**Empty Nest Syndrome**

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This time of the year, many teenagers leave for college either to another city or country. It’s a big transition from the shelter of their homes and the tumultuous teenage into adulthood where they are expected to navigate life on their own. Most teenagers crave independence and protest emotional or functional dependence on their parents and, ‘I can’t wait to get out and live on my own,’ rooted in a perceived fantasy of adulthood. But soon they realise that growing up is not as much fun as they had imagined it to be and the reality of it hits them. Our kids leaving for college is a significant change for the individual and the family. The college-going kid has a big adjustment to make from the safety of the home and parents making decisions for him, to the taste of independence that comes with making small or big decisions and learning to be responsible.
For the family, it’s an anxiety-provoking stage too where not only do the family dynamics change for example the siblings get more space and attention from parents, but letting go of the authority on the child along with separation anxiety experienced by both is extremely hard.
The level of control that a parent exerts for eighteen-odd years has to be released in a jiffy and that is overwhelming, to say the least. All the fears that a parent has that provoke control get amplified but can no longer be entertained. Panic attacks are experienced by both the offspring and the parent rooted in all kinds of fear for the safety of the child. The challenge of adjustment for the parent and child is amplified if we have raised our kids in an overprotective environment and been the parent who jumps at the moment the child is struggling with something and says, ‘Let me do it for you.’
We are disempowering and not preparing them for the real world and it’s like throwing them in the deep end without letting them test the waters first. Although in all fairness, sometimes jumping in the deep end one realises one’s potential as long as parents can sit on the side without jumping in to rescue.
Everyone survives. Human beings are born with amazing survival instincts that we forget to test and lead complacent and comfortable lives and raise our kids the same way. But when push comes to shove, the privileged pampered child will surprise you and adapt to the new surroundings pretty well.
Mostly children adapt faster than their parents as the former has a challenging but exciting journey ahead laced with new experiences. The parent on the other hand experiences empty nest syndrome which is a set of emotions like sadness, emptiness, distress, and helplessness that the parents go through when the child leaves home. Where the parents have a fantasy of independence for the child, it’s also hard to see the kids fly the nest. This is a normal life transitional period but every change needs a period of adjustment.
So how do we cope and support our children during this time? The best thing is to allow ourselves to feel these emotions without trying to ‘fix’. We also need to accept and allow our children to express their distress without challenging and trying to rationalise them or lecture them on gratitude. Hold the space for them and validate their separation anxiety as well as steps towards independence. We need to understand that physical separation does not mean our children’s internal psyche is fully independent.
The parent has to readjust to a new dynamic from a parent of a child to the parent of an adult child. It is important to remember they are going through their own evolution and learning to manifest their independent lives. What can reassure the college kid that his home is a source of stability and parents should avoid projecting their anxiety onto them because their plates are full and unlike the parents for whom change is there but they are in the comfort of their homes, it’s the child who has stepped into a different world. Learn to celebrate this change with your grown up children and accept and embrace it wholeheartedly.