

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My daughter Sarah – our only child -- is going off to college this year, and I'm a wreck. I had encouraged her to attend our local university and live at home, but she insisted that she wanted to go to a school in Vermont – more than 700 miles away! We have the money to send her, and she has worked for the past two years at a part-time job to save for her education. I'm feeling weepy and sad at the thought of her leaving, and am dreading the day when my husband and I will drop her off at her college dormitory in a few weeks. Is this normal?

-- Madeline

Dear Madeline,

This may not make it any easier; but yes; it is absolutely normal to feel sad facing this momentous change. You've nurtured your daughter for the past two decades, you've enjoyed her company (except when you didn't!), and it's likely that a big part of your own self-definition is based on your role as a mother. Sarah sounds like a great young person. Working to save for one's education – instead of spending all her dough on clothes and concert tickets – strikes me as mature and responsible. Kudos to you and dad for a job well done!

This is a new beginning – a time to reclaim and reimagine yourself and the options that exist for you now, too. It will help you to remember that this is as important a transition for you as it is for her, and that you still have half your life (God willing and the creek don't rise) for self-discovery and unleashing your full potential.

Make plans for what you will be doing after Sarah leaves for school. What fires your passion? You are embarking on a period of your life when you will have more time and energy to devote to your marriage, invest in your career, take classes in subjects you have always wanted to learn about, travel, volunteer, or uncover hobbies that bring zest to your life.

Plan to keep in close touch with Sarah, but don't overdo it. Remember she's going to be learning to live on her own – to become an independent adult. Limit phone calls to two a week (unless there is some pressing issue that needs to be discussed or a family emergency). You don't want her roommates to greet her every afternoon with, "Hey, Sarah! Your mother called *again!*" Greeting cards and emails are a good way to feel your connection, without requiring much of a response on her part. Let her know that you miss her, but don't burden her with your sadness. Instead, send clippings of funny news from home, how the pets are doing, and what you, her dad, and other family members are up to.

Talk about your feelings with your husband or close women friends – especially friends who are in the same boat with kids going away to school. I know you'll discover that your feelings are natural and you're not alone. But also be aware that if these feelings persist for more than a few weeks, if you can't stop crying, or feel that your useful life is now over, you might benefit from professional help. But that's putting the cart before the horse.

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Why not plan a great vacation with your husband right after you drop Sarah at college? Vermont and New England are fabulous in the fall, and you'll be in that neighborhood already. This not only gives you something to look forward to, but also gives you and your husband a chance to spend some quality time together where you can – among other things – process your feelings about Sarah's leaving. At this time, you and your husband will be redefining your relationship. Many couples work well together while they are raising a family, only to find that there is not much communication or shared interests after the fledglings leave the nest. A romantic dinner at a mountain cabin, or a hike in the woods with your husband, may be all you need to realize that you're embarking on a new and exciting part of your life. Good luck to you and to Sarah!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.