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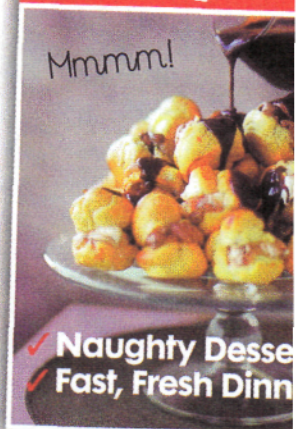
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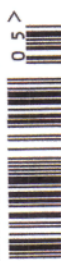


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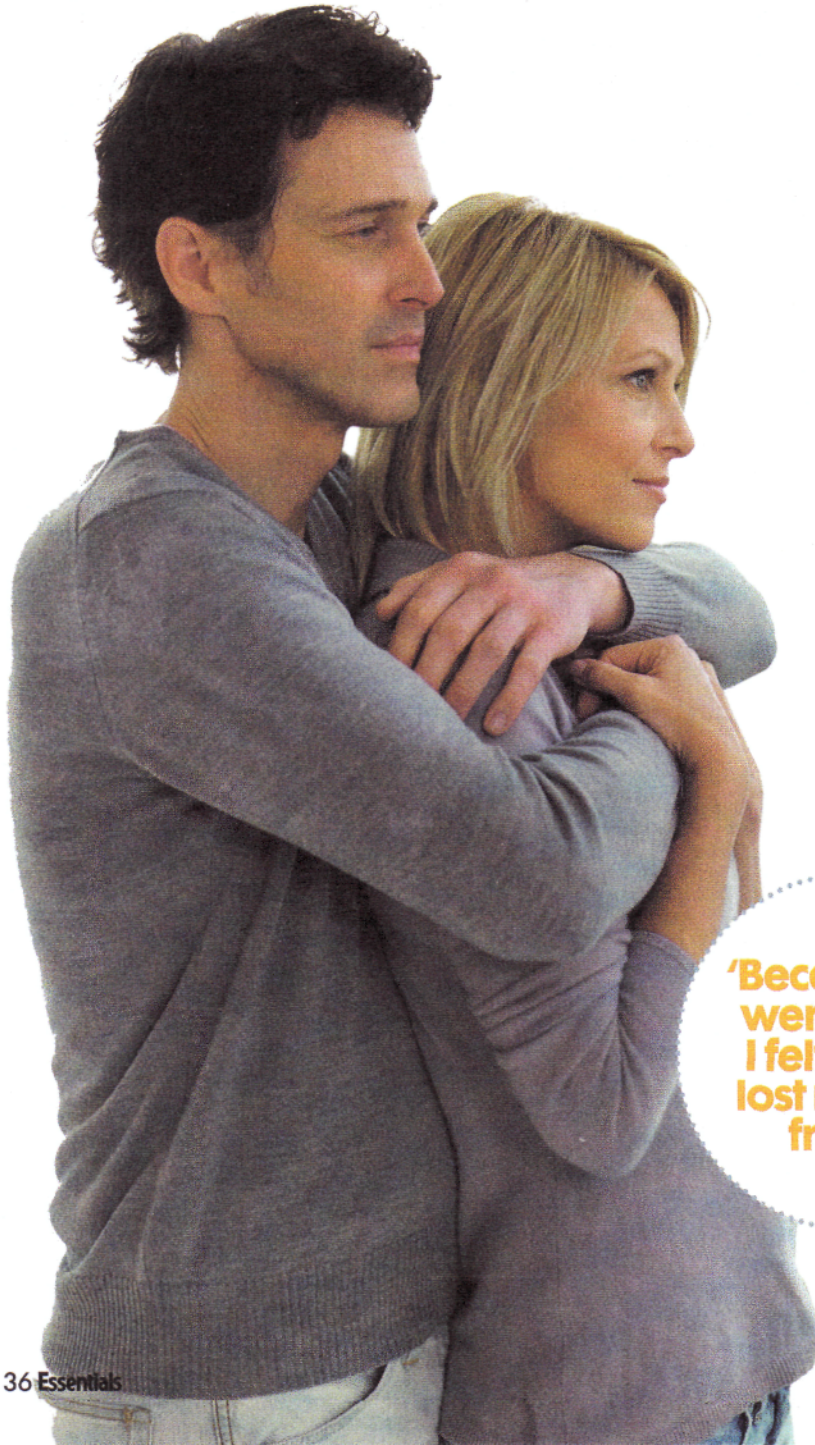
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# 'Goodbye kids,



All the research shows that when the kids leave home, couples have more money, more time and more friends. So why am I dreading it, asks mother-of-two **Eve Ahmed?**



**T**wo years ago, when Rosanna, my eldest, left home to go to college in Cornwall, I as good as followed her. Once a month, I'd make the 500 mile round trip, where my youngest, Claudia, and I would stay in a nice hotel, eat lovely meals and go sightseeing with Rosanna. For an entire year I told myself she was homesick and needed me, but really I needed her more. She didn't mind at first, but the novelty slowly wore off.

But why did I feel so bereft? It's not as though either me or my husband wanted to keep her at home forever, so her leaving didn't exactly come as a shock.

That's why I've got to behave differently when Claudia, who's now 15, leaves in the next couple of years. As she makes her own way in the world, the last thing she'll need is a clingy parent.

Counsellor Phillip Hodson is not at all surprised at the strength of my feelings, and advised me to browse the many chat rooms that are awash with mothers asking for ways to get through the transition.

## Everything changes

'For some women,' he says, 'it's a gut-wrench. It brings you face to face with ageing and makes you feel redundant. You find yourself asking what's life all about now, and how are you going to spend the rest of it?'

That definitely rings a bell with me. From the hectic days when my girls were babies through to the sometimes-traumatic teenage years, I've structured my life around them and turned down opportunities because of them. When they go, everything changes, and all change is scary.

Mum of one, Deanne Gold, from Hertfordshire, understands. 'When Gemma left to go to

college last year, I was devastated,' she says. 'Because we were so close, I felt like I had lost my best friend, as well as my daughter. I realised I had to take steps to deal with it. So I bought myself a dog – Freddie – and have spent lots of time walking him. And my husband, Marc, and I made plans to do the kind of things we couldn't do before – going out in the evening, and taking holidays during term time, which saves a fortune.'

'We're also thinking of moving to Spain. It's something that we've always talked about, because

**'Because we were close, I felt like I'd lost my best friend'**

# hello... what?'

it would be easy to run my marketing business from over there, but now we're actually looking at properties.'

Getting practical and doing something is the right way forward, according to Celia Dodd, author of *The Empty Nest: How to Survive and Stay Close to Your Adult Child* (£12.99, Piatkus). Her first piece of advice is to write a list of all the things you can do now that you couldn't do before. 'There's nothing that can take the place of your children, but you've just got to get on with it. Write a list of things that would cheer you up – from going away for the weekend, to having friends round for dinner.'

I'm not convinced. Yes, it would be easier to plan and execute a dinner party without two children hovering in the background, but is this really going to fill the hole they leave? I put that to agony aunt Suzie Hayman who, while sympathetic, told me not to dismiss the small things.

'Okay, it may not sound much,' she says, 'but it's all about freedom, and getting it back: choosing what you want to watch on the TV, tidying a room and not having it messed up within the hour. These are the things you will appreciate again.'

Mum-of-three Stephanie Ashley, from Birmingham, agrees. 'I have three sons and the last left home two years ago,' she says. 'At first I didn't know what to do with myself. It was like – that's it, everything's changed, it's just me and my husband now. And then I realised, "Wow, it's just me and my husband". So we've been away together for weekends because we've got more money, I've taken on more work because I can without feeling guilty, and I see so much more of my friends.'

'I haven't done anything momentous, I've just been able to do the things I've always loved.'

## Plan to stop worrying

Knowing that your children are definitely going to leave home at some stage means that anyone worrying about how they'll cope can at least plan ahead. Psychologist Sheila Keegan suggests weaning yourself off them gradually.

'Stop doing their washing and cooking for them and teach them to budget. That way, you know

they'll cope on their own, and you won't worry so much.' Stop ferrying them around, stop giving them money when they ask, and start getting your own social life in order.

Even though her youngest, Shona, is still 15, Julia Baird, a manager from Oxford, is already anticipating the next stage. Her 19-year-old son, Dan, still lives at home, but is hoping to rent a place with his friends. Julia says, 'Recently, my husband and I went on holiday without them for the first time. It was lovely to do something just for us. And I'm consciously appreciating family meals together, and having days out with Shona.'

## Time to become you again

According to Christine Webber, author of *Too Young to Get Old* (£9.99, Piatkus), this is exactly the right time to start making a plan.

'Many women put their ambitions on the back burner when they become mothers,' she says. 'So now's the time to organise your trek to Machu Picchu, if that's what you've always craved. Or to set up your own business.' The Prime Initiative website ([prime.org.uk](http://prime.org.uk))

has information on so-called 'olderpreneurs', while [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) has information on further education and training for adults. 'You'll surprise yourself,' Christine says. 'Every woman I know, once she's got over the initial grief, says she feels more confident and has better self-esteem.'

According to a survey carried out in 2010 of parents whose kids had recently moved out, the majority of mums and dads felt ten years younger, were about £600 a month better off, had increased their number of friends, taken up new hobbies and felt that their relationships had improved.

So what do I want to do with the remainder of my life? Do I get a dog as a substitute baby, or is there a new business I should start? Will hubby and I move to France and grow olives, or will we find ourselves staring at each other across the dining table with nothing left to say?

These are big, scary questions. But, I'm now beginning to realise that they're exciting ones, too.

'Since my sons left, I've been able to do the things I love'

## And how do you feel?

Jill Anderson is a researcher from Leamington Spa

I knew when the last of my three children moved out it would be hard – I'm widowed and I needed to fill my life. So, I set up a local singles group.

Ann Smith is a counsellor from Oxford

It's easy to lose sight of yourself and focus all your energies on the kids. That's why I've always tried to keep some time for myself, so I won't feel redundant when my daughter leaves home this year.

Jane Ball is a dentist from Chester

When my children moved, oddly, it was the things that I hated before that I missed the most, like the cooking and cleaning.

Teresa Clarke is a researcher from London

My only daughter finishes school this June. On one hand, I can't wait! But on the other, I know I won't like it when the house is quiet and empty, and I'll miss hearing about the love lives of her many friends.