

LIFE after children

Stay-at-home mums can feel lost, even grieved, when their babies no longer need them full time, but as **Nicole Madigan** reveals, there are new wonders in store for women once kids leave the nest.

EVER SINCE SHE was little, Rose Dimech knew what she wanted to be when she grew up. She had no plans to take over the world, run the country or even a company. It was simple, really. She wanted to be a mum.

“From a very young age, my dream was to have children and to stay at home to be with them and raise them,” says Rose.

After the birth of her daughter at age 21, that’s exactly what she did. She left her job and began her new life at home, raising the first of four children. A mum first and foremost, from that moment on, everything else came a distant second.

“I wanted to make sure my children were safe and see all the changes they would make each day. I just wanted to be there for them.”

And be there she did, devoting almost every waking moment to the care and wellbeing of her children.

According to LifeCare Consultancy managing director Susan De Campo, the powerful desire to nurture, care for and protect these helpless little beings we have created is sparked during pregnancy.

“Outside of being socialised and expected to devote their time and energy to children, women are biologically and hormonally driven to do so,” she says. “Our babies’ complete and total reliance upon us, and their unconditional acceptance and love of us, compels us to respond in kind.”

But it’s often at our own expense. According to Susan, many new members of what she calls the Motherhood Club prioritise the needs of their children ahead of their own. “Probably because they think of themselves as a mother first, and woman second,” she explains.





And when you consider everything that comes with club membership – children’s activities, transport, chores, health and education, home and environmental needs, spiritual and psychological needs – there’s little time for anything else. As a result, many mothers begin to define themselves by what it means to be part of the Motherhood Club.

Having had her youngest son 10 years after her first daughter, child rearing was Rose’s primary focus for more than 20 years. “That was my life – raising the children and being there with them,” says Rose. “When you’re not working outside the home, there’s not as much social interaction, there’s less money, less for yourself... But I learned to live within my means and the children didn’t miss out on anything, and neither did I, for that matter.”

There comes a time, though, when these children you’ve dedicated your life to begin to grow up. They start school, make friends and, eventually, leave home. Suddenly the house is empty. For the first time, you have time – lots of it. And it can be quite a shock.

“Having been a member for so many years, it is not surprising that one’s identity is defined by everything the club means,” says Susan. “As a result, women can feel a sense of loss, numbness, confusion and sadness when entering this new stage of their life.”

After raising five children, Lyn Kingma can relate. “My children were my life; I spent all my waking hours making the very best of what we had for them,” says Lyn. “It seems as if I didn’t have my own life, but to me, what would my life have been if I didn’t have the joy and the focus that my children gave me?”

When the time came for Lyn to find out, she admits it was scary. “You don’t even see it happening. From the moment my babies were born it was what I wanted to do with my time. I never thought about me as a separate entity.”

But separate entities we are. A fact that can hit home hard once children are no longer tugging on our hems. And while it might seem scary at first, this new freedom can be the start of a liberating transition.

“It’s time to realise you are an incredible, capable and competent person – not just

because you’re a mother, but because you’re yourself,” says Susan. “Start learning about and noticing the activities and pastimes that capture your imagination, or that you simply enjoy – and do them.”

For Rose, the transition began when her youngest started school. “When the kids first go to school, you almost go into a little bit of mourning because it’s quiet and you’re alone. But you either become depressed or view it as an opportunity to realise some of the things you’ve always wanted to do.”

She chose the latter. “I felt it was now time for Rose Dimech – not a mother and not a wife, but actually to have time for myself and to finally build a career.”

So, one by one, Rose began fulfilling career dreams she’d always had in the back of her mind, but ignored due to her focus on family.

Allow yourself the time to adjust ... It will take time to get used to being a different sort of mother – one who is needed in a different sort of way.

“I wanted to be able to use my mind for something other than raising children, and real estate was something that excited me. And, being flexible, it would allow me to be there for the children after school.”

If you think starting a new career later in life is a long shot, think again. “I saw an ad in the employment pages and went for an interview. I got the job, and my real estate license, and began a whole new career,” says Rose.

Next on her list was study, so, putting her new career on hold, Rose became a qualified natural therapist. “I wanted to see if I could still learn and do assignments and exams,” she says. Turns out she could, receiving high distinctions and going on to run her own successful business – another life-long dream.

Rose got creative with a floristry course and spent some time as a florist, before venturing back into real estate, where she carved a 15-year career as an award-winning salesperson.

Along with a new career, this new freedom can also be a time to revitalise your social and love lives, and start living life your way.

“I regularly catch up with friends for coffee, chats and movies,” says Lyn. “I feel as if I can go where I want, when I want. I actually feel young again, with a new found freedom and a bursting urge to do anything I want to do. If I want to go for a ride on my bike, or stay up all night and watch TV, I can. There are no little people relying on me to be there... they have their own agendas now.”

While the process of rediscovery can be liberating, Susan warns it can take time. For some, it can be a difficult and challenging transition. Her advice is to simply allow yourself the time to adjust and don’t be too hard on yourself if you find you’re struggling.

“Don’t feel surprised by any of these feelings. It’s totally normal,” advises Susan. “Remember, it took time to get used to being a new mother. It will also take time to get

used to being a different sort of mother – one who is needed in a different sort of way.”

Susan says it’s important for women to enjoy the life-long journey of discovery. “Invest the time and energy required to clarify the direction you want to move toward.”

For Rose, making the most of every life-stage was paramount in accepting and enjoying the next one. “I loved being at home with the children. I enjoyed that I was able to be there for them, listen to their joys and share their sadness. And when I did have my own time, I enjoyed that I could do things I’d always wanted to do. Now I live and enjoy my own life, but I’m still there for the children and that remains my biggest pleasure and joy.”

For Lyn, it was about realising you’re never too old to live your dreams. “We still see ourselves as the girls in our twenties, maybe feeling a bit tired, but time doesn’t change who you are. Having kids might delay time spent on your favourite things, but now we get to choose when we do it.” *