

Fighting for Your Empty Nest Marriage

Reinventing Your Relationship When the Kids Leave Home

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Chapter 1: The Hidden Meaning of Conflict Stories

Meet the Second Marriage of Your Marriage

Each fall, colleges across the country fill the freshman dormitories with new students all set to begin their college careers. Other high school graduates, all ready to enter the job market, move into apartments and condos with their friends, while still yet others join the army, air force, navy, or marines to be all they can be. Still other young adults do not leave home, at least not for some time, but live very independent lives, mostly using their parents' home as a place to sleep but little else. What do the parents of all these adult children have in common? They are entering the second half of marriage.

WHAT IS THE SECOND HALF OF MARRIAGE?

Because a lot of empty nesters really don't have a truly empty nest, we prefer the term second half of marriage. How can you know if you are approaching the second half or are already in it? Check out the symptoms:

- You begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel, and it doesn't spotlight your role as parents; you realize your active parenting years are coming to a close.
- Suddenly your arms aren't long enough to hold the newspaper you are trying to read.
- Your own parents are aging and may be experiencing health problems.
- You just got your invitation to join AARP.
- The golden oldies radio station is playing your song.
- You start losing hair where you don't want to lose it and start growing hair where you don't want it.
- That extra ten pounds threatens to become a permanent resident.
- You repeat yourself.
- You repeat yourself.

IS THIS BOOK FOR YOU?

Traditionally, we think of the empty nest family as one in which some or all of the children have left home to begin their own journeys through life. Couples in this category have usually been married twenty-plus years, and often the wife has not regularly worked outside the home, or the husband will be retiring and spending more time at home. Actually the empty nest syndrome starts at different times for different couples. Some couples are so overwhelmed with the teenage years that they don't even see the next stage coming until the last child leaves home or gets married. Others begin talking about it when the first college catalogue appears in their mailbox.

Today, many couples reaching the second half of their marriage find that their nest is filled (or refilled) with all sorts of unexpected visitors, such as toddlers or preschoolers or both. (Maybe they started their family late, or they may be raising a grandchild.) Their nest might also include teenagers, an adult child, or an elderly parent who is experiencing

health problems and needs extra care. These situations may be harder to deal with if you have had a period of time with just you and your partner at home. You've started to adjust to an empty nest and now have to readjust to sharing your home and facing increased complications.

We wrote this book not only for those of you who are entering the "traditional" empty nest with the first or last kid leaving home but also for those of you in the more complicated situations, such as the blended marriage, perhaps with both spouses having their own sets of adult or almost adult children. Perhaps you are in a new marriage with no kids but are in the second half of life. Or maybe you have survived the initial transition into the empty nest but need a marriage tune-up. So whether you are a newlywed or have been married twenty, thirty, forty or more years, if you want to keep improving your marriage, this book is written for you.

YOUR PATH TO THE SECOND HALF

As you can see, a marriage in the second half of life is far more complex than a mom and dad with no kids at home. But whatever your unique situation, we believe the sooner you begin to prepare for the empty nest (even if it never empties!), the smoother the transition you will make to this new and challenging stage of life.

Although the first emotion many new empty nesters feel is relief, life can become confusing. For many couples, it is almost as though they are in a new marriage. But like a new marriage, the empty nest marriage can take several different paths. Consider the following couples' experiences. They reflect three different paths: (1) drifting into the empty nest without much thought or awareness, (2) charging into the empty nest with celebration, and (3) crashing into the empty nest and the crises of transition.

Joe and Nancy

"Our twin daughters were the spark plugs that kept our family lively," Nancy told us. "When they left for college, everything changed. It was so quiet. Actually I had looked forward to a little peace and quiet, but it seemed so weird to be just the two of us again—like we really didn't know each other any more. I began to realize that our marriage was stagnant. We had little in common, few things to talk about. It's not that either of us had intentionally ignored the other, but with the demands of two very active and social children, over the years, we had drifted apart." Joe added, "I didn't have a clue as to what to do, so I reacted by spending more time at work and more time with my golf buddies." "I felt so alone," Nancy continued. "I was disoriented. My major focus in life was the girls. Now they were gone, and so was my job. No more college applications to help with or track meets to attend. No more impromptu teenage parties. I realized my own personal interests were limited. No wonder Joe didn't want to spend time at home. I was boring. And I was bored. Wasn't the empty nest supposed to be more fun than this?"

Frances and Albert

"Have you seen the commercial on television, where the mom is upstairs redecorating her son's room before he gets out of the driveway?" Albert asked. "Well, that was Frances! It wasn't that we didn't love our kids, but parenting three adolescent boys had not been a joyride—it was more like forced labor! When they left we were ready to party." Frances continued, "While we did have some adjustments to make, entering the empty nest was not a crisis time for us. Actually, I had the most adjusting to do. I'd always wanted to pursue a graduate degree, so now was my time. Albert was supportive, so I cut back on my hours at work and enrolled in the MBA program at our local university." "I was glad Frances got accepted into the grad school, and I wanted to encourage her in anyway I could," Albert said. Frances, smiling at Albert, added, "And now when the

boys come home for visits, we enjoy them-but we aren't that sad when they leave again."

Hank and Susan

"When our kids left home, we didn't know each other," Hank told us when we met them at a neighborhood party, "and we came close to divorcing. Previously our lives revolved around our children and their activities. We had few conflicts, but when the kids left home there was a vacuum. We had nothing in common. It was a crisis time in our marriage. Susan became more assertive. I didn't know what was happening!" "For years my identity was my role as a mother," Susan went on. "Now I had a whole new world to discover." Hank added, "I was experiencing some health problems and wanted to slow down and spend more time at home, but Susan seemed driven to start her own interior decorating business. We were on different tracks. It was scary." "But you made it," I (Dave) commented. "We've been observing you all evening, and you like each other and seem to have a close relationship. What happened?" Hank responded, "We had to rebuild our marriage. In some ways it was like starting all over again. We had to get reacquainted. We rarely talked about "us," so we had to learn how to communicate and how to work through issues. We were both amazed how little we really knew about each other and how hard it was to change. But now we're enjoying one another's company again. It's like we have a whole new marriage."

Three couples on three different paths. Joe and Nancy drifted into the empty nest. Albert and Frances celebrated it, and Hank and Susan found the empty nest passage a real time of crisis. With which couple do you most identify? Whatever path you're on now, we can help you get on the path to making the coming years the best years of your life together.

THE EMPTY NEST YEARS OF YOUR MARRIAGE

As nests empty, couples enter uncharted waters full of the risks and dangers of midlife marriage burnout. Whereas Hank and Susan were able to rechart their course, other couples become divorce statistics.

In the following pages, we share with you some of what we have learned-from our combined research, from other couples, and from our own experience of the last decade in the empty nest. We're convinced that this phase of your life can be the best-but you have to fight for it to be so. Why is the empty nest so challenging? Consider the following points.

The Empty Nest Passage Is a Time of Insecurity

Children are leaving home, and with them they take their energy and vitality. There is more time to be introspective. For the first time, many spouses take a serious look at their marriage. This can be a risky time for spouses who have not maintained a close relationship during the parenting years. Mothers who had chosen to stay home with their children struggle to find their identity. Joyce, our friend who home-schooled her three children, told us as she sent her youngest off to college, "Now I have to decide who I want to be when I grow up."

As we age, a shift also takes place across gender lines. Many men become more nurturing and begin to focus back on the home. They are ready to slow down and enjoy life. Work becomes less important than in previous years. At the same time, women can become more focused, more assertive, and independent. Now it's their time to go out and make an impact on the world-especially if they, like Joyce, dedicated the first half of their marriage to nurturing and parenting their children. These changes are developmental and occur across different cultures; if they are not managed well, they can threaten the health of any marriage. One husband, married thirty years, wrote in the survey that he was fearful "that we will stop talking and pursuing each other for an

honest level of intimacy."

But changes handled wisely can enhance a second-half marriage. Couples can move closer to each other and may actually have more in common than during the active parenting years.

The Term Empty Nest Is Misleading

The "empty nest" is not always empty. For instance, Gail Sheehy, in her book *New Passages* (1995), reports that of unmarried American men between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, more than one-third are still living at home. Also, many adult children return home-often bringing a spouse, grandchildren, or both with them.

"Really, we never had an empty nest," Jennifer told us. "My widowed mother lived with us in her own apartment in our home for twenty-five years. One son left home, lived on his own for a while, and then returned to live with us. A year ago my mother died at ninety-two, and my son, his wife, and their baby moved into my mom's apartment. Consequently, we've never experienced an empty nest."

In addition, at this stage of life, many couples are in their second marriages with his children, her children, and younger children from the present marriage. Blended families add to the ambiguity of this life stage. Even in a "non-empty nest," the dynamics change when the children become young adults. It's definitely a new season of marriage.

More Couples Are Reaching the Empty Nest Stage, and the Divorce Rate for Empty Nest Marriages Is Accelerating

Conventional wisdom indicates that many couples stay together while children are the focus of the relationship; when the children leave home, so do the reasons for staying in the relationship. Long-term marriages are breaking up in record numbers. According to the National Center of Health Statistics, although divorce in the United States declined 1.4 percent from 1981 to 1991, divorce among couples married thirty years or longer increased 16 percent. A wife, married twenty-two years, wrote in the Arps' survey, "When our children leave (#1) and if my husband's anger and critical spirit remain (#2), then #3 is inevitable. It seems hopeless-will you please pray for us?"

People Are Living Longer, Making the Empty Nest a Major Stage of Marriage

Today it is not unusual to hear about couples celebrating their sixtieth or seventieth wedding anniversary. People are living far longer than in previous generations. Now the empty nest years may be the biggest chunk of your marriage. In the past, couples married, raised their families, and then died. Now people are living longer, and the possibility of a really long term marriage is the norm instead of the exception. Perhaps more people are calling their marriage quits because they don't want to face the next forty or fifty years in a less than satisfying marriage. The glue that held them together (the children) is gone, and these couples simply don't know how to stick together. One coauthor, Scott Stanley, noted in his book *The Heart of Commitment* (1998) that couples who stay together long term either stick or become stuck. Decisions you make at the beginning of the empty nest phase have a lot to do with what path you will be on in the years ahead. This book is about helping you to stick.

Resources to Help Couples Through the Empty Nest Passage Are Limited

Most marriage books, resources, and seminars are focused on pre- and early marriage or on marriage with children. When we (David and Claudia) hit the empty nest phase a decade ago, we were incredulous to discover how few resources even mentioned marriage in the empty nest-thus our decision to research it ourselves.

RESURVEYING EMPTY NEST ISSUES

Since we researched and wrote our book *The Second Half of Marriage* (1996), we conducted an additional survey and found once again that the issues in a marriage remain basically the same over the years. Issues and problems in marriage cause you neither success nor failure; it's how you deal with them that makes a difference, especially in the empty nest. When you are no longer meeting the demands of active parenting, issues will resurface and perhaps loom larger on the landscape of your marriage. So what are those major issues you'll take with you into the empty nest?

Consider the top ten issues in our empty nest survey, number one being the most severe problem area, number two, the next most severe problem, and so on:

Top Issues in the Empty Nest Years

1. Conflict
2. Communication
3. Sex
4. Health
5. Fun
6. Recreation
7. Money
8. Aging parents
9. Retirement planning
10. Children

The top three issues in the empty nest—conflict, communication, and sex—are also among the major problem areas for younger couples. People take their issues along as they transition through the different seasons of a marriage. We observed no overall gender differences that were very strong. However, females tended to say communication was more of a problem than did males, and males tended to say that sex was more of a problem than females reported. (Are you surprised?)

At this stage of life, money issues are not rated as high as for younger couples, but health issues are rated higher. The fact that fun and recreation are rated so high indicates that perhaps couples are having trouble figuring out what to do together that's enjoyable for both or finding fun things that both will take time out for. For years their shared recreational activities may have been centered around their children, and now they don't know what to do to have fun together.

How would you rank these issues in your marriage? Think about your relationship: with which issues do you struggle the most? You may want to take the same survey we give to our couples as an in-depth way to look at issues and discuss them with your partner. It is the second exercise at the end of this chapter. After you complete the survey, you may want to compare your rankings with the mean score of the empty nesters we surveyed. But first let's look at the challenges that all long-term marriages face.

CHALLENGING YOURSELVES FOR THE SECOND HALF

Through the findings of our surveys as well as the research of our colleagues and coauthors at the University of Denver, we have identified the major challenges facing couples who want to make a successful transition into the empty nest and beyond. The good news from our combined research is that for those of you who hang together through the empty nest transition, marital satisfaction can begin to rise again and stay that way if you risk growing in your relationship. But if you do not grow, the bond

between the two of you will likely weaken slowly but surely in the years to come.

The second half of marriage gives you the opportunity to reinvent your marriage, to make midcourse adjustments, and to reconnect with one another in a more meaningful way. Long-term marriages have staying power because they are held together from within. Competent couples invest time and energy in building and maintaining a positive relationship with each other.

The Eight Challenges of the Empty Nest

In our book *The Second Half of Marriage*, we listed the following eight challenges to those entering the empty nest years. We are convinced that if you work on these eight challenges, your marriage will be enriched. If you do not surmount these challenges, then your empty nest marriage will not be as fulfilling as it could be. Check and see how many of these challenges you are facing right now.

Let Go of Past Marital Disappointments, Forgive Each Other, and Commit to Making the Rest of Your Marriage the Best

Are you willing to let go of unmet expectations and unrealistic dreams? What about that missed promotion—for either you or your spouse? Can you give up your dream for a condo by the ski slopes? Or maybe you are realizing that your kid is never going to be a Rhodes scholar or professional baseball player. Can you accept those extra pounds? Those gray hairs—or the lack of hair? Your mate's irritating little habits don't seem to be disappearing; can you accept them?

Giving up lost dreams and dealing with each other's imperfections are positive steps toward forgiving past hurts and moving on in your marriage. Holding on to marital grudges and disappointments will only prevent you from moving on in your relationship and developing a new, more loving marriage.

Create a Marriage That Is Partner Focused Rather Than Child Focused

Too often when the children leave the nest, couples move from a child-focused marriage to an activity-focused marriage. Community or church activities may now take up the time and energy formerly devoted to their children. Unfortunately, excessive activities may buffer the couple from making their marriage a true partnership. How can you make the transition to a partner-focused relationship?

In the second half of marriage, the dynamics of your relationship change. Roles and functions that previously worked are no longer relevant. Without children as distractions, you have the opportunity to refocus and redefine your marriage. Marriage in the second half can be more personal and more fulfilling as you focus on the couple relationship and not on children.

Maintain an Effective Communication System That Allows You to Express Your Deepest Feelings, Joys, and Concerns

You may find the communication patterns that seemed to work during the first half of your marriage to be inadequate and lacking in the second half. With the children absent, there may be more silent spaces between you, with less to say to each other. You may ask yourself, "We made it this far, why is it now so difficult to have a really personal conversation?" A husband, married thirty-four years, wrote of his "hope for a renewal of the kind of communication experienced during courtship."

When you begin to talk about really personal matters, it's easy to feel threatened. Midlife is a time when it is vitally important to develop interpersonal competence—the ability to converse on a personal level by sharing your deepest feelings, joys, and concerns.

Successful couples are able to find a proper balance between intimacy and autonomy, and this is critical for healthy relationships in the second half of marriage.

Use Anger and Conflict in a Creative Way to Build Your Relationship

Love and anger can both be used to build your marriage, but you must process your anger in an appropriate way and develop a proper balance that allows you to express your concerns in the context of a loving relationship. A healthy marriage is a safe place to resolve honest conflict and process anger. The reason this challenge is so critical to long-term marriages is that in most conflict situations, the issue itself is often not the greatest problem. As we mentioned earlier, it is how you deal with the issues you face that is most crucial. A wife, married forty-one years, found the best aspect of her marriage to be "unity-we have the same goals and objectives. We are two individuals with very different interests. We learned to accommodate each other." This illustrates that working on your relationship communication can be effective. She wrote later in the survey that she looked forward to "unknown adventures" in the future, sending a message of the strength and growth this couple has experienced.

For most couples, the issues that cause conflict stay pretty much the same year in and year out. But, as we will describe later in the book, certain patterns of negative interaction are deadly for your marriage. We challenge you to learn to face your more difficult issues in a whole new manner that allows you to grow closer in the years ahead.

Build a Deeper Friendship and Enjoy Your Spouse

At this stage of marriage, you can deepen your friendship and become close companions. One advantage of a long-term marriage is being more familiar and comfortable with each other. You know you aren't perfect, so you can relax and enjoy each other. What are you doing to build your friendship with your spouse? Are you taking care of your health and pacing yourself for the second half? What are you doing to stretch your boundaries and prevent boredom? The second half of marriage is a great time to develop "couple friends." How can you put more fun in your marriage and use humor to diminish the effects of an already too serious world? Friendship and fun in marriage-especially in the second half-is serious business!

Renew Romance and Restore a Pleasurable Sexual Relationship

Many assume that as people grow older they lose interest in sex. Research shows otherwise. Our survey results suggest that sexual satisfaction actually increases rather than decreases with number of years married. As couples enter the second half of marriage it is important for them to protect their privacy, cherish their love relationship, and renew romance, while also acknowledging the inevitable changes in their bodies. The quality of one's love life is not so much a matter of performance as it is a function of the quality of relationship. A husband, married thirty years, wrote of the best in his marriage: "We enjoy each other. We like to do similar activities. We are good friends. We are in good health and exercise. We enjoy good healthy sex; we do know how to party and celebrate life." What more could anyone ask for?

Adjust to Changing Roles with Aging Parents and Adult Children

Just as you need to release your children into adulthood, you need to reconnect with them on an adult level. At the same time, you need to balance relationships with your own parents. If your parents did not successfully meet this challenge in their own marriage, it may be more difficult for you. Whatever your situation, the relationships with your elderly parents and your adult children definitely have an effect on your marriage. Understanding and accepting what is realistic in your own family relationships is very important. You can't go back and change your past family history, but what you do in the future is your choice and decision. You can choose to forge better relationships with

those loved ones on both sides of the generational seesaw.

Evaluate Where You Are on Your Spiritual Pilgrimage

Couples reading this book will come from many different perspectives about faith, religion, and belief systems. Regardless of your particular beliefs and whether or not the two of you share them, this is a very important time of life to draw together in this area. Research has confirmed that most people, as they age, get more religious. Researchers speculate that this is because people think more about "what it all means" as they get closer to death. Or, as one gentleman put it in a PREP workshop years ago, "they are getting wiser with age." You may have noticed this tendency to "get wiser" in your own life. Our challenge to you is rather simple: to consider this time of transition as a great opportunity for the two of you to talk more openly and regularly about how you view life at this point-what it means, what matters, where it all heads, and what core beliefs you share in your marriage.

The Marriage Journey

Marital success comes through daily struggles. Marriage is made up of the daily grind; the little things, such as making unselfish choices and forgiving each other, help build a healthy marriage. If taken in good faith, little steps can turn the tide. But it helps to have a plan.

You can take the initiative to improve your relationship with your spouse and master the challenges of the empty nest, but remember that real growth involves more than knowledge. You must transform that knowledge into experience. Then you can make the rest of your marriage the best. The following chapters give you the tools to surmount these challenges.

PREPARING FOR THE EMPTY NEST WITH THIS BOOK

In Part One, we'll walk you through the first step of preparing. You need to evaluate where you are right now in your relationship. Taking stock of your relationship as it is now will help you accept each other as a package deal, forgive each other, and refocus on your marriage.

In Part Two, you'll learn how to develop your own coping system-it will be your key to communicating and to handling conflict in the empty nest. We will look at patterns to avoid as well as habits to develop, such as the Speaker-Listener Technique. You will learn how to talk things out-even when you disagree. We'll introduce the critical distinction between issues and events and show you how that concept will help you stay on course and open the door for continued growth and intimacy in your relationship. You'll be able to solve problems more effectively when you learn how to fight fair-especially if you follow our ground rules.

In Part Three, we look more specifically at empty nest issues. One of the biggest challenges is dealing with unmet or unrealistic expectations. Some things are just not going to change or happen in this lifetime. To move on in your relationship, you must accept your unique situation.

We look at the huge role that commitment plays in an empty nest marriage as well as the importance of core beliefs and how to focus on developing spiritual intimacy for this stage of marriage.

Relating to young adult children and older aging parents is a huge challenge. The key is to make your marriage the anchor relationship. Let your marriage be the relational tie that binds you together, so that together you can weather those inevitable family storms

that surface from time to time.

In Part Four, we look at ways to enhance your empty nest. This season of marriage holds great challenges as well as great rewards. From our survey, we discovered that empty nesters may be the best lovers and may attain the highest level of sexual satisfaction. A key to enhancing your marriage is simply having fun and building your friendship. We are convinced you can keep your relationship strong and that a successful empty nest marriage may be your greatest reward for the years you spent raising your family.

Now let's get started. It is time to take stock of the second marriage of your marriage by working through the exercises.

In Chapter Two, we guide you in discovering the refreshing, restorative power of being willing to forgive each other and to commit to making the rest of your marriage the best!

EXERCISES

Taking Stock of Your Marriage

These questions are designed to help couples think carefully about the issues in their relationships in preparation for discussion about these issues. Consider the following questions about your marriage. You may want to discuss one or more of them with your spouse after you answer them individually, in writing if you wish.

1. What are the major transitions you are presently facing? (First or last child leaving the nest? Changing roles? Relating to new in-laws? Grandchildren?)
2. What do you want your marriage to look like when you are in your eighties?
3. What are your financial goals? Educational plans? Retirement plans?
4. How is your health and physical fitness? Do you need to make any changes?
5. What do you do just for fun?

Second Half of Marriage Survey

Again, each of you may think about these issues individually and discuss them later as a couple. Keep your written answers to refer to later in the book (Chapter Seven). To complete the survey, please make two copies of the issues inventory on the next page; each of you should complete it on your own.

Issues Inventory

Consider the following list of issues. Please rate how much of a problem each area currently is in your relationship by writing in a number from 0 (not a problem at all) to 10 (a severe problem). For example, if money is a slight problem in your relationship, you might enter a 2 or 3 next to Money. If money is not a problem, you would enter a 0, and if money is a severe problem, you would enter 10. If you wish to add other areas that aren't included, please do so in the blank spaces provided. Now rate each area on a separate scale of 0 (not a problem) to 10 (a severe problem): ____ Money

- ____ In-laws
- ____ Recreation
- ____ Communication
- ____ Conflict resolution
- ____ Friends
- ____ Extended family
- ____ Aging parents
- ____ Careers
- ____ Alcohol and/or drugs
- ____ Sex
- ____ Children

- Grandchildren
- Religion
- Retirement planning
- Health and physical fitness
- Household responsibilities
- Ministry and community service activities
- Friendship with spouse
- Fun and leisure activities
- Other
- Other

Briefly answer the following questions:

What are the best aspects of your marriage?

What are the areas that cause the greatest stress in your marriage?

What do you fear the most about your marriage in the future?

What are you looking forward to in your marriage in the future?