

Dr Kate Owen

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FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

What is the "Family Life Cycle"? What Family Life Cycle stage are you currently navigating? Let's go on a journey through each life cycle stage and let me share with you tips and tricks on how to successfully navigate each transition.

The Family Life Cycle is the progression of the family through transitional periods across time. Each transition requires the family to adjust, adapt and change to the new context. The family structure, relationships, roles and rules are all up for renegotiation.

Problems and challenges can occur when the family is unable or unwilling to accommodate to the changed circumstance. The family continue to operate as if life has not changed. For example, parents who continue to use 'time out' as a consequence for misbehaviour...with their 17-year-old!

Predictable life cycle transitions include:

- Leaving home and accepting financial and emotional responsibility for self.
- Joining families through marriage or union and therefore a commitment to a new family system.
- Having children and accepting new family members into the existing system.
- Children becoming teenagers and families increasing their flexibility to allow growth and independence.
- Launching teens into young adulthood and moving into midlife, requiring the navigation of multiple exits and entries into the family system.
- Families in later life accepting the shifting generational roles.
- Families nearing the end of life and accepting the completion of one cycle of life.

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LEAVING HOME

Let's talk about "leaving home" and becoming an adult in this unique and crazy world. This life stage involves reflecting on how to become responsible for yourself with decision making, problem-solving, finding financial stability, as well as strengthening your emotional self. And then balancing this with conversations about values, hopes, dreams and aspirations.

This life cycle stage often brings a shift in family relationships – staying connected to your family whilst establishing yourself as an individual in the world. This might also require you to establish yourself in your expanding communities of work and the larger society.

Often the challenge is shifting from an idealistic view of "being my own person" to now thinking like a "householder" and the reality of having to take responsibility for every aspect of your own care.

Individuals in this life cycle stage might benefit from these questions:

- What skills and strengths do I have that will help me navigate this stage of life?
- What skills am I lacking that I really need?
- Who can I approach to help me learn these skills? What other resources can I access?
- How do I manage emotions?



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COMMITMENT TO ANOTHER

Let's talk about finding love and committing yourself to that relationship. What a dynamic life cycle stage that can be!

Not only does the couple create their own uniqueness in relation to intimacy, communication, boundaries around their relationship and with each other, financial considerations, everyday chores, and having fun.....each of their respective networks (friends, family, and community) also have to realign and adapt to accommodate the new partner.

Often this life cycle stage can feel both absolutely amazing and absolutely overwhelming at the same time.

Couples in this life stage would benefit from open communication, learning how to problem-solve together, and fostering curiosity about their partners connections and relationships to others.



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WELCOMING BABY

When you move from being a couple to becoming a growing family, there are many changes that take place to accommodate to this changed context.

First is the need to “make space” for another relationship in the family home. The couple's relationship will be different once the baby arrives, and each parent will need to create their own unique relationship with their child. Talk this through and acknowledge that this is an inevitable part of the process.

“Making the decision to have a child – it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart walking around outside your body”

Anonymous

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Second, conversations regarding finances, roles, and housekeeping are all back up for discussion and negotiation. Plan ahead and generate ideas on how to share the load.

Third, spend time talking about your hopes for being a parent and what your role models have taught you about caring for children.

Fourth, appreciate that having a baby impacts your extended family networks and your community. These relationships will also change once the baby arrives, and new family structures and relationships will emerge.

Watch my [YouTube video "When Two Becomes Three"](#) for more information.

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THE TEENAGE YEARS

Being a family with teenagers is a tricky life cycle stage. They are old enough to think they know better, and still young enough to need your support and encouragement. Moreover, the changes to the teenage brain mean that emotions run high and logical thinking goes out the window. These neurobiological changes are normal but often challenging to accept as a parent.

During this time families need to strike a balance between keeping connected as a family unit, whilst allowing the teenager to move “in and out” of the family system.

This is also a time for the couple to think ahead to what life will be like when the nest is empty. Preparation and acceptance of these changes are key to healthily adapting to the changing family dynamics.



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LAUNCHING TEENAGERS

Have you heard of the “launching phase”? This is when teenagers and parents shift from a parent-to-child relationship towards an adult-to-adult relationship.

“Launching” does not necessarily mean moving out from the family home. It simply means moving into the next stage of development and life.



The launching phase in a family takes several years and is a time of supporting and mentoring your emerging young adult to learn the necessary skills to set them up for success in life.

It is also a time when the child starts to appreciate that their parent is also a "person" in the world, and forming rituals of connection is an important part of the launching process.

During this time it is important for parents to evaluate their own goals, dreams and aspirations as individuals in the world. With increased freedom from parenting duties, this is a time to explore new interests.

Read my [Blog on Launching Messages for Teenagers](#) for more information.

Watch my [YouTube video "Once I Was A Teenager Too"](#) for more insights.

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MID-LIFE

As families progress through the family life cycle, they will head towards “late middle age” which is a stage of life characterised by an acceptance of the shifting generational roles.

What does this mean? It is where families are focused on their own and/or couple functioning and interests in the face of physiological decline. An acceptance that “we are not as young as we used to be” even when we still mentally feel like we are 17 years of age.

This stage of life also tends to pique interest for hearing stories and learning wisdom from our elders. This may lead to rich conversations about family history and learning new family information.

If you are interested in understanding how family legacies and relationship patterns are handed down across generations, [watch my YouTube video for more insights](#).

This stage of life also sees a shift in relationships with elderly parents. Supporting them without over-functioning for them whilst they still have their independence.



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END OF THE LIFE CYCLE

No such conversation about stages of life would be complete without acknowledging the end of the life cycle. "Death and loss are the most profound challenges families confront" – McGoldrick, Carter & Garcio-Preto (2011).

Families going through this life phase may experience the following:

- Dealing with the loss of a spouse, sibling or peer.
- Making preparations for someone's passing and their legacy.
- Managing reversed roles with adult children now becoming caretakers for their frail parents.

During these times there are four tasks that can help strengthen the family unit:

1. Acknowledge the death and loss as a family.
2. Create rituals to help with the loss experience.
3. Acknowledge that family relationships will realign and reorganise in different ways.
4. Redirect energy into other relationships and life pursuits as a means of moving forward.

"At times of death, without mutual support the pain of loss is that much worse for those who grieve alone or not at all. When we foster relational connectedness in the face of loss, families and their members emerge strengthened and more resourceful in meeting future life challenges" – McGoldrick, Carter & Garcio-Preto (2011).

[Read my blog on "Not So Happy Anniversaries"](#) to understand how to validate someone on dates marked by grief and loss.

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UNPLANNED LIFE TRANSITIONS

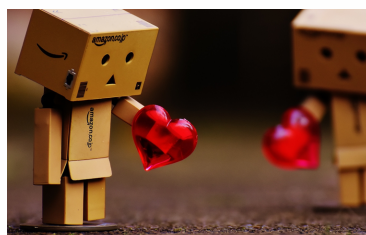
So far we have explored the various changes that occur in families during predictable life cycle stages and transitions. But what about the unexpected and unpredictable changes that happen in families?

Let's acknowledge the emotional processes that occur in families during divorce and separation. In particular, I would like to focus on the separating phase, when there is a mourning of the loss of the intact family. This can be a very difficult period for the adults, children, and extended family involved.

This is a tricky time of restructuring multiple aspects of family life – relationships, finances, living arrangements, social networks, and much more.

From a family therapy perspective, one key area that can assist with this process is for the adults in the family to embrace a willingness to continue to co-operate in their co-parenting relationship and support their children.

This can be challenging when emotions are high and wounds are not yet healed. So if you are navigating this unplanned life transition, hang in there. Not just for you, but also for your children.



If you are at the stage of transitioning to become a stepfamily, watch my [YouTube video for more insights and information.](#)

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FAMILY OF CHOICE

“When everything goes to hell, the people who stand by you without flinching – they are your family.”

Jim Butcher

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Let's acknowledge that sometimes we have our “family” and then we have our “family of choice”. Those who are special to us and we would do anything for, as close to us as our blood relatives.

References:

McGoldrick, M., Carter, B., & Garcio-Preto, N. (2011). The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.

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