

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Six months ago, I moved in with my parents after my husband and I separated, which led to a lot of financial difficulties. I've been on my own since I graduated from college in 1968! I'm almost at retirement age but my parents relate to me like I'm still sixteen. I'm serious! I feel guilty because my mother waits up for me when I go out for the evening with friends! She is constantly nagging me to call my (almost) ex-husband and get back together. I'm hoping to get my own apartment sometime soon but, in the meantime, how can I make this work without going crazy?

-- Prodigal daughter

Dear Prodigal,

Are you sure you're the only one who might go crazy? How about your poor old mother, hanging out, watching *David Letterman* while she waits for you to come home?!

There are natural tendencies in families to get stuck in certain roles, and no matter how old we get the roles don't change. Old patterns run deep; often they seem to be set in concrete

Lots of families are dealing with adult children moving home. You might be a little on the outer edge age-wise, but according to *American Demographics* magazine, about 38% of singles between the ages of 20 and 34 live at home for financial reasons, loss of a job, saving money for college or grad school, or, like you, because of a divorce. All these families will have to find new ways of relating, just as your family will.

It sounds like your mother is having a difficult time letting go of her mothering role, and she doesn't know how to welcome you back home as an adult. She may not understand that the time for teaching and protecting you has been over for a long time.

It's a lot easier to look at the things your parents are doing that make you crazy than it is to look at your own behavior. Are you doing anything that reinforces your old role? Do you expect your mother to do your laundry, make dinner for you, or pick up after you? Are your parents supporting you?

Even though you're having financial difficulties, it's imperative that you contribute in some way to the household finances. It will help to think about how you would handle these responsibilities if you were staying at the home of a friend. Chances are you would pitch in with housework and, in spite of your limited finances, buy some groceries, cook dinner from time to time, take your hostess out for a meal, or bring home flowers or her favorite ice cream.

In short, you'd be a good "guest" (not the type that Benjamin Franklin was describing when he noted that "Fish and houseguests both begin to smell after three days"). That's the model to look to – no, not the houseguest/fish metaphor – but how you would behave with a good friend. In your situation, this "friend" just happens to be your mom and dad.

Set a reasonable goal for getting your own place. “Sometime soon” is not a very specific strategy. Look at your finances, set a deadline for moving out of your parent’s home, then make a plan and put it into action. Clarify the deal and stick to it.

In the meantime, new behaviors will be required from everyone – behaviors that let you relate to each other as adults, and in respectful ways. It’s time for a family talk.

Your letter notes that both your parents are treating you like you’re still sweet sixteen – so let’s not leave dad out of this conversation.

Let your parents know that you appreciate their generosity in allowing you to move home, but that you’ve been an adult for quite some time now and you are more than capable of making decisions about your ex-husband and your future.

Set clear boundaries. Talk about your expectations and what you would like to see during your stay with them. Ask them to express their feelings about your return home. What do they want from you? How has it changed their lives? Let them know what they’re doing right for you, as well as focusing on areas that you’d like to see changed.

Be honest. Be kind. Be direct. Listen more than you speak.

Remember that you can only control your own behavior. If, after this conversation, your mother continues to wait up for you at night, accept that as her choice. Don’t feel guilty about something over which you have no control. She may actually learn to like late-night TV.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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