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I Was Devastated After My Kids Left The House. This Is How I Rebooted My Life.



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2018 was a crisis year for me.

Our daughter moved far away after finishing medical school, our son moved out to his own apartment, I hit 50, and menopause hit the gas pedal with mood swings, bloating, cramping, weight gain, night sweats and hot flashes. The combination nearly broke me.



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I missed my kids terribly and felt suddenly purposeless without them around. My hormones were on a wild, exhausting ride and hitting a milestone birthday was an additional blow. It was a perfect storm.

I saw no clear path out, but I was determined to find that empty nest freedom and joy so many people talk about, even though all I was feeling so far was deep sadness and loss.

Sure, I was happy not to have to deal with other people's messes, moods or laundry. I had a guest room to decorate, which made me happy. My husband and I started doing weeknight things like going out to dinner or to see a play, which felt unusual and fun. But my heart still ached.

Not only was our daughter not coming around once a week or so for a family dinner, but she couldn't come home for Thanksgiving. In the spirit of "we can make this work," my husband, son and I flew to her for the holiday, where I cooked a downsized version in her apartment the day after Thanksgiving. It was hard to give up the big elaborate family Thanksgiving at my house, with my turkey plates and my harvest décor and extended family, but being together was more important. Even so, it started the holiday season off on a sad note for me.

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To try to head off the sadness of not seeing my kids on my birthday, I planned a getaway for my 50th. My husband and I went to New York City in early December and saw the holiday windows, the Rockettes, and an amazing musical. We ate fabulous food and hit all the holiday markets. It would have been magical if I hadn't been sick with a respiratory infection that lingered for three weeks, throughout December, both before and after the trip.

In retrospect, I can see I was depressed. I wasn't excited about decorating the house for Christmas (which I normally love doing) and probably wouldn't have done my usual over-the-top approach if our daughter hadn't been coming home for Christmas.

I was so thrilled to have her home, sleeping under our roof. I was happy our son came for the day, even though he went home to his apartment at night. Having all of us together at our house, just the way things used to be, was nearly perfect. But I should have known it was going to end badly.

When our daughter left to fly back to her new city, I absolutely fell apart. Somehow, having her here again (the first time she'd been back since we moved her so far away) just made me hurt more. The hole she left felt even bigger once she got on that plane. I absolutely spiraled.

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I can't say any solution was readily apparent, but I started piecing together things that eventually had a cumulative impact. One thing that I can't stress enough was therapy. I've been going for years, but having that place to really talk through everything was crucial for me. I learned to basically separate myself out from my thoughts and really look at what I was thinking and analyze why I was thinking it and then reframe it into the truth.

I realized one thing lacking in my life was in-person friends, so I started a book club that meets once a month where I was able to combine my love of reading with socializing. It was a tiny first step, but it was an important one that forced me to put on decent clothes and chat with other people.

In January, I started doing embroidery. That seems like a ridiculous solution, but it's been magic. I bought a large mandala pattern and tons of embroidery thread and every single night while I'm watching TV, I work on it. There is something therapeutic for me about repetitive movements. It's soothing, but it's also mentally stimulating. I'm focusing on the process and not the end result, so it's just fun and there is no judgment or expectations. Somehow the time flies for me when I'm sewing, so the evenings no longer feel long and empty.

Also in January, I fired the hairstylist I'd been going to since I was 17 and found someone who specializes in curly hair. With her help, I've grown my hair out and learned to love the curls and embrace this part of myself I've always fought.

I also started going for a monthly massage. Massages have always been a disaster for me. They're too hard or the lotion smells, or I feel judged. My judgment-free hairstylist recommended a judgment-free masseuse who respects my needs, makes me feel respected and accepted. Somehow having these two women who accept and celebrate my body has helped me to do the same without criticizing myself.

As if to symbolize my emotional pain, in the summer, just as my son was getting ready to move out, I hurt my knee and also had a flare-up of another old injury. Months of physical therapy put me back together, but after occasional flare-ups, I've now learned that I need to regularly do simple exercises to keep things in check. I used to fight this, but I now see that five-minute routine as insurance for my future health and do it regularly and remind myself it's a gift I'm giving myself. It's just one way I've learned to care for my own body, which I really have neglected all these years when I was worrying about the other bodies in my house.

My wardrobe needed some attention next. I decided to just take over one of the closets in the kids' old bedrooms and I now put all of my off-season clothes in there, so I can actually see what I have in my closet and organize it more effectively. The result of that is I feel good about getting dressed and can sort and select clothes in a way that feels finally grown up.

The other empty bedroom's closet has become my gift wrap storage station as well as my tote bag organizer. One of the bedrooms now has a treadmill in it. Once I made those spaces my own, it helped me feel the loss a bit less. The rooms are not empty and aching — they each have a purpose and belong to me.

I made myself go to a professional conference for a weekend, where I was reminded that I am actually good at what I do and I have accomplished a lot in my career. Forcing myself into this social/professional situation was far out of my comfort zone, but has given me a confidence boost since I navigated it successfully.

I have also made a mental shift in thinking about my kids. Instead of focusing on missing them (which I still do and will always do), I find myself enjoying the contact I have with them and then focusing on my own projects and tasks when they aren't in touch. In some ways, it is a relief to not have to carry the emotional weight at all times and freely and joyfully enjoy them when I talk to them and see them, but let life give me other things to focus on when I don't.

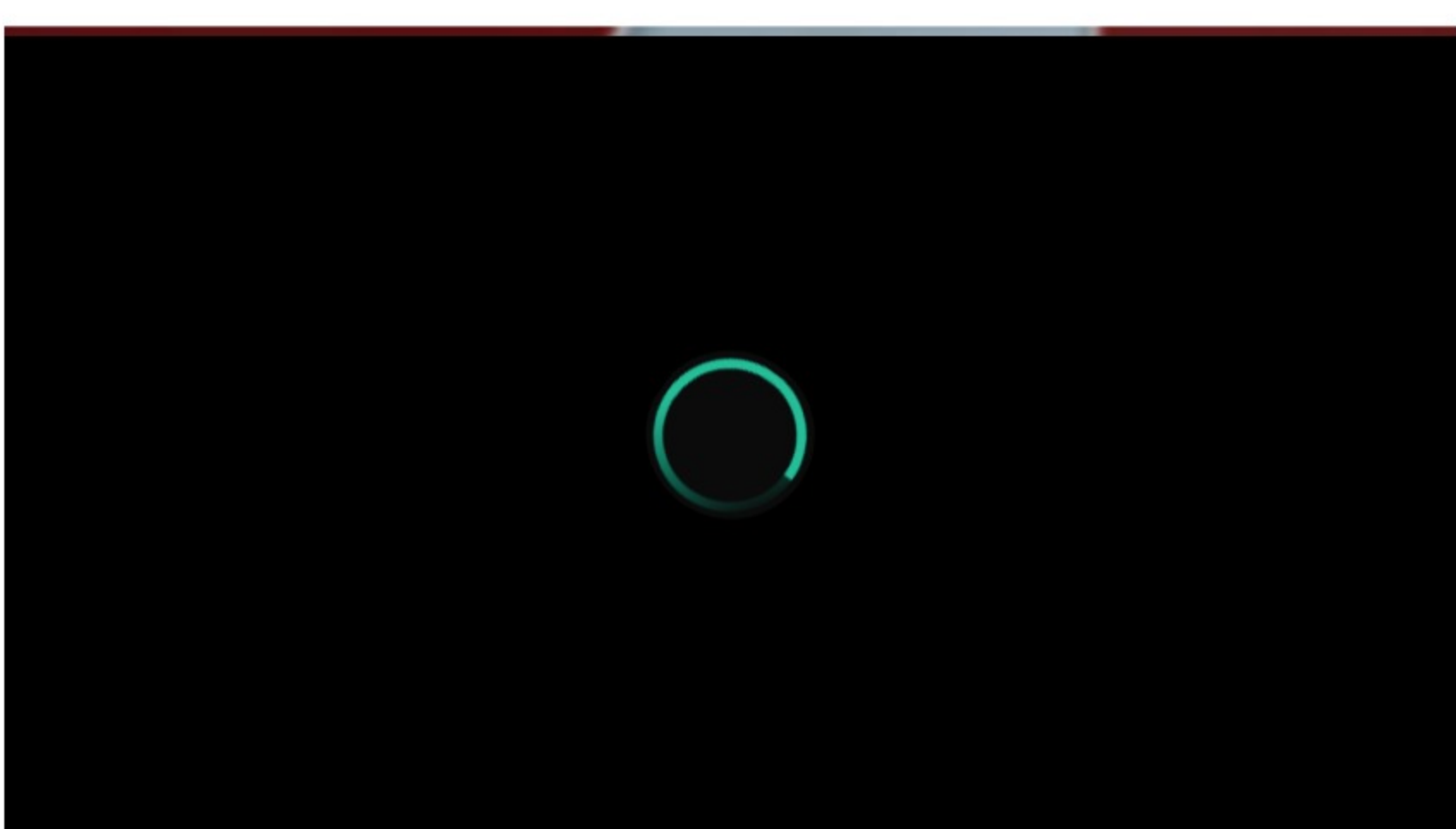
I more solidly understand who I am and what I enjoy now and this translated into my professional life as well, where I've slowly turned my focus to the projects that make me the happiest. I've had the time to think about what who I am and where I want to go with my life. I never had the emotional space to think about myself so intently until now.

It's now been one year since we packed my daughter up and moved her cross-country and 10 months since our son moved out. I am a completely different person than I was a year ago. Rebuilding myself was the way to heal from the loss of my life as a mom of kids in the home and to transition to the mom of grown and flown adults. It was a very difficult journey for me and one I didn't think I would get through when I was in the depths of despair. Today I'm on a path I've set for myself with activities and projects that fulfill me. I'm still a work in progress, but every day, I'm hopeful and confident that life is good and will continue to be good. All I can change is myself, and I've learned how to do that.

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