Experiencing Menopause and Empty Nest Syndrome

by AFRA WILLMORE

What Happens When Your Children Leave Home

You would think it would be a good thing that after all those years of spending your time, money and energy raising your brood, the little birds are finally leaving the nest.

In the past you probably dreamed of the day your children would gain independence. But unfortunately, the timing of this new stage of parenthood often coincides with the onset of menopause, so you might find it unexpectedly difficult to see them go.

Hormonal Chaos

Remember when you were pregnant and a diaper commercial on TV could send you into fits of emotional sobbing? Or a dropped and smashed glass could seem like the end of the world? At the time, you realized your magnified sensitivity was down to those baby-sustaining hormones rampaging through your body.

And because it seems nature is not done with making our lives a misery, she throws another bout of hormonal chaos our way just as we have to cope with a major change in lifestyle.

A friend of mine told me she spent an entire evening wailing and sobbing after making a huge dish of spaghetti, as she usually did for her three boys, only to realize one was out with his girlfriend for the evening, one had left the week before for university, and the other had left the year before to study.

She admitted she'd mindlessly made the portion sizes she'd grown used to producing through their teen years and momentarily forgotten she only needed to make a meal for two.

She was sobbing not for the wasted ground beef, or even because she was missing her children, but more for the realization she had been made redundant from her role as hands-on mum, cook, counselor, taxi driver — all those chores we often grumble about while we are doing them!

Of course she also realized after a night of hot flashes that her menopausal hormones had possibly exacerbated her grief, and in the morning quite sensibly remembered that although our children might grow up and leave home, we never stop being parents.

Why Do We Become Emotional?

Interestingly, researchers are divided on why women can became sad, emotional, anxious or even depressed during menopause.

Some experts believe fluctuating hormones (particularly the decrease in estrogen levels) prompt changes in neurotransmitters in the brain, causing mood variations — both negative and positive — along with physical

symptoms.

However, other specialists believe it is the life changes triggering these psychological symptoms rather than the menopause itself.

Throw into the mix difficulty sleeping and decreased libido that often accompanies menopause, as well as a feeling of sadness or loss because pregnancy may no longer be possible, and you have a cauldron of emotions that are sometimes going to spill over.

Next page: finding the liberation having an empty nest brings

Why Do We Become Emotional?

It might be even more confusing as emotions may be triggered at unexpected times. Like my friend who initially seemed to cope with her children leaving, only to be floored by a bowl of spaghetti, sadness, anxiety and other feelings could be set off at random times.

My Meltdown

My own meltdown moment occurred four years after my first son left home and a year after the second went away to study. I was planning Christmas and suddenly realized this was my future — trying to get as many of my family members under one roof as possible.

With my eldest planning to go to his in-laws and my other son seemingly indifferent to the whole occasion, I felt the magic of Christmas with my children was being eaten away by the reality of train timetables and planned web-chats on Christmas day.

Oh how I sobbed at the memory of small tousled-headed children excited by the holiday, the ritual of the day, even the enormous job of cooking lunch for my big family.

I have children still at home, but most of them would prefer a lie-in nowadays to an early morning sortie to check out what Santa has left.

So what can we do about feeling sad or redundant? The simple task of counting my blessings helped me.

Christmas Day might be different but I can console myself with the festivities being extended throughout the whole week as we can share a few special days with our absent family members.

Feeling Liberated

A realization that there is still plenty of life left in us and that the world is our oyster can be liberating too.

With fewer socks to wash and sandwiches to make, maybe now is the time to learn that instrument, take that trip, or join that group you'd always wanted to.

Often people of menopause age find they are financially more secure so can plan the holidays or remodeling they have dreamed of for years when paying for soccer and school trips took precedence. Or maybe with your birds gone you could think about a smaller nest with less housework? Plus, a chance to release funds can make life easier and more fun.

Whatever you decide, remember menopause is not an illness, just a stage of life we can and should approach positively. However, it's still OK to let out emotions every now and again, so curl up with a good book or movie you know will trigger the tears and cry if you want to!