

How to navigate LIFE'S BIG CHANGES

*Have a healthy relationship whatever life throws at you,
with help from relationship expert Jan Day*

Big life changes, even those that are joyously anticipated, can cause ripples in our relationships. Altering our lifestyle patterns disrupts our established ways of being together and if we aren't aware and pro-active in dealing with these, they can result in painful consequences in how we relate to our partners

Here I'll look at three different scenarios, what to consider and how you can prepare yourselves so that you can use the challenge of changing times to deepen and strengthen your relationship rather than undermine it.

1. Children leaving home

When your children leave home this can create a new phase of life that seems to offer more time and energy for ourselves. Often children can bring an even greater sense of meaning to our lives than work. Even though this won't dissipate completely, the stage at which we them let go to create their own lives can be difficult as we face feelings of emptiness, possibly loneliness and something of a hole in our lives and routines. In addition, even though our children have left home, our worries and anxieties about what they are doing and whether we've prepared them sufficiently are more likely to escalate than subside. We can only trust, be there to support them and let them go to find their own independent lives. It can be a time of identity crisis, especially for mothers who have primarily been focused on children. This stage of life can result in depression, alcoholism and marital conflict as the profound sense of loss impacts our lives.

THE PLAN

Have discussions with your young adults before they leave home in order to set up arrangements for staying touch. Setting some structure ensures that we fulfil each others' needs in a way that fits in with their newly discovered freedom.

Because the empty nest can often affect one parent to a greater degree than the other, it may also cause tensions as that person reacts to the loss. This is a good time to talk to each other to strengthen your personal connection, re-ignite the bond between yourselves and maybe even re-ignite the romantic love-life. Find ways to mark this transition as a positive step forward by, for example, planning a holiday together. Talk about ways you could deepen your relationship, and activities you'd enjoy to do together and alone.

It may be a great opportunity to study, find new work, try volunteering or simply indulge in hobbies that you haven't had time for before. Build your own sense of purpose so that you don't succumb to depression or get overwhelmed with loneliness. Above all, turning towards your partner in your vulnerability will support the relationship during this transition.

2. Retirement

This is a time that most people eagerly look forward to. Even if you've enjoyed your work life, the opportunity to have more time for yourself sounds very enticing. However, most of us forget that employment gives us way more than just money. Work gives us a structure to our lives, social connections and a way of contributing to society that can give our lives meaning. For this reason, the ending of our work life can have a significant impact.

During this time, we have to deal with the issues that arise as a result of having a lot more time with our partner. Differences in how much time you each want to spend with each other can arise. It may be that one of you assumes you'll spend all your hours together while the other may need some time alone. Many big companies offer pre-retirement courses to prepare their staff for the time ahead. Whether that is available to you or not, making plans for this different rhythm will be useful.

THE PLAN

Structure your days so that you plan when you want to get up and what you want to do. Of course, you may want to have some unplanned time, but even that can be scheduled in. Think about what is important to you and what interests you, and set specific time aside for exploring those activities. Talk with your partner so that you know how much time you both would like together, what projects you'd like to share and what you'd like to do separately. Make sure there are times for you to talk about how you are feeling in this new phase of life and what you are both missing so that you can make adjustments. Think about how you'll stay active, and consider introducing things that you can do together that will keep you fit like walking, cycling, gardening or dancing.

You might also find out if there are clubs or associations where you can do activities with other people to build a social network around your retirement.

Many retired people have grandchildren to care for and that brings a natural purpose to life. If you don't have that, consider becoming involved in the local community in some way, organising or volunteering so that you have a sense of focus.

Whatever you try, remember that this is a new phase of life and the challenges it introduces can bring you closer together if you take the time to plan, communicate and listen to each other.

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3. Looking after elderly parents

This is another big moment in a couple's relationship life. We each have different ideas about how best to deal with this phase and this is a situation where people often anticipate the difficulties most openly. Understanding that you may have differing views about how to deal with the issue can help encourage you to listen to each other so that you empathise with each other even if you disagree.

THE PLAN

As during all conflicts or times of disagreement, if a couple are willing to listen and see the situation through each other's eyes, it becomes much more possible to work together and find a solution that you can both agree to. It is inevitably polarising because one partner will almost certainly have stronger feelings about what should happen than the other. What is important is to keep a sense of what you most value and what is most important. If you want to maintain a strong relationship and move forward together, that is more likely to happen if you hold the bond of your relationship as primary.

From there, you will find it easier to discuss the impact of looking after elderly parents and negotiating the various challenges along the way. If you end up living with them, ensure that you find times that are just for you and your partner and make sure that you talk with them and make agreements about house rules and how to manage the likely difficulties.

Prioritising your partner and involving them in decisions will enable you both to grow from the experience without feeling torn between loyalties.

Easy ways to prioritise each other

1. Plan structured time to share feelings and talk over the week.
2. Make appreciating each other a regular occurrence. This could involve a 10-minute session every few days, where you sit opposite one another and take it in turns to say things you like about the other.
3. Acknowledge when times get tough and earmark time to spend together.
4. Have resources, like a list of good relationship therapists, to hand just in case.
5. Be willing to go on workshops together that create intimacy when you have the time.

Jan Day is a relationship expert.
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