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link to Reader's Digest article [1]

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The pain of being childless—not by choice—is as deep as it is broad, profoundly affecting the individual while also leaving its mark on a broad cross-section of society, irrespective of gender, age, religion or background. And yet, reaching new heights of happiness and even contentment beyond childlessness is possible.

Surviving the struggle

When Facebook is flooded with pictures of children grinning at the front door, ready to start the new school year, it can be hard for those without children. Childless author and coach Lesley Pyne shares the feelings of “loss, longing and feeling lost” experienced by herself and 19 others in her extraordinary book [3], *Finding Joy Beyond Childlessness*. Women talk of feeling “the unstoppable force of the baby blues” or of feeling “like a big, useless void of a being, with no useful purpose in the world.”

Being childless not by choice, write Enza and August in Pyne’s book, can leave you feeling “worn out and overwhelmed by grief”, “crushed by the guilt and weight of expectation from want-to-be grandparents”. You’re a permanent outsider of the “mum’s club” and it can seem as if everybody is pregnant.

Knowing how to spend time can be a challenge when you don’t have children since your diary is not automatically filled with school runs, play dates and parents’ evenings. Time can pass slowly, or demands can be incessant since it’s assumed that you’re unoccupied.

There’s a similar tension when it comes to the right and proper joy of caring for others as a childless person: where to begin (when for others it begins with their brood) and where to end (the world’s your oyster, with the King’s Fund acknowledging the growing problem of “unmet need [4]” in society). In the first century BC, Cicero said “Not for ourselves alone are we born”, and you don’t have to give birth to have an in-built desire to care for others.

You're not alone

For Lesley Pyne, finding others who shared her story “saved her life”. Being with others who “got her” as no-one else did was transformative. To this end, she shares “Inspirational Stories” on her website, including, to date, that of one man. Robin Hadley is childless and has written a PhD thesis entitled “Life without fatherhood’’. He likens his experience to a complex bereavement. Writer and broadcaster Sheridan Voysey, meanwhile, has written separately on his “decade of disappointment [5]” as he and his wife tried to conceive.

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Lesley shows that there are “many routes to the place in the forest we call childless” and, in addition to it affecting both men and women, it affects those of all religions and none. She describes how her Christian faith anchors her to something solid, making her feel peaceful and grounded, whilst others say they find strength within.

“More to Life [6]” is a community of men and women from all backgrounds who are childless not by choice and who meet up and support one another. Its strength lies in its diversity.

Reaching new heights

“I can truly say that I am at peace with my past; for the first time in my life, I know who I am and I’m living a life I absolutely love,” writes Lesley.

Learning that there are things in life outside of our control (such as the ability to have children) can indeed lead to a deep peace; no longer expecting life to go according to plan is a valuable life lesson.

There’s also an unmistakable freedom in contentment, with contentment being called “the greatest gain”. Childless doctor and missionary Helen Roseveare [7] learned the secret of being content in every situation, and it helped her face unimaginable trials, including imprisonment during civil war.

All life is a gift anyway; to have it at all is to defy the odds. Lesley encourages a practice of noticing (and cherishing) what you have, and not mourning what’s missing. It is though just that: practice. When it comes to learning gratitude, it can take a long time for practice to make perfect, but it is possible.

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