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Season 2: Episode 1D: Becoming an Empty-Nester

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

MB: Hello again, everybody, this is Megan Bergfeld with Work/Life Connections EAP here at Vanderbilt. Today, we are wrapping up our miniseries on parenthood. I would like to welcome another returning guest, Julie Burton, from Work/Life Connections. Welcome Julie!

JB: Thank you, Megan. I'm so glad to be here with you today. I'll be real honest, though. This topic is a little fresh and a little bit hard to talk about.

MB: Yep. That's why I thought of you for it. So, we'll see how it goes, but today, just for everyone listening, we're going to talk about empty nesting and how parents can navigate the world when our babies become adults in the eyes of the law. Julie, as you mentioned, you're actively living this reality as the mama of two lovely humans who are moving through young adulthood. So, to start, would you mind sharing a bit about your story.

JB: Sure. I am so grateful to be the mom of Jack, who will turn 20 years old in just four days from today, and Annie, who is 18. So, Jack moved away for college last year, and Annie recently started her freshman year at UT Knoxville. Since they are just one school year apart from each other, I really had to do this empty nesting transition in a very quick, short amount of time. I went from a home with all bedrooms occupied to one that is pretty empty.

MB: Yeah.

JB: Pretty lonely sometimes.

MB: How did you prepare yourself emotionally for that shift?

JB: That's funny. I'm going to be real honest with you and say that there is really no way for you to prepare yourself for the wide range of emotions that you're going to experience when they leave. I was excited. That's one emotion. They are becoming amazing adult humans. I am so proud of them. But I also have been experiencing stress and worries and then that sadness and grief about them leaving one sweet chapter and starting a new one. To help combat some of my stress and anxiety in the months leading up to their moving away for the first time, I went into like nesting mode, but instead of nesting for myself, I was nesting for them, getting everything for their new nest ready. All the supplies, the medicine kits, the umbrellas for the rainy day, the comforts of home to cozy up their new living spaces. Since everything about this process felt very out of control, those were the things that I could control. Taking charge of their essential packing needs with something that I had some control over.

MB: It's funny that you call it nesting mode, because I think many parents experience that when they're preparing to bring a baby home, right? Like, we nest. We get everything ready. We prepare. Maybe again because that's just one of the things we can control, right? But, I hadn't thought about how that might show up again when you're helping them leave your nest, right? To build, like you said, to make their own nest. That makes a lot of sense.

JB: Yes. That's exactly what I was doing. So, as it relates to the grief part and managing the sadness, that's a little different. We were closing a chapter, and there is a lot of grief, and I think I just had to allow space for that grief. In the first weeks after they both left, I have found myself getting really tearful when I walk by their rooms and they're empty. Without them in the room and their things in the rooms.

MB: It's too quiet, isn't it?

JB: Yep. Sometimes, like the quietness in the kitchen in the morning will just kind of sneak up on me and remind me of their absences. So, I have just had to be there. I'm sure you've heard me sort of get a little emotional as we've been talking about this. I recently read a book on burnout, where the author described emotions like tunnels, that you have to go all the way through them in order to see the light at the other side. If you don't go all the way through, you get stuck, and so I've been allowing that space just to move through them, giving myself permission to feel the emotions when they come out, just raw and organic.

MB: Yep. Natural part of who you are, who you are as a human, who you are as a mom, who you are as Julie, in general. I think that's a beautiful thing, a necessary piece for everybody. Did you notice any differences, like in the style, in the emotional piece, whatever, between the first kid leaving and the second one? I know it happened fast for you. Did you notice any differences?

JB: I wouldn't say it was because of the order of which they left, I would say it was the personality of the child. My oldest child, Jack, he wanted to soak up all of the family time that he could before he left. We made all of his favorite dinners. He asked for extra game nights and movie nights leading up to his move. Now Annie, she was a completely different situation. She was ready for college to begin before she even graduated high school, and she literally counted down those days until she left. She told us regularly how much she couldn't wait to be on her own. So, quite different.

MB: Yeah. I'm not sure which of those scenarios would wreck me more as a mom. Like, having all that one-on-one time with your kid and trying to just be present but not too far ahead in my brain versus the kid who's ready to leave me, and I'm like, "No, please don't leave!" That just all sounds like a lot. It really does. How has your role with your kids changed since they turned 18? Particularly since they moved out on their own.

JB: So, I've had to transition from being in the role of parent to being in the role of a consultant for them. I ask them questions, allow them to ask me questions. I'm able to provide them with guidance, but I'm learning to let them make their own decisions. My kids' pediatrician told me when they were entering their adolescent years that the level of freedoms I should give them should be equal to the trustworthiness that they have demonstrated. So, I have been very intentional about trying to follow that rule. So, in my case, my kids have been extremely responsible. They've made good decisions. They've always been conscientious students, made good grades. So, when they asked me when they turned 18 to remove Life360, and then they didn't elect to grant me access to their college grading system, I have respected those decisions. Of course, things will change, or hopefully they won't, but they would change if for any reason they demonstrate that they need more monitoring. This might look different for other people, but this has worked well for our family.

MB: Yeah, yeah. I think that's the key is knowing your kid, right? Having those conversations. That sounds like that's a big piece of it, because just because you magically turn 18 doesn't mean you know everything suddenly. So, they're going to need you still. But, I like that shift from the parent to consultant. It's still an important role, but it's a little less, I don't know what the right words are, but it's different. It's a shift.

JB: It gives them more autonomy.

MB: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, how can parents continue to foster connections, then, with their adult children. Like, in this autonomy, right? How do you still have a good connection with your adult kids?

JB: Yeah, I think it's important to find that perfect balance. You know? Give them that space, give them that autonomy, but also express your own needs to them. Like, mama's going to need some regular check ins. Yeah. I think just letting them be, but also being true to what your needs are is important.

MB: Yeah. I think that's a good life lesson for them, too. You know, they're not the only ones with needs, right? In adolescence and childhood, kids don't see too far beyond themselves all the time. So, having that shift in adulthood, like other people have needs, too, including your mother, who needs you to call, who needs you to visit, or who is going to need to come see you and just lay eyes on you, kiddo.

JB: Absolutely.

MB: That's really, that's a good point. So, to close, do you have any suggestions for how parents can care for themselves in the transition?

JB: Well, shut that bedroom door. Shut that bedroom door before you move them out. That way, you'll have a little more control over how quickly those tears start flowing when you see their empty space, their empty room without them in it. I think, you know, what's helped me is staying active, keeping tight

relationships with those social connections, making sure you're with other people. I've actually reengaged in some hobbies. I had to dust off my sewing machine that hasn't been used because I had been mama, and mamas don't often have time to make space for their own hobbies, but I've brought that old Singer out and been sewing a little bit. I think that it's also important to admit when you need support and allow yourself to be sad. I have checked in a little more frequently with my own therapist. I have also reached out to other moms and parents who are also empty nesters. That has been very comforting and validating at times to hear they're in the same space. They're feeling those emotions all over the place, just like me.

MB: Julie, thank you. Those are great tips, and I really appreciate you meeting with me and sharing your insights, and I appreciate you in general. Thank you.

JB: Oh, thank you.

MB: Listeners, thank you for tuning in today and throughout this whole month for this miniseries. If these discussions resonated with you and you want to continue the conversation, please feel free to reach out to EAP for your no-cost, confidential appointment today. Our number is 615-936-1327. Until next time, take care!

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