

# FLYING THE COOP

*Your children have left home. Now what? More time for yourself and your partner, says Catriona Ross*

**S**ome parents are delighted at the thought of a house without kids, enthusiastically planning to turn their child's bedroom into a study or hobby room the day after they've left for university or married life. But if that's not you, take heart. Empty nest syndrome is a major life transition and can be stressful and unsettling.

## FACING THE MUSIC

The first step to overcoming these emotions is to accept that you are upset by what's happening, advises counselling psychologist Rita Suliman. Define what you're experiencing, then acknowledge that it's related to your kids leaving home. But, whatever you do, don't bottle up your feelings, adds Mary Ovenstone, a Cape Town couples counsellor and coach. 'You need to feel the emotions in order to process them and eventually let them go. If you repress your feelings, they will come back to haunt you.'

Along with deep sadness, you may feel confused and displaced, asking yourself questions such as: 'What am I going to do now?' or 'Who am I, now that I'm not a mom or a dad with kids at home?'

'Consciously grieve the passing of family life in order to exit that phase of parenthood and find a new lease on life - otherwise you will live in regret,' says Mary. Avoid becoming that empty-nest parent who sends their adult children on guilt trips, making them feel obligated to visit their lonely old mom and dad over the weekend. If you find you're still struggling to move on, speak to a counsellor.

## FILLING THE VOID

'Your children won't need you in the same way they used to, so you must find a way to be productive - a way that isn't linked to your kids,' says Mary. Focus on the present, not the past. 'You never stop being a parent, you're just moving into the next phase.'

It helps to redefine the meaning of 'family'. Are you still a family now that your children aren't at home and you are no longer running

## Just do it

Draw up a plan for the next phase of your life before the kids leave home. Also make financial investments so you'll have enough money to enjoy this stage, advises Mary. Ask yourself: 'How would I like to spend my spare time?', 'What can I do to spend quality time with my partner?', 'How can I express myself as a person?' and 'How can I support my partner's personal growth?'. If you nurture your own career, interests, hobbies and key relationships, you will have something to focus on when the children are gone.

List all those things you've always wanted to do - and follow through on them, says Rita. 'Making a list isn't the end of the process. The next step is action, and this is completely your responsibility.' Now's the perfect time to renew or start friendships with like-minded people, so set up coffee dates and sign up for socially interactive classes. If finances allow it, broaden your horizons by travelling. 'Explore our country and your surroundings. This is your second chance to live your dreams,' says Rita.

around for them? Absolutely. The only thing that's changed is that you need to establish new rituals to keep the connection strong - perhaps Sunday lunches, family holidays or birthday celebrations.

## WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T BOTTLE UP YOUR FEELINGS

Don't forget to relish me-time! Remember those years when all you wanted was peace and quiet, but all you got was blaring music and strange people in the house? Now you have what you wanted.

