

NC Psychology Board Public Education

Your Next Chapter

The Psychology of Thriving Through the Empty Nest Transition

Katherine C. Hutchinson, Ph.D.

Licensed Clinical Psychologist · Peak City Psychology

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ABOUT YOUR SPEAKER

Dr. Katherine Hutchinson

Licensed Clinical Psychologist · Peak City Psychology, Apex, NC

Dr. Katherine Hutchinson is a licensed psychologist with over 17 years of experience in private practice, helping individuals and couples navigate life's challenges and transitions. After earning her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Duke University, Dr. Hutchinson dedicated her career to supporting clients through a holistic, compassionate, and evidence-based approach.

Throughout her career, Dr. Hutchinson has worked across all stages of parenting, from pregnancy, through the early days of raising children, to the complexities of launching them into independence. Over time, she recognized a recurring gap: while there is abundant support for parents navigating early and middle parenting, many feel adrift when their children leave home.

Dr. Hutchinson believes that this stage of life is not an ending but an opportunity—a chance for parents to rediscover themselves, explore their passions, and create meaningful, intentional lives. Her work combines her professional expertise with her personal understanding of this transition, offering clients a unique blend of insight, tools, and support to thrive in their own “next chapter.”



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A MOMENT OF RECOGNITION

Is This You?



More time and resources than ever — and no idea how to invest them in yourself



Quietly asking, “Who am I, if I'm not needed the way I used to be?”



Re-evaluating your marriage, career, and friendships



Feeling a grief you can't quite name

You are not alone, and you are not doing this wrong.

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WELCOME

Key Messages

1

It is normal and healthy healthy to feel a mix of emotions, including grief.

2

This transition impacts multiple aspects of life, life, not just parenting.

3

Thriving means making room for all your emotions, while continuing to build a meaningful and purposeful purposeful life.

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Ambiguous Grief

Ambiguous grief is grief over a loss that is unresolved, or has no clear ending. It often isn't openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned.

Ambiguous grief in the empty nest is mourning a chapter of parenthood that has ended while the relationship itself continues. Your child hasn't left your life, but the way you knew them, and the way you knew yourself as their parent, has changed. It's possible to feel excited, proud, happy, sad and anxious all at the same time. All of these feelings are valid.

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You can grieve a role and look forward to your future, your relationships, and a new version of yourself — all at the same time. Hold the both/and.

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More Than Parenting

This transition impacts multiple aspects of life: life: identity, relationships, routines, meaning and meaning and purpose.

It also offers a rare opportunity to step back and examine your life as a whole. What's working, what no longer fits, and what do you want more of? This is your chance to move into your next chapter with intention.

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The Identity Piece

For 18-plus years, “parent” has likely functioned as a master status — an identity central enough to organize your schedule, your thoughts, your conversations and your sense of purpose. The developmental task of this stage is to find ways to keep contributing and finding meaning.

Rediscover yourself: Who are you beyond being someone’s parent? someone’s parent?

I’ve always wanted to...

I’ve missed...

I’m curious about...

So the “Who am I now?” question isn’t a crisis — it’s your identity doing exactly what it’s supposed to do.

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Redefining Relationships

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With Your (Adult) Kids

The shift is from manager to consultant:

- Support without rescuing
- Love without controlling
- Advise without directing

2

With Your Partner

An empty nest can provide an opportunity to reflect and reconnect:

- Create shared time and novelty
- Small, everyday moments of turning toward each other predict long-term relationship health
- Re-evaluate the division of labor and the mental load

3

With Others

Friendships and social circles often shift when kids leave home:

- Friendships built around kids' activities may fade
- It's a good time to build new connections or reconnect with old friends
- Relationships with siblings or aging parents may deepen or need new attention

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Daily Rhythms and Routines

For years, daily life has been organized around your children's schedules: school drop-offs, practices, meals and the steady hum of a full house. When they leave, those familiar rhythms can disappear almost overnight, leaving quiet mornings, empty evenings and unstructured time. This loss of routine can feel surprisingly disorienting, even when you've been looking forward to more freedom.

- **Create new anchors.** Set up simple daily rituals, such as a morning walk, a weekly dinner with friends or a set time for a hobby, to bring back structure and something to look forward to.
- **Experiment with your time.** Treat the first few months as a trial period. Try new activities, classes or commitments, and notice what energizes you.
- **Stay connected on new terms.** Set up a regular, flexible way to keep in touch with your children, like a weekly call or a shared text thread, that respects their independence while keeping you close.

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Purpose and Meaning

For many parents, raising children has been a central source of purpose, offering a clear sense of being needed and knowing what matters each day. When children leave home, that built-in sense of meaning can fade, leaving a quiet but unsettling question:

“What now?”

This is a natural part of the transition, and it offers a chance to rediscover purpose that comes from within rather than from your role alone.

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Purpose and Meaning



Re-evaluate: Clarify Your Values

- Reflect on what truly matters to you, such as connection, creativity, growth, service, adventure or faith, apart from what others need from you.
- Notice which values were expressed through parenting, like nurturing, guiding or building a family. Consider how they might be expressed in new ways.
- Identify values that may have been set aside during the busy parenting years and are ready to be revisited.



Seek: Take Values-Based Action

- Choose one or two core values and ask, “What is one small step I could take this week that reflects this value?”
- Focus on meaningful action rather than finding the “perfect” new purpose. Meaning often grows through doing.
- Revisit and adjust over time, letting purpose change as you learn what feels fulfilling in this next chapter.

Build a vision through small experiments — a class, a volunteer shift, a reconnection — not one big decision.

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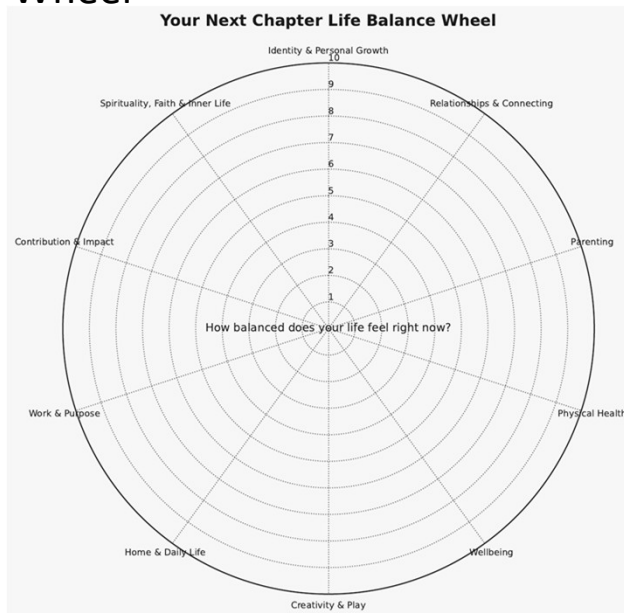


Try It: The Life Balance Wheel

A short, hands-on reflection

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A Simple Self-Assessment: Your Next Chapter Life Balance Wheel



Rate each area from 1–10

- Identity & Personal Growth
- Relationships & Connecting
- Parenting
- Physical Health
- Wellbeing
- Creativity & Play
- Home & Daily Life
- Work & Purpose
- Contribution & Impact
- Spirituality, Faith & Inner Life

1. Notice where you feel satisfied.

2. Notice where you want more attention or growth.

3. Choose ONE area you want to nurture first in your next chapter.

**The goal is not perfect balance.
The goal is awareness.**

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Thank You

Questions & Discussion

By approaching this transition with intention, an open mind and plenty of self-compassion, you may find that this new chapter is an exciting beginning, not only for your child but for you as well.

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drkatherinehutchinson.com



[@dr.katherinehutchinson](https://www.instagram.com/dr.katherinehutchinson)



linkedin.com/in/katherine-hutchinson-88818b70

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