

## Introduction

There's no way to hide how tired she looks, despite bright red lipstick and a charming smile. "I'm so confused," Pam blurts, settling into the office chair. "At times I'm glad my son Greg is home because I really missed him when he was in college. But mostly the stress of it is more than I can take. It feels like an unwelcome step backward. And the timing is plain lousy, just when my boyfriend started a conversation about living together. I feel guilty that I want my life back, but I do. I know Greg is struggling to pay off his student loans but I've got enough of my own bills to handle."

Pam, my last client of the day, is here for an evaluation. She is in her late 40's and overwhelmed, as are many mothers who have been asked to welcome a boomerang Millennial back home.

She wakes up every night worrying and has lost her focus at work. Pam keeps wondering where Greg belongs in her life. He's not a kid anymore. Should she include him in her plans, insist he do his own laundry, or give

him an allowance? And she can't deny her disappointment that he didn't make it on his own. Even her father has criticized her for letting Greg live at home, and she certainly doesn't need that.

Pam's upheaval is taking place in one corner of a very big and complicated picture. According to the Pew Research Center, more than 20 million Millennials aged 18-34 are living with their parents. That's over 1/3 of this generation, making it an all-time high. Many of them are a by-product of economic forces: the recession, the skyrocketing costs of both college education and student loans, a dearth of jobs, much less full-time work. The number of young adults who have returned to the nest has risen dramatically, increasing by 50% in the past 30 years. They're often underemployed or even unemployed like 25 million of this generation. In fact, 40% of all unemployed American workers are Millennials. And that means parents are digging into retirement funds, after having maxed out on college expenses, even though their kids as a group are still carrying \$1 trillion in student loans.

Should Pam decide to continue with coaching, deeper issues would surface about how Greg's circumstances have begun to impact her freedom and her identity. Pam's emotional turmoil makes sense, given the disruption created by her son's boomeranging home.

### **Family relationships**

The five stories of *Whose Couch is it Anyway? Moving Your Millennial* play variations on Pam's themes, each with a different family. If you're reading this book, maybe you

thought your parenting days were over and the house was yours again. Perhaps you've packed up the trophies and transformed your kid's bedroom into a study. Or already mourned the loss of family movies and popcorn on Sunday nights. But now that you've gone through the angst and exhilaration of an empty nest, guess who's knocking at the door?

The return home of adult children is not a new phenomenon and, for many cultures, multi-generational families are the norm. But what sets today's cohort apart is the number: close to one-third of these young adults are not living on their own.

Recent shifts in society confound the issue. Due to both financial backsliding and technological advances, families are physically and *virtually* more connected than ever. Although there are many gifts in this closeness, it can lead to blurred boundaries, an increase in stress, and a failure to thrive.

Many moms like Pam are torn between embracing their kids and pushing them out of the nest again. Despite ambivalence, nurturing is deeply rooted for many women, whose physiology enables them to create strong attachments. Remember how you took care of your favorite doll when you were growing up? That's the backstory—little girls learning early on to value the idea of mothering. But even though women thrive in relationship, relaxing your hold is exactly what you need to do now.

With any major change in family dynamics, it's normal for the mother to feel insecure and vulnerable. Her connections are primal. They keep her healthy and define the human condition. Yet the ultimate truth is that kids

in their teens and twenties are meant to individuate. If you hold on too tight, you'll delay their growth and your own.

If the thought of relaxing this unique bond troubles you, remember that you've eased away many times before and handled it. You left your baby with the sitter and you handed over the car keys to your teenager. Sometimes you let go willingly, other times less so. And what you're going through now is one more stage in a mother's life cycle.

On the other hand, perhaps you're the type of mom who already feels comfortable pulling back. In fact, you may be delighted that you've taken a stand and posted the *no vacancy* sign. But if you're often perplexed about how to interact with your boomerang Millennial, you might still be looking for answers.

Whatever your situation, it's not entirely of your own making—and you're certainly not alone. As we suggested to Pam, let's step back and first try to understand the boomerang phenomenon. Then we'll explore how you can feel empowered as you take action.

## **Your Millennials**

Millennials, aka Gen Y, Echo Boomers, or Generation Me, Me, Me, were born between 1980 and 2000 and are 89 million strong. As the largest generation in the United States, they reflect a broad spectrum of characteristics. Some describe them as narcissistic and over-advantaged with a strong sense of entitlement. Others appreciate their idealism, social consciousness, and commitment to community. Hanging out in packs, they're tech savvy,

connected, and rely heavily on social media. Despite the lack of jobs, they're well educated and optimistic about the future. Some even see themselves in the process of redefining happiness and the American dream.

Of course no one can sum up millions of individuals in a few sentences. Just as Gen X and Baby Boomers defy simple categorization, Millennials slip out from under glib labels. Indeed, now in their teens, twenties, and thirties, they're still writing their narratives and defining their place.

Yet in case after case, many of these young adults manifest some sort of detour on their journey toward *individuation*. They've prolonged the life stage between the teen and adult years, now called *adulthood*.

These emerging adults, also known as *kidults*, have delayed the responsibilities of marriage, children, and home ownership, which are traditional components of being a grown up. It's no surprise that more of them in their mid-twenties are living with a parent than with a partner. Just 21% are married and the Urban Institute estimates that, by the time they turn 40, the figure will increase to only 70%; that's considerably lower than the Gen X rate. A mere 18% of Millennials consider owning a home an important goal. The decline in home ownership by those under 35 reflects this attitude.

The life choices of these kidults comprise more than a temporary trend. Sociologists and demographers say that it's not going away, in part the result of decades of societal change and permissive parenting styles. Impacted by the self-esteem movement, Millennials may shade toward overconfidence and self-involvement. The attitude that

everyone on the team gets a trophy no matter how they play the game may have led to unmerited self-regard.

A positive effect of placing primary value on being part of the team is that Millennials view themselves as global citizens and integral to the world around them. Since they see the similarities among people more than the differences, they readily give of themselves to those in need. Confident that they can accomplish their wildest dreams, they're upbeat and innovative. They direct these qualities into a commitment to altruism and social justice—for some this means trying to save the world, for others, crowdsourcing and creating a cooperative startup company.

They are unified by their immersion in social media. Well over three-quarters of this cohort have created profiles on networking sites. They text and use their smart phones significantly more than any other generation. Wanting validation and approval, they get it from friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter and Instagram.

Technology is their ally and an essential part of their daily lives. It offers a direct electronic line to their parents, with whom they can regularly check in to seek advice. Mom and Dad have been relaxing the boundaries as well, opting to be pals with their kids. It's a brand of parenting often called *peer-enting*. Parents say they have a closer relationship with their kids than their parents ever had with them—and believe all of them are better off because of it.

Traditionally, one of the ways kids mature is by internalizing an image of Mom that includes the values and counsel she has imparted over the years. Then when

they're on their own and faced with a decision, they lean on these acquired principles. They've incorporated a sense of right or wrong that serves as a touchstone throughout their lives. Conversely, constant access to the actual parents tends to *infantilize* emerging adults, keeping them dependent and less prepared to take care of themselves. Technology prevents them from drawing on their own resources to figure out what to do. Instead, they access the Internet or text a parent to get the answers.

### **Mothers of Millennials**

We are living in a time of accelerated change on every front. Chances are as a Boomer or Gen X mom, the feminist movement had some influence on you. Because of it, women gained legal access to contraception and abortion, making it easier to delay motherhood. They also began gravitating to careers, often earning a degree prior to marriage.

You had the freedom to nurture and love your family. And kids grow and blossom in all that sunshine. Your parenting style might have helped them develop high self-esteem and confidence. But you've heard about *Tiger Moms*, who program their children for success and *Helicopter Moms*, who hover over theirs. When kids are raised to feel so special and important, they may develop narcissistic tendencies or, conversely, feel inadequate to meet such high expectations.

Although it helps to look back in order to move forward, what's more relevant now is where to go from here. As your Millennials struggle with real issues like student loans, unemployment, finances, and relationships, it's your

attitude toward how they take responsibility for their future that matters. A major goal of parenting is to raise an independent and self-sufficient adult.

Some say the culture that encourages kids to be grown-ups has broken down. But you can work with your child to get back on track. Because it's still true—parents who motivate their adult kids to deal with day-to-day stresses help them develop resilience and better coping skills.

It's important to keep in mind, too, that emerging adults are not the only ones harmed by the hyperconcern of overprotective mothers. Vigilance itself can be stressful. When you give up the idea of perfection, doesn't it feel good? You can relax and quiet the inner voice that advocates intrusive control. Without being on call to pick up the pieces 24/7, you'll have energy to create the life you want.

### **Moms and boomerang kids**

Some families embrace their returning kids with open arms, enjoying the stimulation of a full house and the chance to reconnect with their young adults. Others are less enthusiastic but let them come back anyway. These parents grudgingly surrender their space, time, and money, feeling both resentment and guilt. But beyond the moving in, there's also the question: how do you eventually get them out? While 60% of Americans believe it's acceptable for college graduates to move home, the limit they set is one year.

Of course, not all parents or problems are alike. Each chapter here focuses on a specific family with a different

boomerang issue, the mother being our primary client. We present a precipitating event and a series of coaching sessions with each mom, tracking her progress in resolving the turbulence that brought her to us.

In Chapter 1, a family is thrown into flux when Cody, the twenty-two-year-old middle child, runs out of money and asks to come home. He has a degree but no job and has been floundering for a year. Cody's return brings to the surface new tensions between his parents, Susan and Jim. Instead of enjoying an empty nest, they must put their personal dreams on hold. Can they negotiate mutually acceptable conditions for their son's moving in, as well as goals that will enable him to leave again?

Toxic interdependency is the focus in Chapter 2. Margo, a successful attorney who never married, has raised her twenty-seven-year-old daughter and younger son alone since birth, managing all aspects of their lives. When her daughter Abby asserts the wish to move in with an equally controlling boyfriend, Margo is overcome with bewilderment and pain. Can mother and daughter learn to respect the other's autonomy and each develop her own sense of wholeness?

A tug of war develops in the busy household of Chapter 3 where Anna lives with her husband, Tony, and their teenager, Isabella. His widowed father moves in followed shortly by their twenty-five-year-old daughter, Lucia, and her toddler. There's an exponential increase in tension as the multi-generational family tries to coexist. Both mothers struggle to maintain their roles while living under the same roof. Can Anna reduce her stress and find balance while being pulled in all directions?

In Chapter 4, Nick, a thirty-year-old serial boomerang, creates physical and emotional havoc for his widowed mother, Bev. He's an alcoholic who has relapsed again after rehab. His sister Betsy has been burned once too often and has withdrawn her support from Nick as well as her mom. Bev is conflicted, not yet ready to confront her assumptions about parenting. Torn between enabling her son and standing her ground, can she set limits and begin to care for herself?

Boundaries bleed as two blended families face a crisis in Chapter 5. Teri and her ex-husband must cooperate after their daughter, sixteen-year-old Emmy, is bullied at school. When she moves back with her mom, sexual tension develops between her and stepbrother Chad. Conflict increases as Teri deals with Emmy's emotional problems and the issues in her new marriage. Close to her own breaking point, can Teri learn to nurture herself as she creates new rituals for her growing family?

These families are unique in history, attitudes, and composition, from the baggage they carry to their current state of affairs. Yet common threads weave through all five stories. A child boomeranging back home can release a cascade of complicated emotions—*anxiety, frustration, anger, happiness, ambivalence*. Disturbance to the established patterns impacts each family member, particularly Mom, who is often at the center of the storm.

How do these women deal with their inner turmoil and the external crises that arise day-to-day? And in what ways can they take care of themselves while preparing their kids to be independent? You'll see how each mother tackles the challenges, helping her family communicate

better, learn new problem-solving strategies, and build strength in relationships. At the same time, she tries to reserve psychic energy for herself.

As you read these opening scenarios and stories you'll recognize familiar attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. They can stimulate introspection and fresh ideas as well as action. Best of all, the first person accounts introduce you to practical solutions that work. We hope that as your awareness grows and you reflect on the courage of other moms, your internal dialogue will shift. And what you learn will give you the confidence to transform your own story.