

The Campus Link

A newsletter for parents & families

November 2006



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Empty Nest Syndrome

What is this thing they call “empty nest syndrome”? And are you suffering from it, now that your student has been away for awhile?



According to Psychology Today, empty nest syndrome refers to “feelings of depression, sadness, and/or grief experienced by parents and caregivers, after children come of age and leave their childhood homes.” Many parents of college students go through it in one shape or form.

What It Looks Like

This syndrome manifests itself in various ways. They include:

- Feelings of sadness.
- Spending time in your student’s empty bedroom as a way to feel close again.
- Having more free time and energy.
- Figuring out the family dynamic without your student in the everyday mix.
- Adjusting to a more peer-like relationship with your student.

Sometimes, an empty nest hits hard, causing overwhelming sadness, excessive crying and feeling that your useful life has ended. If that’s the case, it may be time to talk with someone and possibly get professional assistance.

Another compounding factor in this whole equation, particularly for women, is that, at the same time their student is leaving for college, they may be going through menopause and caring for elderly parents who increasingly rely on them. While studies show no increase in depressive illness among this population, that is a lot to handle. Treat yourself well during this time of transition.

A Deeper Relationship

The “empty nest” that first came to national prominence in the 1970s has changed with the times. Being in touch with your student at college, via various technological means, helps with the transition. One researcher, Karen L. Fingerman, Ph.D., a professor at Purdue University and author of “Mothers and Their Adult Daughters: Mixed Emotions, Enduring Bonds,” says that the parent/child relationship often improves when the student leaves home.

“People may worry about losing their child when the child leaves home,” Fingerman says. “In fact, they’re not. They’re going to have a more mature, more emotionally meaningful and deeper relationship with them to look forward to.”

Enjoying Your Nest

So, enjoy the extra time and energy that comes along with an empty nest! Dig into hobbies that you’ve been pushing to the back burner. Consider different career possibilities. Spend time on leisure activities

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Handling Challenges With Professors

One conflict that may arise during a student's college career is a conflict with a professor. These conflicts often result because of the following issues:

- The professor impedes class participation by making students feel uncomfortable asking or answering questions because of his/her response to inquiries and ideas.
- The professor is unresponsive to communication attempts, such as requests to meet outside of class time, e-mails asking for help, or questions asked in class.
- The professor does not accept any excuses for missing class/deadlines, even in extreme circumstances.
- The professor provides inconsistent expectations, such as changing requirements/deadlines related to quizzes or assignments with little or no notice or setting different expectations depending on the student.

Five Steps Students Can Take

If your student complains about problems with a professor, encourage him/her to do the following:

- **Talk with other students.** Tap into the RA, if living on campus. RAs are able to direct students to the appropriate folks for help and offer advice on how to proceed.
Other students in the class might be feeling similarly. Suggest that your student talk with others to gauge their thoughts. He/she may be able to work with them to deal with the concerns and talk with the professor.
- **Meet with the professor individually.** Schedule a time to meet with the professor to address concerns. It might be best to ask for a meeting time outside of scheduled office hours, so other students are not waiting for the professor's time.

Bring a list of concerns and feedback to the meeting. Try to frame criticism constructively rather than just complaining or blaming the professor. Give the professor a chance to respond to concerns. After all, understanding is a two-way street.

Talk with a friend, RA or residence director before the meeting for help in framing the conversation. These people can help your student elaborate and clarify points.

- **Talk with his/her adviser.** Remember that an adviser's role is to advise students on all aspects of their college career — conflicts with professors are no exception. Advisers currently are or have been professors, so they can help your student in crafting his/her conversation points.

Try to remain constructive and respectful when putting an adviser in the position of potentially criticizing a colleague.

Enlist the adviser's help. Keep in mind that if a situation warrants the notification or involvement of a department chair, an adviser will be able to navigate the political scene more effectively than your student.

- **Meet with the department chair.** If the issue your student is having is of a personal nature, or if he/she is uncomfortable addressing the professor directly, the department chair can serve as a neutral source of assistance.



Think about what the goal is for the meeting before attending. A department chair is not likely to agree to fire a professor. But, he/she may be able to clarify the department's expectations for assignments or speak with the professor directly about concerns.

- **Meet with the dean.** Use campus resources. The worst thing your student can do is nothing. If your student is not getting the needed help or is not being heard, suggest that he/she try to meet with a higher-level administrator. If the professor is the chair of the department, your student may need to schedule a meeting at this level anyway.

Be prepared for the meeting. Wasting a dean's time is definitely not a good idea. Bring documentation of concerns and any proof, if applicable.

Overall, students should not be afraid to voice concerns or to ask for help. If something does not feel right, it probably isn't. College is about learning. If a professor is being unreasonably difficult or unprofessional, your student's ability to learn will be compromised. There are plenty of folks on campus who are willing to help your student. All he or she needs to do is ask.

A Family Thanksgiving Without a Fumble

Families often fumble a little during the Thanksgiving holiday, as many times it is the first or second time your college student has returned home since leaving in August. Put your game strategy in place to help ensure a winning weekend for all.

- **Make Sure Your Student Has a Space.** It's common for rearranging to take place once a student has departed for college. Has your college student lost his/her bedroom? If so, make sure you prepare a space for him/her to sleep and store belongings, prior to coming home. This way, your student won't feel put out or like a burden on you.
- **Talk With Your Student About Lifestyle Changes.** Rather than waiting until your student comes home, talk beforehand. It's quite likely that your student's sleeping, eating, dressing, and thinking patterns have changed during the last couple of months. Try to avoid surprises by discussing these new habits and perspectives ahead of time.
- **Try Not to Plan Too Much Ahead.** While it's likely that you will have a scheduled family gathering for the holiday, try not to plan beyond that — at least not without your student's consent. You will appreciate the quiet time together as a family and your student may want to organize gatherings with friends on his/her own, too.
- **Prepare Siblings for Your Student's Return Home.** If you have other children, they will be anticipating your student's arrival, too. Remind them that your student will be very excited to see them, but also will have a lot to do while he/she is home. This will help alleviate disappointment if there is not enough time for extensive one-on-one interaction.

- **Review and Renegotiate Expectations Together.** Even though your student's habits and behaviors may have changed, your expectations of him/her may still be the same. Keep in mind that your student has operated independently over the last months. Hopefully, he/she is more adept at making decisions. Make a point to talk with your student about expectations such as curfew, assisting with chores around the house, interacting with family members and more. Being proactive about this will help alleviate tense situations. If you are willing to adapt your expectations, let your student know this, too.

Communicating your “plays” effectively is certain to score you a touchdown this Thanksgiving!



New Thanksgiving Traditions

To usher in this new era of your family's life, why not incorporate a new tradition? Some possibilities include:

- Bake cookies together the night before your student goes back to college so he/she can share them with friends back on campus.
- Take a flannel family photo where you all wear flannel shirts or pajamas and strike a wacky pose!
- Instead of shopping on the day after Thanksgiving, work as a family to create a holiday package for a local family in need.
- Address all the holiday cards while sitting around, listening to seasonal music and noshing on eggnog.
- Encourage siblings to stuff notes in your college student's luggage so he/she finds them when he/she returns to campus.

It's never too late to start a new tradition!

Take a Commercial Break!

Reconnect with your student by

- planning a family game night — pull out the old board games or play a little Texas Hold'em.
- going to a coffee shop.
- sharing photos from the last couple of months.
- attending a local high school event.
- staying up late one night chatting.
- cooking a Sunday brunch.

Addressing Student Conduct Issues

Editor's note: The following message from the Rev. Joseph L. Levesque, C.M., president of Niagara University, was delivered to the university community as a podcast on Sept. 15, 2006. It outlined the university's expectations about student conduct.

I'd like to speak to you for a few minutes about an issue that affects all of us. Here at Niagara we use the term "university community" quite a bit. It encompasses everyone on campus — faculty, staff and students — and even those off campus who are connected to Niagara in some capacity. They include people like parents and alumni and friends. Whatever your reasons for choosing to attend Niagara, now that you're here you are a stakeholder in our community. As a stakeholder, everything that happens here affects you as a part owner of this educational enterprise.

Since the start of the school year only a couple of weeks ago, the behavior of a handful of students has tarnished the image and reputation of the university, and the whole community has been affected. Perhaps you have seen articles in the local newspapers and the national media about incidents involving some of our athletes and about rowdy and indecent behavior by some of our students who live on and off campus.

Such incidents, some of which have resulted in several arrests, are completely contrary to the values of this university, and we are taking the matters very seriously. We are cooperating fully with law-enforcement authorities, and students will be held accountable under our own judicial system after matters are resolved in the local courts. Niagara will not be a refuge for those who break the law and disrespect others.

The thoughtless actions of a few students are reflecting poorly on this wonderful university. Everyone needs to be aware of that and avoid situations that may lead to trouble and result in long-range consequences. Be conscious of your actions and how they will be perceived by others. Remember, actions speak louder than words. Something that might seem like an innocent prank can become a much larger issue, especially with Internet sites that thrive on student misconduct on college campuses.

All of you want your Niagara degree to stand for something. You want it to reflect academic excellence and the proud tradition this university had built over the past 150 years. Don't do anything to tarnish the value of that degree, and remind others who may be inclined to do so to think beyond the moment. Tell them that their actions have consequences and impact all of us. Tell them to respect the Catholic and Vincentian values upon which this university is built — the same values that make a Niagara degree something to be cherished.

National Family Health History Day is Nov. 23

Have you talked about family health issues with your student? Well, Thanksgiving Day has been designated as a day for families to sit down and talk about their health history. To help in that pursuit, the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General has created a Web-based tool called "My Family Health Portrait." It helps users organize family history information and print it out for doctors. You can also share family history info via computer with other family members.

It's free and can help families predict health disorders that may have moved down the generational line. This Thanksgiving, why not give one another the gift of health awareness?

Source: www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/

Seasonal Student

Issues

There's a seasonal ebb and flow when it comes to student issues. Here's some things your student may be experiencing:

- Roommate problems and floor tension.
- Academic pressures due to procrastination, workload and lack of ability.
- Burnout.
- Not feeling like they have the stamina to keep up the pace through finals.
- Job search stress for holiday break.
- Problems from increased alcohol consumption.
- Lack of initiative to find new friends or activities because it seems social groups are already set up.
- Concerns about going home at Thanksgiving time — whether it's concern about seeing changes among old friends, how things will be with family members, or dealing with a romantic relationship.

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without feeling guilty.

Your student may be gone — for now — yet he/she will always be part of your life. Create a welcoming "nest" for him/her to return to during breaks and stay in touch while you're apart. Those empty feelings will soon fade as you both focus on developing your new adult relationship.

Sources: "Empty Nest Syndrome," *Psychology Today* online, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/emptynest.html>; "An empty nest can promote freedom, improved relationships," *APA Online*, April 2003.