

COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN THE LAUNCHING STAGE

Family Therapy Program

In the launching stage of the family life cycle the children have reached the age where they are in the process of making the transition from home as the primary location of their life to living life as an independent adult outside the home. For some parents this leads to what is **often referred to as the “empty nest syndrome”, where parents are feeling somewhat lost as to their meaning and role.** For some parents this requires that partners reestablish their couple relationship without the buffer and distractions of kids. For others, it can be a liberating time of **freedom to pursue interests put on hold while the children’s needs** were the focus of family life.

Ideally, the transition from dependence to independence is a gradual, smooth, mutually agreed on and satisfying process. There are times though when this is a highly emotional and conflicted time of family life. Parent and young adult alike can be experiencing confusion and inner turmoil about the impending separation. This can be especially hard if there have been difficult and unresolved separations in the

family’s life, like a turbulent divorce.

Likewise, if the family has been especially close due to financial problems, life difficulties, or in general has felt like it has had to band together due to constantly feeling under threat by forces outside its boundaries, sorting out the emotionality of the separation can very painful for everyone involved.

As with adolescent separation, it is easy for parents in this stage to assume more **deliberateness to their child’s behavior than** is intended. Once the young person is at this stage in their life they are trying to be more self-determining in how they present to the world than they are feeling inside. While they are trying to act certain on the outside, there is often a part of them that has questions, but pride, habitual

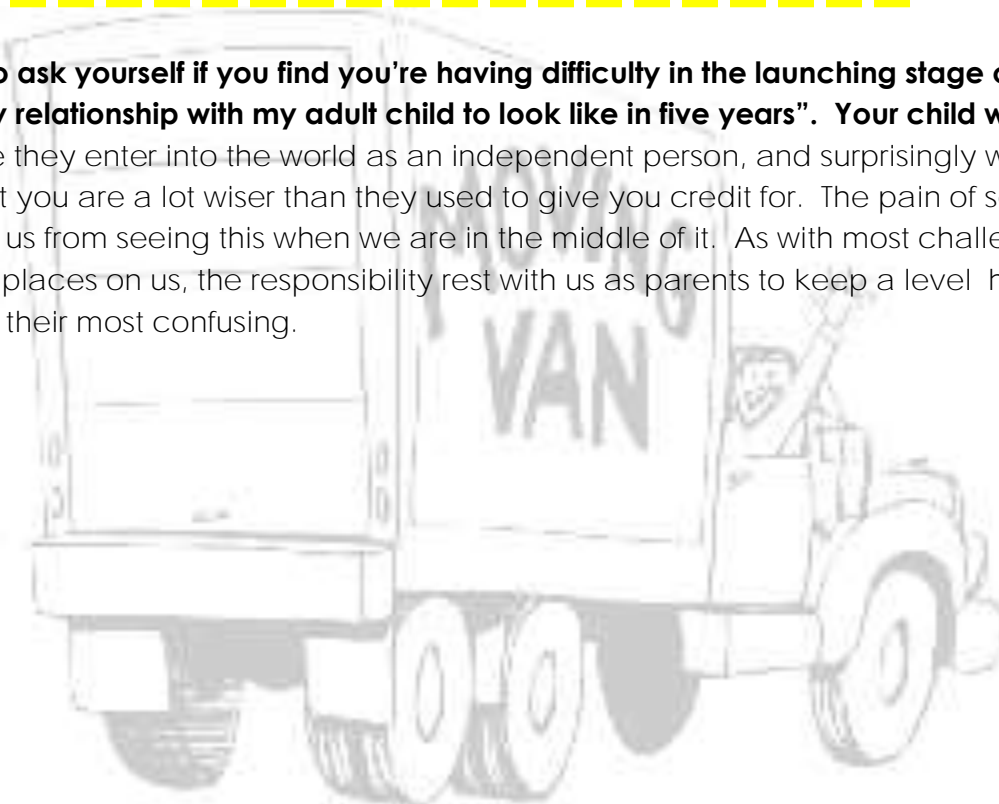
communication patterns or emotional history makes it difficult to ask. As a parent it is important to put your own frustrations and fears aside and to assist them to save face in asking for your help. While they might not hear you about big life choices that they are immediately facing, they are still learning a lot from you about how to process choices, and how to cope with emotional tension in the midst of a lot of conflict.



Any and all of these kinds of dynamics can become greatly magnified when parents have a history of problems from their own launching stage. If your own separation was especially conflicted it makes it that much more difficult to manage a smooth transition for your own children. Unable to draw upon your own experience of seeing how to manage this effectively, you are faced with the difficult task of having to operate in a parental capacity, while holding in check your own lingering resentments about how it felt when your parents dealt with you in a similar situation. All of this conspires to put you in a position to have to navigate two huge tasks. The first task is to devise strategies and structures at a rational level that you have no template from experience to draw on. Secondly, you have to work through the emotional confusion of participating in a negotiation where you have to play the role of someone you resented in adolescence. Therapy can be useful in getting perspective and developing strategies.



A question to ask yourself if you find you're having difficulty in the launching stage of life is "how do I want my relationship with my adult child to look like in five years". Your child will learn life lessons once they enter into the world as an independent person, and surprisingly will likely find with age that you are a lot wiser than they used to give you credit for. The pain of separation often clouds us from seeing this when we are in the middle of it. As with most challenges that childrearing places on us, the responsibility rest with us as parents to keep a level head when things are at their most confusing.



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