

# When They Leave—You Shift

A Real Talk Guide to Mental Health in the First Year of Letting Go

*Brought to you by Women's Therapy Centre and Post-Secondary Pathways*



*A new beginning—for them and for you. Drop-off day marks more than a move;  
it's a moment of growth on both sides of the journey.*



# Parenting the Launch

Let's talk about what doesn't get talked about enough: when your child heads off to college or university, something shifts in your world too. Maybe it's your first child to leave home. Maybe it's your last. Either way, this isn't just a logistical change—it's an emotional one. A life-stage pivot. And you're allowed to feel all of it. This guide is for the parents holding it together at move-in day, crying in the car, or wondering if it's weird that they're not crying at all. However this chapter hits you, there's no wrong way to feel it—and no shame in needing support while you do.

## The Letting Go Season

### Feelings of Loss

**What It Can Look Like:** You walk past their empty room and your chest aches. You miss the chaos, the noise, even the late-night fridge raids. Maybe it's not sadness every day—but it's there, in waves.

**Why It Makes Sense:** Your identity has been wrapped in caregiving. Daily connection with your child has been a rhythm in your nervous system. Losing that rhythm feels like loss—because it is.

#### Body's Cues:

- tearfulness
- mood dips
- feeling heavy
- longing or numbness
- physical fatigue
- tightness in the chest

**Ways to Support Yourself:** Let yourself grieve what's shifted—it's not weakness; it's love. Remind yourself: your connection isn't gone, it's changing shape.

Somatic supports to relieve angst and stress:

**Hand-over-heart pause:** Gently place your hand on your chest and breathe into the space beneath it, deep into your stomach allowing a full expand. Repeat this ten times.

**Scent recall:** Light a candle or use a scent that brings comfort or a sense of home.

**Return to self:** Unclench your jaw, drop your shoulders and feel your feet on the ground.



## Identity Shifts

**What It Can Look Like:** You wonder, “Who am I now?” Your calendar is strangely empty. You’re unsure how to fill your time—or your heart.

**Why It Makes Sense:** For years, your child’s needs gave structure to your identity. Now that structure is shifting. It’s disorienting. It’s also a chance to meet parts of yourself you’ve set aside.

### Body’s Cues:

- Restlessness or brain fog
- Emotional flatness or disinterest in hobbies
- Self-doubt

### Ways to Support Yourself:

- Reconnect with something that lit you up *before* parenting
- Let meaning come in small doses—it doesn’t have to be grand
- Somatic practices:
  - *Grounded walking:* Walk slowly and deliberately, noticing each step
  - *Mirror mantra:* Look at yourself and say, “I’m allowed to grow and explore.”

## Increased Anxiety and Worry

**What It Can Look Like:** You’re thinking constantly about whether your child is okay. You wake up at 3 a.m. checking your phone. Every quiet moment turns into a worry spiral.

**Why It Makes Sense:** You’ve been their safety net. And now, watching them navigate life from afar can activate deep attachment patterns—especially if you weren’t offered that kind of secure launch yourself.

### Body’s Cues:

- Racing thoughts or irritability
- Shallow breathing or tense muscles
- Trouble focusing

### Ways to Support Yourself:

- Anchor yourself with what’s *true*, not what’s *possible*
- Give your nervous system permission to rest
- Somatic practices:
  - *Box breathing:* Inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4
  - *Tapping:* Gently tap your chest or collarbone while repeating, “They’re growing. I’m steady.”



## Marital & Relationship Strain

### What It Can Look Like:

Suddenly it's just the two of you again—and it's awkward. Or tense. Or just... quiet. Maybe communication feels off, or old issues are resurfacing.

**Why It Makes Sense:** Raising a child can eclipse relational space. When that shared focus shifts, you're left looking at each other with more time—and sometimes more unresolved things.

### Body's Cues:

- Irritability or emotional distance
- Silence that feels heavy
- A sense of disconnection

### Ways to Support Yourself:

- Talk openly about how this transition feels—for *both* of you
- Rebuild small rituals of connection (walks, check-ins, shared meals)
- Somatic practices:
  - *Eye contact reset*: Spend a few minutes just looking at each other without fixing anything
  - *Shared breath*: Sit quietly and sync your breathing for a minute. It's more powerful than it sounds.

## Other Emotional Shifts

**What It Can Look Like:** You feel foggy, unmotivated, or disconnected from your usual self. You're sleeping more—or not at all. Maybe you're reaching for more wine than usual or zoning out to escape the quiet.

**Why It Makes Sense:** This is grief. And transition. And the nervous system in “what now?” mode. There's no exact map, and your reactions are not flaws—they're signs that your body is adapting.

### Body's Cues:

- Trouble concentrating
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Overuse of distractions like substances or social media

### Ways to Support Yourself:

- Take it slow. Rebuild routines that ground you
- Reach out before things feel unmanageable
- Somatic practices:
  - *Body shake*: Literally shake out your arms, legs, and hips. It releases stuck energy
  - *Soft music stretch*: Put on calming music and stretch however feels good. No rules.



## The Text-Back Spiral

**What It Can Look Like:** It's been five hours since your child last texted. You've imagined at least three worst-case scenarios. You've drafted (but maybe not sent) a message saying, "Just checking in—are you alive?" You're considering calling their residence, the college, or someone's roommate.

**Why It Makes Sense:** When your child lived at home, their physical presence offered constant reassurance. That quiet sense of "they're okay." Now, with distance—and fewer updates—your attachment system is scrambling for signs of safety. It's love, dressed up as panic.

### Body's Cues:

- Pacing, checking your phone repeatedly
- Tight chest, restlessness, or inability to focus
- Irritability, especially if someone says, "I'm sure they're fine"

### Ways to Support Yourself:

- Name it out loud: "My brain is looking for proof they're safe because it loves them."
- Remember: delayed responses don't mean distress—they often mean your kid is doing what they're supposed to be doing: living.
- Somatic practices:
  - *Exhale focus:* Extend your exhale longer than your inhale. Example: inhale for 4, exhale for 6. Repeat 5x.
  - *Touchstone text:* Write a short, loving message that doesn't require a reply: "Thinking of you. No need to reply. Just love you." Then breathe.

## How to Support Your Child Through the Transition

### What's Helpful (Even When It's Hard to Do)

You love your child. You want to fix it when they're hurting. So when they call crying, saying they hate it there and want to come home, every fiber of your being wants to pack the car. But sometimes the best support doesn't look like a rescue mission—it looks like holding space for discomfort while reminding them they're capable of riding the wave. Here's how you can support their transition in grounded, meaningful ways.

### Normalize Home Sickness

Let your child know—before they leave—that it's completely normal to feel disoriented, lonely, or overwhelmed in the first few weeks, and sometimes even months. It doesn't mean they're not ready for this step; it simply means they're human. Create a plan ahead of time about when they'll come home, so everyone has shared expectations. That way, if they call on night three saying "I can't do this, come get me," you can gently remind them, "We've got a visit planned for the third weekend." Of course, stay open to adjusting if needed—some students need a bit more anchoring. But try to resist the urge to swoop in and rescue. Homesickness often stirs up





anxious thoughts that calm only after the body experiences something new and safe. Sitting through that discomfort, while knowing support is available, is how they start to build confidence in themselves. And remember: their school is absolutely equipped for this. Every campus has systems in place to support students through exactly these moments.

### Encourage Connection (Gently)

It's easy for students to retreat into gaming, scrolling, or isolating. Encourage them to attend orientation events, join clubs, or go for a walk with someone from class. You can say, "I know it's awkward at first, but everyone is looking for connection right now—even if they're pretending not to." Help them set goals around this connection and say you will check in at the end of the week to follow up. For example, they will introduce to themselves to one new person each day or sign up for one event by the end of the week.

### Set Communication Boundaries That Reassure, Not Hover

You're allowed to ask for a quick daily check-in—something simple like a "good morning" or "goodnight" text. It offers peace of mind without spiraling into micromanagement. Be clear with your child: "This isn't about control—it's about knowing you're okay." **But here's the key:** set this up *before* they start school. Create routines and agreements when things are calm—not in the middle of that first homesick meltdown or week-one chaos. It helps everyone feel anchored before the waves hit. And trust us, the dorm dean will thank you. They don't want to be on the receiving end of a panicked 1 a.m. phone call because your child hasn't texted back in 12 hours. A little structure protects everyone's nervous systems—including yours.

### Remind them and yourself, that you're both growing through this

One day they love it. The next day they want to come home. They might lash out, go quiet, or call sobbing—only to FaceTime you laughing the next morning. Try not to take it personally. Their brain, body, and sense of self are all recalibrating. And while they're growing, so are you. This isn't just their transition—it's yours, too. The goal isn't to avoid pain or stay perfectly composed; it's to build the muscles to move through it, together. You're still their anchor, even if the rope stretches a little farther now.

### Remind Them That Support Is Built In—And They Deserve to Use It

Every college and university in Canada includes mental health supports as part of your child's tuition. That means they have access to counsellors, peer supports, and wellness programs—and they're not "being dramatic" or "burdening anyone" by using them. Encourage your child to connect early—before things feel overwhelming. Just like you wouldn't wait for a toothache to get unbearable before seeing a dentist, they don't have to wait for a breakdown to talk to someone.



## You're Allowed to Feel All of It—And You're Not Alone

Some of you might breeze through this shift. Others might feel like you've lost your emotional compass. Either way, there's no grade for how you handle your child leaving home. There's only this: you're showing up. You care. And that's everything.

If you're finding this chapter harder than expected, don't wait to ask for support. Your child's university counselling office may have parent resources—and you're also welcome to connect virtually with Erin Smith, a counsellor at McMaster University and therapist at Women's Therapy Centre, who specializes in guiding students *and* parents through this transition.

This season won't last forever. But while you're in it, support is here.

**In support of all your chapters,**

*The Team at Women's Therapy Centre*



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