



Making the Most of the Empty Nest

When kids fly the coop, mom ultimately lands on her feet

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

THE FIRST ARTICLES I WROTE AS A NEWLY PRACTICING NATUROPATHIC physician were written when I was a newly practicing mother! In a synchronous way, the early years of my doctoring included treating many children.



Now as my youngest of three leaves for college, I can see how my naturopathic practice, too, has matured. Not only in how my knowledge and experience of the past 25 years informs my ability to treat patients, but also in terms of the patients who come to see me. While I still enjoy welcoming pregnant women and babies into the office and value the energy, spunk, and unique challenges of children, I see more and more patients in their middle years and beyond. Many are in transition—adjusting to the empty nest, figuring out retirement, adapting to the loss of a life partner and, increasingly, nearing the end of life.

And I don't mind! I am glad to be further along in my own life when treating patients who have lived through so much. Many have overlapping diagnoses, illnesses on physical and emotional levels, and cognitive challenges, along with being on numerous pharmaceutical prescriptions. They often choose to

come in or come back to see me when they're in crisis with major life changes. Fortunately, homeopathy can be an invaluable tool to help with illnesses and emotional challenges that arise from the stress of these significant life transitions.

Flat out

When I think of difficult transitions, especially for parents whose kids are heading off to school this autumn, a patient named

“Natalie” comes to mind. At 52, Natalie came to me with the complaint of severe pain. It was with some embarrassment that she gingerly situated herself on my exam table. She had brought along a set of small soft pillows and asked if it would be okay if she was lying down during our visit. Natalie had a history of low-grade back pain but nothing like the pain she was experiencing now. She had a herniated disc between L-3 and L-4 vertebrae and simply needed to lie flat on her back and not move much to minimize the suffering. She felt the severe pain mostly down her right leg; there was not much actual pain in her back.

It was wintertime and Natalie had been suffering for the past four months. She could identify no event that had triggered the pain—no heavy lifting, unusual twisting, or extreme exertion. One morning she merely bent over to put on her shoes, and a strong, drawing pain accosted her, zipping right down her leg. It took her breath away. She had been to a chiropractor and a cranial osteopath to no avail. It was an orthopedic doctor who had made the diagnosis of herniated disc and prescribed bed rest and anti-inflammatory medications. She was trying to follow the doctor's orders; she worked for herself as an organizational consultant and could do a fair amount by phone from her horizontal position, but after four months flat on her back, her patience was running thin. Depression was creeping in, and she was becoming hopeless.

Flown the nest

I asked Natalie what else was going on in her life during the autumn when the back/leg pain started, and she shared that her second of two daughters had left for college. She had been looking forward to

I want a remedy to help her through this time of transition to a place inside herself where she might be less worried and less anxious.

the empty nest, or so she thought, but in fact she had found it difficult. Her husband, a very successful businessman who was often on-the-road, was theoretically supportive but, in reality, he just wasn't around much. She would love it if he were more present, more able to reach out to her and take care of her the way she wanted to be taken care of. "He's a good provider, he's certainly not mean-spirited in any way," she said "but I wish he could somehow be more affectionate, softer, more loving."

With so much time on her hands, lying there in bed or on the couch, Natalie's thoughts went to feelings of isolation and loneliness. She had done so much for so many for so long; she felt utterly exhausted as if she had been wrung out dry. She also found herself reviewing many of the things that had happened in her life and feeling badly about how some events or relationships had gone. In one way, her back complaint made complete sense to her, and she almost welcomed the opportunity to pause and take stock of where she was and where she might be headed at this juncture. But the situation had dragged on too long, and now she felt like she was just wallowing. "I'm getting desperate!" she said.

The weight of the world

When she wasn't worrying about her own issues, Natalie was overwhelmed with concern for her two grown daughters. They were each basically fine, but she could fret and simmer about small and large concerns—about their education, their work, their choice of partners. The daughters were in frequent contact with her, even from across the country, often calling for support, for help, or just to chat. On top of that, Natalie was largely responsible for her elderly parents, and like many women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, it was as if the empty nest had hardly had a moment to air out when it immediately filled up with the needs and demands of the older generation. Natalie was managing medical care, bill paying, and even some of the day-to-day decision-making for her parents. In other words, even flat on her back, Natalie felt the tug of everyone who needed her, the weight of ongoing responsibilities, and the long-to-do lists that cluttered her mind and her computer desktop. All those demands made her feel anxious and overwhelmed. She wondered where *she* was in the never-



The empty nest hardly had a moment to air out when it immediately filled up with the demands of the older generation.

ending pile of things to do for others.

Natalie hated conflict and went to great lengths to avoid discord at work, with family, and with friends. But it came with a hefty price tag: she often felt angry, irritated, and overwhelmed but seldom felt she could express these emotions. So she held them in, tried using deep breathing and prayer, but sometimes felt that her anger and resentment had no appropriate vent. From time to time she would "lose it," mostly snapping at her husband or crying by herself "over something inconsequential."

A clean slate

As we reviewed Natalie's history, she confirmed that she was basically very healthy and robust prior to this back problem. She had never been hospitalized, except for the births of her children. She did not take any regular medications and did not get sick much. She had occasional headaches if she spent too much time in front of the computer screen or was very stressed out. If she went out for a walk or just got away from her desk, the headache would usually go away on its own. She had a lifelong

challenge with constipation, mostly prevented with a careful, high fiber diet and drinking enough fluids. She worried about her weight, which she said had crept up over the years, perhaps ten pounds over where she wanted to be. She still had regular menstrual periods.

Goals for Natalie

Here was a thoughtful, lovely, communicative person, feeling trapped by her back/leg issues, as well as, in some ways, by the life she had created for herself. Natalie's one major physical problem—pain in her back and leg—gave me few clues to finding an appropriate remedy, as there was nothing significant about the quality of the pain and few modalities (beyond lying flat, no other approaches offered her relief; being upright or sitting for any length of time made her feel worse).

When I see a patient like this with one physical issue that has few clear symptoms on which to base a homeopathic prescription, I will try to find a remedy that has a broader sphere of influence, one that will address all aspects of the person—physical, emotional, and cognitive. What am I looking for here? I obviously want a remedy that will make Natalie's pain go away and help her get back on her feet. But beyond that, I want a remedy to help her through this time of transition to a place inside herself where she might be less worried and less anxious; a remedy to help her be more direct with people, to take time for herself, and to embrace the possibilities this new phase of life might hold. I would love her to feel less hemmed in by all her responsibilities and more liberated to enjoy her life.

Of course, we often see the physical and emotional issues of a person reflecting one another or as metaphors for one another. In Natalie's case, we can see how all the pressure and stress of holding up the world around her reached an emotional and physical breaking point—doing too much for too many for too long led to a kind of collapse!

Narrowing it down

In choosing a remedy for Natalie, the symptoms (translated into *Repertory* rubrics) that came to my mind included:

- Mind, Yearning for affection
- Mind, Ailments from discord
- Mind, Anger, suppressed



- Mind, Dwells on past disagreeable experiences
- Mind, Full of cares
- Mind, Ailments from responsibility
- Mind, Anxiety for children
- Mind, Anxiety about everything
- Mind, Discontented
- Mind, Duty, too much sense of
- Mind, Harmony, desire for
- Back, Pain, sacral region
- Back, Pain, extending to legs
- Rectum, constipation, chronic

The main remedies that I considered were *Staphysagria*, *Natrum muriaticum*, and *Carcinosinum*, which all covered Natalie's general nature and her symptoms well. With *Staphysagria*, I would have expected to see more self-blame than Natalie had, as well as lots of guilt and a general low self-esteem. Patients needing *Natrum muriaticum* certainly do not like discord and can take on lots of responsibility, as Natalie did, but we do not usually see the resentment building as much as in Natalie's case. Also, the fact that she had headaches without classic *Natrum muriaticum* modalities (such as "worse in the light") turned me away from this choice.

So it was upon *Carcinosinum* that I settled. Natalie had that characteristic combination of wanting to do right, trying to be and do everything for everyone else, and losing herself in the process. Squeezed between her parents and her children, in some sense, she had lost herself. So much of her self-definition had gone into caretaking, which had filled her with a strong sense of purpose (even if tinged with a bit of resentment). With her kids now far away, the empty nest was especially difficult for her. She also had the chronic constipation, the real aversion to conflict, and the total exhaustion (i.e., flat on her back), that we often see in patients who benefit from *Carcinosinum*.

Carcinosinum is not the best-proved remedy, consequently much of our knowledge of it has come from clinical experience. I use it often in constitutional treatment, especially for super responsible people who eventually burn out. When I am thinking about remedies like *Phosphorus*, *Pulsatilla*, *Staphysagria*, or *Natrum muriaticum* for a patient, then *Carcinosinum* should probably be on my short list, too.

Morrison's *Desktop Guide to Keynotes and Confirmatory Symptoms* mentions the

following symptoms for *Carcinosinum* that may relate to Natalie's case: "Passionate and longing patients who over-extend themselves on many levels. Timidity. Aversion to reprimand or contradiction. Anxiety and anticipatory worries. ... Constipation and inactivity of the colon. ... Pain in legs ... Weakness, numbness and aching especially in the thighs."

Back on her feet!

Two months after a dose of *Carcinosinum* 200c, Natalie came walking in to see me, pillow free. Sitting comfortably in a chair for our visit, she reported that within the week after taking the remedy, she no longer needed to spend the day flat on her back: "Thank goodness! After four months of misery, I could finally get up and get moving again!" She was now back at work about 25 hours a week and, after my suggestion, had made some adjustments to her work area, chair, and computer position after an ergonomic assessment. Natalie had had one setback over the last two months, after a long, four-hour car ride. Her leg and back flared up requiring her to lie down for rests during the day; this lasted four or five days, but she was not feeling any pain now.

Natalie also told me that a few days after taking that dose of *Carcinosinum*, she began feeling very serene, with no anxiety or worry and with mental clarity and calm. "I felt just wonderful!" she exclaimed. Nothing had really changed with the demands on her or her responsibilities, but she wasn't as stressed by them and she was taking more time for herself without feeling badly about it. This wonderful feeling lasted about 3 weeks. "Unfortunately, I don't feel that serene anymore... but yes, I'm still better than I was before the remedy. I'm probably more able to take things in stride, feel less pent up and more free. ...But I'd like to get that feeling back! Can I have another dose?"

Ah, good question for the homeopath! She was feeling better from her chief complaint of back and leg problems. She had better energy than before taking the remedy and had had a seemingly deep response, at least temporarily, to the homeopathic remedy. Was the remedy still working? Or did she need another dose? A higher potency?

I usually err on the side of repeating remedies infrequently. If I believe a remedy

is working, I do not like to try to stimulate the person's vital force even more. So I told Natalie we needed to wait awhile before giving another dose and asked her to return in about a month. I felt that by then I would have a better sense of whether she was continuing to improve, had reached a plateau, or was slipping backwards. At our second follow up, three-and-a-half months after our initial visit, her back and leg still felt good, but Natalie felt like she was dragging again in her spirits. She felt a bit at sea, was wavering between how to "get it all done," and resenting having to "do it all." *Carcinosinum* 200c, coming right up.

Easing transitions

In the ensuing three years, I have seen Natalie a handful of times when her back pain flares or when she has the occasional acute illness. She has not had another episode of extreme back/leg pain since we began treatment. The flare-ups are more like a shadow of that darker time—she may feel a tension in her back and a hint of pain going down her leg. When she first notices these symptoms, she does not wait but comes right in for treatment. I have continued to prescribe *Carcinosinum* as needed, which helps Natalie feel more in control of her life, happier with her husband and family, and less at the mercy of all the demands; it also helps the back pain. Her nest has now been empty for a number of years, and she seems to relish the quiet, the orderliness she can create, and the time to pursue her painting, music, and photography.

At times of transition when the stress of change leads to troubling symptoms, homeopathy can be a godsend, as Natalie and so many other empty nesters can attest. At its very best, homeopathy helps us to weather life's transitions with fewer physical and emotional symptoms, and with better energy, spirit, and attitude—leaving us free to make the most of the next phase of our lives.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Rothenberg, ND, practices with her husband Paul Herscu, ND, in Enfield, Connecticut. Join the Facebook group New England School of Homeopathy. For more information about the next NESH course to begin in Boston in the fall of 2011 and for free articles and information, see www.nesh.com and www.hersculaboratoryflu.org