

Feather an empty nest

When you are surrounded by toddlers in nappies and are desperate for a good night's sleep, the thought that in 20 years you and your partner will be empty-nesters must seem like a blissful dream.

Yet fast-forward those 20 years and the reality can feel rather different. Though the freedom of time to yourselves with no need for babysitters sounds wonderful, it's not an automatic bed of roses.

Freedom to be with your partner without the kids getting in the way is something for which you need to consciously train. If you don't prepare yourselves in your children's teenage years, you may find that once you hit the empty-nest stage you are married to someone with whom you don't have much in common. And that can be a scary prospect.

The empty-nesting years are a peak period for divorce and it takes a tremendous amount of planning to make these years successful.

And if both of you decide to retire early, that's even more of a challenge, because for the first time in your lives you face the possibility of being together 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This is a transition time, even for couples who have always got on well. So it makes sense that in the years leading up to your empty nest, you make the effort to do something together that doesn't focus on the children, because it's too hard to jump that gap if you haven't had a taste of it.

Don't become a couple that sits in a restaurant with nothing to say to each other. If you are already at this stage, get some counselling to find out how to rediscover each other.

It's time to take stock of where you are in your life and what you want to do with the last third of it. These are big questions and you need to be creative and open with each other, and allow new interests to come into your life that you might not expect.

Though it's great to take up new interests together, you may also want to discover something new that doesn't involve your partner, but which you can take back into the relationship as a conversation point, and share your excitement.

Remember that commitment is a lifelong process, not just two minutes when you say "I do" at your wedding. Relationships are living and changing, not static and dead.

Change can feel scary, but it's just a part of life to be negotiated and celebrated.

Survival tips

- **You need to train for the empty-nesting years by maintaining connection with your partner**
- **Realise that relationships do change over your life and it's just a matter of adapting to that**
- **Once the children don't need you so much, develop some new interests that you can take back to your relationship.**