

EMPTY NEST, SCHMEMPTY NEST!

On how two parents are embracing the joy of having their life back.

By **MANIELA DASSENZ***

* Names have been changed to protect the innocent and not-so innocent.



I'VE WRITTEN before about JOMO – the joy of missing out, the infinitely preferable sister of FOMO (fear of ...). But it's only recently we have started realising the sheer JOMO of having an empty nest.

Over its 23 years of occupation, our big house has sheltered me, my husband, our two children, the grandparents (a nonna, a nanna and one granddad), plus various animals, at the same time. Yes, we needed our heads read, but this addressed various family social and material needs.

As the grandparents moved on, they were replaced by nephews; friends; FOTFOOL (friends of the fruit of our loins) – both domestic and feral (friends and animals).

Occupation peaked in 2018, when I thought Husband and I were going to end up in padded cells... which we would have welcomed! But sending Eldest out into the world on a one-way ticket and the sad loss of two of our elderly fur children was the catalyst for a slow emptying of the nest.

All we, the parental unit (sounds so sexy!), desire is a simple, peaceful life. We don't feel like dealing with anything that has the word 'dynamic' attached. And when you have adults all rubbing along in one house, there's sure to be some of that.

So, when Youngest asked me with trepidation, 'What do you think about me moving in with Boyfriend in the new year?', I had to school my face to not show an indecent amount of glee.

In the very near future, we could be

down to just us two, barring the animals. But they can stay. IF they behave!

AM I A BAD PARENT FOR WANTING THIS?

I have friends who miss their children desperately and are struggling to find their new post-parenting identity. Me? Not so much. Don't get me wrong. I adore my kids, but it's time for us now.

Our caregiver modus has been extremely hands-on. We didn't want it that way: I'm all in favour of benign neglect. But we had kids and parents who needed, and demanded, a lot of attention. Granted, they had some very serious health issues and consequences to contend with.

But there is a natural life progression and we outgrow situations. Remember how you could tell that your child was so over their school tier at age 12/18? This is as applicable to adult children living under the parental roof. And, of course, parents of said children.

KIDS ARE MEANT TO FLEDGE

Cape Town-based clinical psychologist Victoria Mayer gives us her professional insight into what's at play. 'Leaving home and living independently is a huge part of a young person's personality development, if you have the privilege to be able to,' she says.

'In families, children play many roles. You develop a kind of identity or job. And it's very hard to break out of that

psychologically as you develop,' she continues. 'It's often only when you leave the family stage that you work out who you really are. Having a little bit of distance to work on which parts of your identity you want to keep and which you want to shed is helpful,' she explains.

IT'S GOOD FOR THE PARENTS TOO

Parents also have job descriptions within the family. 'Even parents who aren't "full time" are consumed by parenting. Even with benign neglect – a good parenting model – you always have to monitor, think about and consider your children,' Victoria says.

During the active parenting years, this means many of your own interests and hobbies, and your personal development and relationship with your partner have to be deprioritised. The upside of the empty nest, she points out, is that 'you have a fantastic opportunity to remember and resurrect all those wonderful things.' But, she cautions, 'You have to actively pursue that. It's not going to fall into your lap. You have to create that space and use it.'

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREPARE AND BUFFER YOURSELF?

'You need to think about how you want to fill that space well before the departure,' Victoria says. 'I, for instance, have an "I don't have time for this" list in the

back of my diary. It was, initially, resentful. I didn't have time for art lessons or horse riding ... whatever. Now the list is aspirational. When I have more time, I will pursue these things.'

She continues, 'Maybe you can do the fitness thing, enrol for a course or travel more. Turn the bedrooms into carpentry studios!'

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTIC FEELINGS OF EMPTY NESTERS?

According to Washingtonpost.com, empty nesters feel three emotions: **GRIEF.** A deep sadness, even beginning to experience the five stages of grief. **EMPTINESS.** You may feel adrift, a boat without a rudder.

FEAR AND WORRY. You might be uncertain and afraid of your life ahead.

Victoria explains, 'This is a huge life adjustment. You may feel joy and relief, or a combination of sadness, nostalgia, guilt and anxiety around not having control over your kids, and concern about them.'

How much you feel it depends on your identity as a parent. 'The impact of the kids leaving should be mitigated if you've kept parts of yourself alive, apart from your parenting identity. If a lot of your identity was taken up as a parent, then their leaving is likely to be devastating, because you've lost your job.'

Her advice: Whatever you're feeling, just allow yourself to feel it. Don't hedge it and don't try to pretend it's not there. Feel it and move through it.

It's similar to the feelings you may experience if you are retrenched, she explains. 'You have to go through a mourning period and reinvent yourself.' Unlike grief, though, this is not a complete ending. It's an ending of a particular chapter, she points out. It's just a transition in the relationship.

WHEN DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE IN TROUBLE?

You should expect to have these feelings for a period. However, you should feel incremental improvement over time. 'There is no correct time frame,' she says, 'but if you haven't had any shift in six months, or if you feel it's becoming complicated – you feel depression or anxiety, for example – then you should definitely seek help.'

AN EMPTY NEST CAN EXPOSE CRACKS

When we're in the throes of servicing the family unit, it's easy to default to relating to your partner solely in these parental roles. But this can leave the couple relationship vulnerable because, once that pivotal element is removed, little else remains.

The consequence of this can be

marital breakdown, Victoria confirms. 'In my practice, the marriage is the most common casualty of empty nesting. The primary relationship between the parents stutters and stalls. Often, the children have been the glue keeping it all together. It's also often a gloss that disguises significant fractures. You remove that patina suddenly and the relationship doesn't actually hold together.'

CAN YOU PROTECT YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

Auditing ourselves and our relationships, especially when there are about to be seismic shifts, is not the easiest thing. It can help to have a neutral third party to steer and buffer the process. 'It may sound a bit contrived, but this is probably the best insurance for surviving the empty nest. It's better to survive together than apart,' says Victoria.

YOUR HOMEWORK

'As the children approach the end of schooling, you as a couple need to start trying to find your way back to a relationship that is not hinged on them,' Victoria advises.

'In a session with a therapist or counsellor, or even in your own conversations, you could say: "In the next four years, our kids will be leaving home. Let's take an X-ray of our relationship.'

'The impact of the kids leaving should be mitigated if you've kept parts of yourself alive, apart from your parenting identity.'



What are our strengths? Where are the challenges?" The counsellor could offer advice and exercises that help you reconnect,' says Victoria.

Discover and rediscover activities you can do and enjoy together. 'Something that can then form a bridge into your post-children life together,' she explains. 'It feels like a lot of homework to do early. But starting before the kids leave home is helpful. Don't wait until you're in an empty house – no independent life and no children – staring at each other across the dinner table with nothing to talk about.'

The alternative is, frankly, bleak.

'Struggling with an empty nest and a fracturing marriage at the same time is a very problematic cocktail that often brings people to therapy. They're mourning their kids and the end of this aspect of family life. And they're mourning each other and their relationship. They're alienated from their partner and not sure whether they should stay married. That's enough to collapse anybody.'

PROBLEM IS ... THEY FLY BACK!

Fast forward a few weeks, months or years. You've worked through it all, adjusted and you're loving your new, liberated life.

Then... ding-dong!

'Actually, the studio flat in town is a bit pricy. I'm thinking of moving back.' Or, 'I've just lost my job.' Do you then let Junior back in?

'This boomerang phenomenon is far more common now. The cost of living is high and our kids are used to a certain lifestyle. Going out on their own is a rude awakening because they've never had to account for all the expenses,' Victoria says.

A friend had her daughter and grandchildren come home after the daughter separated from her husband. 'It's lovely having them and we're very happy to offer support,' she says. But Daughter has reverted to teen mode while leaving the active parenting to the grandparents.

'I understand she needs to heal and lick her wounds, so I will tolerate it in the short-term. But this is getting old very fast.'

It's not only semi-permanent returnees who can ruffle parental feathers. Other friends complain that their son, a neat-freak in his own home, becomes slovenly when he visits them.

He uses a new cup every time he has a hot drink, and then leaves it unwashed in the sink. When they point out the error of his ways, 'his face goes full-on mulish', his mom complains. 'It's giving me flashbacks!'

ADULT CHILDREN AND PARENTS COHABITING: RENEGOTIATING THE NEW DYNAMIC

Adults living in the same space is not easy. Understatement.

'You have to change the social contract,' Victoria stresses. 'Renegotiate and set out expectations and obligations. "You may have your bedroom back, but it's going to cost you X rand. And you must cook and mow the lawn".'

She cautions, 'There's going to be a lot of friction and rupture as you transition.'

Parents are the ones who have to hold the boundary. You will need to be strong about 'It's your turn to cook tonight/take out the rubbish', she says. 'We tend to see our children as little and we want to love and protect them, so they get away with behaving like they're fully dependent on their parents. But, actually, they're adults. I admire people who get it right.'

WHY DO WE REGRESS WHEN WE'RE UNDER OUR PARENTS' ROOF?

'It's such a hard one,' says Victoria. 'Every year in my practice, I spend October, November and December working with clients in preparation for that progression. They're worried about going back and the resurrection of old feelings or

dynamics with siblings and parents. And of being massively disappointed with themselves that they are so easily activated. They think they've evolved and are over certain things, and suddenly they're not. Part of what I say is "expect this to happen".'

Why do we regress, though?

'It's because the old patterns around roles we play in our family are laid down in childhood, and some things are still the same. At family reunions, we re-enrol unconsciously back into those patterns,' Victoria explains. 'We become a version of ourselves we don't recognise. And it's often some of our shadow self – the worst parts of ourselves – that gets activated.'

It's extremely difficult to prevent this happening, she points out. 'Even if we try not to, our mother/father/aunt/uncle/brother/sister/granny/grandpa hasn't got that memo and they re-enrol us. At some point, the crap hits a critical mass. We surrender to it and start acting like a 16-year-old brat.'

BACK TO MY RAPIDLY EMPTYING NEST ...

I guess I need to guard against complacency, keep a weather eye on my feelings about the departure and up my marital game, but I think we'll be okay.

BESIDES, I'M FOCUSING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF A VACANT NEST:

- ☘ Control of your Netflix algorithm.
- ☘ Hot water doesn't run out just as you're shampooing your hair.
- ☘ You can swim naked without worrying about melting young eyes.
- ☘ You can make any meal you want.
- ☘ No more catering for vegan/keto/fritarian every day.
- ☘ Peace reigns supreme. Even the cats reach a détente.
- ☘ You don't spend hours looking for your preciously cared for clothes/shoes/make-up before finding it in Offspring's room: a) tossed on the ground after being tried on and vetoed. Worse) with a cigarette burn that wasn't there before. Even worse) seeing it on a FOTFOOL after weeks of hunting. Cue throbbing forehead vein.
- ☘ Not being woken at 3am from your delicious romp with Xavier by a crash of baby rhino creeping (clomping in their Docs) past your room, shushing each other loudly.
- ☘ Getting up in the morning to find a disaster area in your kitchen. Denuded cupboards and fridge. And you can't even steel yourself with coffee because the milk was left out and is sour.
- ☘ No more watching a stranger wander into your kitchen, greet you

casually (no introduction – at least you taught your kids that!), then open your fridge and help themselves ... the gall! As you wonder idly: Is this a FOTFOOL or a burglar?

THINGS I WILL MISS:

- Before I'm accused of being an unmaternal grouch!
 - ☘ Cuddles in the morning.
 - ☘ Youthful good energy.
 - ☘ Keeping up to date with what the kids are doing/saying/listening to.
 - ☘ Them making tea.
 - ☘ Their friends.
- So they can all visit... with a clear end time and date.

PS: DAY 12 OF THE NEW ORDER

Youngest has decamped, one suitcase at a time, over several weeks. I'm calm and life is blissfully peaceful. Except, sometimes, in the recesses of my belly, I feel a tiny spot of yearning. Out, damned spot!

FURTHER READING

- [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com): 'The ups and downs of being an empty nester'
- [griefandsympathy.com](https://www.griefandsympathy.com): 'Empty nest divorce'

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