

Empty Nesters and Retirees: A Fact Sheet

Empty nesters must prepare for many transitions and the resulting effects on their marriages.

Background

Mature couples who have been married for a long time may think the hardest part is over. Their marriage has survived child-rearing and career-building, and they are preparing to relax and enjoy the “golden years.” However, many of these couples will encounter transitions for which they were not prepared.

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.

These natural transitions may involve children growing up and moving away (or returning), the loss of a parent, or retirement. Additionally, various transitions may occur at the same time, which can heighten a couple’s stress level. The large baby-boom population is experiencing many of these mid-life transitions and the resulting effects on their marriages.

Trends

The term baby boomer refers to the population surge after World War II, a period that lasted from about 1946 to 1964. This group numbers 78 million, or about 40 percent of the population older than age 15, and will have aged to their late 40s, 50s and

early 60s by 2010.ⁱ The sheer size of the baby-boom population has brought the pressures caused by retirement, children growing up and moving out of the house, and other mid-life transitions, to the forefront of our national cultural conversation. The following describes the nature and magnitude of trends facing older married couples with children.

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. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that, between 1995 and 2010, the number of married couples with no children living at home is expected to have increased by 7 million; all of the increase is predicted to occur in couples age 45 years and older.ⁱⁱ

Sandwich Generation refers to a generation of adults who are caring for their own children while taking care of their aging parents. As health care advances enable people to live longer, more adults are finding themselves in this situation. Some



estimates show that nearly two-thirds of the baby-boom generation will be taking care of an elderly parent in the next 10 years.ⁱⁱⁱ

Boomerang Kids refers to young people between the ages of 17 and 35 who, after moving out of their parents' house, return for varying periods of time. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, since 1985, while the portion of 18-24 year olds living with their parents has fluctuated between 48 and 60 percent (with a smaller portion of females than males living at home), the portion of 25-34 year olds living with their parents has, for the most part, steadily increased. In 1985, 13 percent of males and 8 percent of females in this age group were living at home. In 2008, about 15 percent of males and 10 percent of females were living at home.^{iv} They return for various reasons, most often economic.^v Some even return with children of their own.

Even when couples are experiencing the same transition, they may respond differently. For example, women, who often fulfill the role of primary caregiver, are sometimes more emotionally affected by children leaving home.

Retirement refers to the period after an individual stops work. Often this is a voluntary decision intended to allow for rest and pursuit of other interests; however, in tough economic times, "retirement" can be forced. Data show that retirement rates since 1950, at least for men, are following a bell-shaped curve. In 1950, nearly half of men ages 64 and older were still in the workforce. This dipped to 15.8 percent in 1985 and, by 2007, had increased to 20.5 percent. The trend for women is different, as relatively few women were in the workforce in 1950. In that year, workforce participation for women ages 64 and older was 9.7 percent. This decreased to 7.3 percent in

1985 and, by 2007, had increased to 12.7 percent. Still, these data show that the majority of women and men ages 64 and older are no longer in the workforce.^{vi}

Gender-Based Approaches to Transition

Even when couples are experiencing the same transition, they may respond differently. For example, women, who often fulfill the role of primary caregiver, are sometimes more emotionally affected by children leaving home. In fact, a survey of nearly 1,200 parents ages 40 to 70, conducted in 2004 by Del Webb Corporation, an industry leader in retirement homes, found that 70 percent of men reported they are or were emotionally prepared to see their children leave the house, compared with 55 percent of women.^{vii} Retirement can be a more difficult transition

for men. American society often equates a man's identity with his job. When the job is no longer there, a man can struggle with his sense of identity.

This can be even

more complicated when both spouses work or the retirement is the result of downsizing.

Impact on Marriage

While these issues affect individuals, they also can create challenges for marriages. Data reveals that during the past three decades, the portion of first marriages that made it to their twentieth anniversary declined considerably. Of first marriages that began between 1955 and 1959, 73.1 percent celebrated a twentieth anniversary, compared with 53.1 percent of marriages that started between 1980 and 1984. Consider the case of the female empty

vester: Feeling a void in her life, she may look to her husband to help fill it; if he does not respond in a supportive way, then she may feel alienated or become resentful.

With more two-career households, the rules are changing regarding how women respond to mid-life transitions. Women are now defining themselves differently and are more likely to see divorce as an option to address feelings of unhappiness. Two-thirds of the divorces among people ages 40 to 70 are initiated by the woman.^{viii}

Summary

Couples who feel connected are better able to overcome the challenges of midlife.^{ix} The feeling of connection may apply to each other, family or friends. Having retired or experiencing an adult child moving away and starting his/her own family can challenge a couple's feelings of connection. If each spouse experiences this transition differently, then they may look to their marriage to meet a previously nonexistent need.

Survey, available at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ad1.xls>

^v Bodnar, Janet *Writing a Contract for Boomerang Kids* <http://www.kiplinger.com/columns/drt/archive/2005/dt050317.html>

^{vi} Purcell, P. "Older Workers: Employment and Retirement Trends," CRS Report for Congress, updated September 15, 2008. Available at <http://aging.senate.gov/crs/pension34.pdf>

^{vii} *Baby Boomers Reclaim Independence in the Empty Nest but Del Webb Survey Shows 'Boomerang' Kids May Re-Feather Their Future*, Business Services Industry, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_2004_June_29/ai_n6089238/pg_3/?tag=content;col1

^{viii} Gibbs, Nancy *Midlife Crises? Bring it On!* <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1059032,00.html>

^{ix} Larson, Alina (Jan/Feb 2008) *A Matter of Perspective* *Positive Thinking Magazine*, 38-42

ⁱ Day, Jennifer Cheeseman, *Projections of the Number of Households and Families in the United States: 1995 to 2010*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P25-1129, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/1/pop/p25-1129.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stritof, Sheri & Bob *Sandwich Generation: The Cluttered Nest Syndrome* <http://marriage.about.com/cs/sandwich/a/sandwichgen.htm>

^{iv} Table AD-1, *Young Adults Living at Home: 1960 to Present*, Data based on Current Population