

My nest emptied faster than most. In fact it virtually tipped over during a mass exodus. It's 20 years since my perma-pregnant phase when I was lucky enough to produce four healthy children in just three years. My tightknit quartet processed through nursery, primary and secondary school together, and recently it's been time for university and the wider world.

There is plenty about empty-nesting to like. A pint of milk lasts all week, there are no 3am callouts for Mum's taxi service, and bath water reaches up to my chin because the hot water never runs out. The Arctic Monkeys are no longer battling The Streets. The murmur of Radio 4 has become the serene backdrop to my life.

And yet, when they left home, the kids took some of my va-va-voom with them.

I wanted it back, but how? My lovely husband is a busy teacher who spends all day talking to people and was thrilled with his empty, tidy and extremely tranquil home. It would have been ridiculous for me to drag him off in a vague get-more-out-of-life quest. My search for a solution would then have become his problem. I know he would have done whatever I asked, but there might have been payback and one of his interests is archery. I pictured myself standing against a tree with an apple on my head – wiser to tackle my empty-nest issues solo, I decided.

By chance I saw a reading group advertised in the local library. I love reading and like talking so this was a match made in heaven. Evenings went as follows: drink wine, critique book and nitpick through *Hello!* magazine. It was a large, easy-going, drop-in, drop-out group that seemed to have no rules other than come along and laugh a lot.

Enthused by how jolly the reading group made me feel, I accepted an invitation from one of its members to join their monthly bingo group. This was a scream, literally, because to get your prize you have to holler for it. I had a brilliant night out and won £600. I'm going again next month and hope that my beginner's luck lasts.

Concerned that I might be having too good and too self-indulgent a



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time, I joined a prayer group affiliated to my local church, where I found a collection of sincere and generous people from all over the world. Once a fortnight we discussed spiritual ideas and shared personal experiences in a way that was both soothing and life-enhancing. We also ate great angel cake and drank tea. I hope I was able to give back a fraction of what I got from them.

To date I've tried reading, writing, theatre, bingo and prayer with meditation groups. I love the company without commitment that these groups offer. There's no sense of obligation because they are not courses or classes, just light-hearted gatherings of cheerful, chatty people. Some meet weekly, others fortnightly, monthly or even quarterly, so you can join without fear that you'll forget what your husband looks like or have to abandon your favourite TV programme for ever.

Joining a group is a yes vote for living life to the full. My husband said he thinks I'm 'fresher' since I got involved with my groups and I know exactly what he

means because I do feel more energetic and revived. He's a believer in the 'happy wife, happy life' approach to marriage and is delighted with my new independence. My friends love to hear my groupie tales and we've never laughed so much as when we talk about what I'm up to. A couple of them have confessed to being terrified that I was going to invite them to come along with me. But I'm proud that I've found my mojo without pleading with family or friends to do it with me or for me.

So, it's official. I'm a very cheerful 50-year-old groupie. I plan to add rambling, singing and wine appreciation to my repertoire this year.

Being a groupie is a great way to tackle your issues without tissues! I'm not claiming that joining a group or two will solve any major life problems, but it will deliver respite from them, and surely that's a start? In fact, it's only the kids who complain. They grumble that when they call they frequently hear the message, 'Sorry, I'm too busy to come to the phone – please leave a message.' One has suggested that they form a support group to talk about their feelings. I might join if I've got the time