies, to not so dependent, as young adults. We can take pride that we've done something right, served our purpose."

How can parents make the transition stress-free for the child who is leaving? It's one thing to admit, "I'll miss you" and another thing to burden the child with guilt if you make a big scene.

"It's not out of sight, out of mind," Wemhoff agreed. "Let them know they always have a home and you always have their back. Don't call too often but make home a place where they can relax and bring their friends on breaks. Give them independence but also connection."

And don't beat yourself up for feeling a little blue, Wemhoff advised.

"It's one of the most major transitions people ever go through," he pointed out. "It's an ending in a way, from going to look at colleges and planning for the future to the moment that child walks down the aisle or down that sidewalk into her dorm. It's not an ending of a relationship, but a changing. ... Hopefully, you have given them the values you continue to live by."

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

What are tips for students whose parents are too clingy? How can kids set boundaries without seeming insensitive or disrespectful?

If a college student was sitting here, telling me, 'My parents are calling me every other night. I can't take it,' I'd suggest, 'Your mother obviously loves you a lot, but I think you need to tell her, 'I need my space here. I want to relate to you but I need to establish my life here,'" said Wemhoff.

"Try to set up a structure that allows you to be connected, yet fosters independence," he noted.

In his own family's case, said Wemhoff, "we worked out a reasonable schedule for how much to be in contact with our daughter. At the beginning, she said to contact her very little, but she later contacted us a lot on her own."

And with today's technology, it's easy to keep in touch in an unobtrusive manner.

"Now there's e-mail, texting," said Wemhoff. "A short message, 'Hope you're having a good day!' works really well."

TIPS FOR COUPLES

When the last of the kids leaves for college and the nest truly feels empty, a marriage can improve or deteriorate, said Wemhoff. "If it's a good marriage, many parents find happiness because they have more time to spend together," he said. "Now it's time to face each other more, continue to develop their relationship in another way, not just as parents."

Some couples or single parents fill extra time, after the kids are gone, with joining clubs, doing community service or pursuing hobbies they had put aside.

"Try to do things you both enjoy," Wemhoff suggested. "Remember, at first, it was just the two of you. Then you were busy with the kids and now it's not that way anymore. You can look forward to seeing your kids get married, having grandchildren, but if your whole existence has been about the children, you're in trouble."

He has seen this in his practice, "couples who feel their work is done and now they have nothing to talk about," said Wemhoff. "Marriage can deepen when kids leave the nest, you can lead parallel lives or end the marriage, which is sad," he remarked.

For couples who need to rekindle their relationship, Wemhoff recommended a book called "Love at Midlife," written by Richard A. Osing.

ABOUT EMMAUS COUNSELING

Emmaus Counseling, with offices in both Redmond and Bothell, was recently voted "Best Family Therapy on the Eastside" by readers of 425 Magazine. For more than 25 years, Emmaus has provided faith-based or conventional outpatient mental health services to children, teens and adults. For more information, please call 869-2644 or visit www.emmauscounseling.net.