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# How To Cope With Empty Nest Syndrome

Communicating with your family, setting expectations and finding healthy distractions can make life easier once your kiddo flies the coop

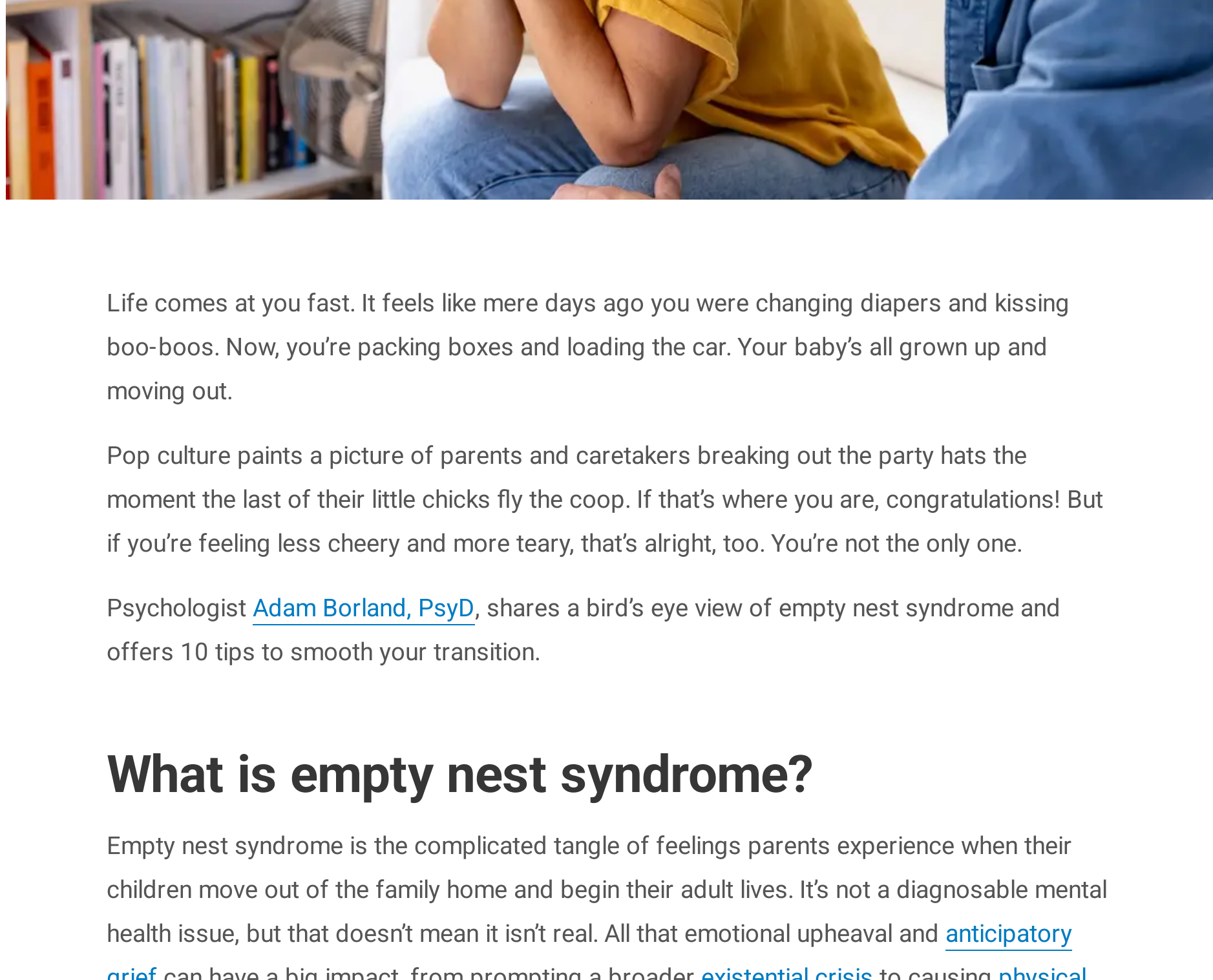
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Life comes at you fast. It feels like mere days ago you were changing diapers and kissing boo-boos. Now, you're packing boxes and loading the car. Your baby's all grown up and moving out.

Pop culture paints a picture of parents and caretakers breaking out the party hats the moment the last of their little chicks fly the coop. If that's where you are, congratulations! But if you're feeling less cheery and more teary, that's alright, too. You're not the only one.

Psychologist [Adam Borland, PsyD](#), shares a bird's eye view of empty nest syndrome and offers 10 tips to smooth your transition.

## What is empty nest syndrome?

Empty nest syndrome is the complicated tangle of feelings parents experience when their children move out of the family home and begin their adult lives. It's not a diagnosable mental health issue, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. All that emotional upheaval and [anticipatory grief](#) can have a big impact, from prompting a broader [existential crisis](#) to causing [physical symptoms](#) or [catastrophic thinking](#).

"Empty nest syndrome is a very common experience," Dr. Borland reassures. "A large part of one's identity often becomes defined by their role as a parent. And suddenly, there's this recognition that a significant change is about to occur, that time has flown really quickly. It's OK to feel a sense of loss and uncertainty during this period of transition."

## Causes

We can all experience a sense of loss when faced with certain life-changing events, but some transitions hit harder than others. Any parent can experience empty nest syndrome. But you may be more prone to it if you:

- Are experiencing the hormone fluctuations that come with [menopause](#) or [perimenopause](#).
- Are the parent of an only child.
- Already have a diagnosed mental health condition.
- Have a history of [trauma](#), especially around abandonment or the loss of a child.
- Served as a child's primary (or sole) caregiver.
- Don't have many formal responsibilities outside of childcare.
- Lack of social support structures like family, friends, co-workers or a faith community.
- Found other childhood milestones emotionally difficult.
- Feel concerned for your child's physical safety (if, for example, your child enlists in the military or has a chronic medical condition).
- Have a strained relationship with your significant other, don't have one or are newly single.
- Are experiencing other difficult transitions in your life, for good (like starting a new job) or for ill (like the loss of a loved one).

Of course, not every child grows up and leaves home in the same way, at the same time or for the same reasons. If you have concerns about your child's ability to adapt, care for themselves or stay "on the straight and narrow" for any reason, that could also make this a more difficult season of your life.

## Symptoms

Again, empty nest syndrome isn't a diagnosable psychiatric condition, but Dr. Borland says people experiencing it tend to experience some or all of the following feelings:

- Fear.
- [Grief](#).
- Sadness.
- [Guilt](#).
- [Stress](#).
- [Loneliness](#).
- [Irritability](#).
- Emptiness.
- Powerlessness.
- Rejection.
- [Apathy](#).
- Hopelessness.

If these sound like symptoms of anxiety and depression, it's because they are. Think of empty nest syndrome as a milder, situational version of these conditions. If these feelings intensify or seriously impact your daily life, you may be dealing with something more serious. More on that later.

## How to cope with empty nest syndrome

You might not be able to prevent empty nest syndrome, but you *can* take measures to reduce its impact. Dr. Borland recommends doing these 10 things to better cope with your kiddo's departure.

### Prepare yourself

[Denial](#) can be extremely comfortable. But Dr. Borland says avoiding that inevitable only makes it harder to confront.

"It's important for parents to prepare themselves," he explains. "It doesn't mean that it won't be difficult, but at least you won't feel blindsided because you've given yourself time to process these feelings."

He adds that it's crucial to remind yourself that you're *still* a parent, and you're still *parenting*. Your role has changed, yes, but that doesn't make it less important. Your child may be growing up, but they still need you. They just need you in a different way. And different doesn't have to be bad. It's just different.

### Celebrate all you've accomplished

The process of moving a child out of your home and onto their next step is full of hustle and bustle. In the midst of the logistics, swirling emotions and changes to your daily life, it's easy to forget what the empty nest symbolizes.

"Recognize your accomplishments," Dr. Borland urges. "You raised a child who has succeeded." Whether your child is headed to [college](#), to the military, to a new job or just to the apartment complex down the street, they're demonstrating they're mature and confident enough to live independently.

It's their victory, sure. But they couldn't have done it without you.

### Communicate with your family

You want to be all things to your child: A superhero with the power to solve every problem. But that's not reality. You're human, too.

Pretending you don't have feelings can make empty nest syndrome even harder to bear — because it means you have to bear those feelings alone, within the confines of your own mind.

"Let your child and the rest of your family in," Dr. Borland advises. "Tell them *I'm going to miss you*, and *this is going to be a transition for me, too*." [Maintaining open communication](#) is really helpful." Getting vulnerable could lead to valuable conversations with your *kid* about your shared hopes and fears.

### Set expectations

Open communication is valuable for many reasons. For one, it allows you to establish clear plans and [boundaries](#) with your child.

Let's use the example of coming home to visit. How often is your child planning to come home? Are they expected to pay for their airplane ticket? Are there any upcoming events they *really* need to be home for? Is it OK to bring new friends or love interests with them? Working through these kinds of questions ahead of time can prevent miscommunication and hurt feelings down the road.

### Don't guilt your child

Communication is key. But it's also important that you're mindful about *what* you communicate to your child — and *how* you do it. After all, they're dealing with their own feelings, too. (And unlike you, they don't yet have a fully developed brain to do it with!)

"They're dealing with their own anxiety, stress and fear," Dr. Borland says. "The last thing they need is to feel as though they're carrying the weight of their parent's sadness, too. You have to find a balance: Practice open communication, but process your feelings separately from your child."

If you're feeling blue, it's OK to let them know. It's *not* OK to make them responsible for fixing it. Instead of complaining that your kid hasn't been calling enough, for example, ask them what contact method works best for them, or see if you could add a monthly video chat to their calendar.

Your kid probably won't say as much, but watching you be honest, own your feelings and find creative solutions may help them do the same.

### Respect each other's feelings

Not every member of a family is going to respond to an empty nest the same way. You may be ready to slide around the house in your underwear, *Risky Business*-style, while your partner's working late and avoiding the peace and quiet like the plague.

"Each person's going to deal with their own experience," Dr. Borland says. "It's a matter of honoring those feelings, communicating and trying to find a balance that allows you to move forward in harmony."

(It's also worth noting that — if your nest isn't *really* empty yet — you need to show the children still in the home the same consideration. They have a right to feel however they feel and it's important to respect their boundaries as they process their sibling's departure.)

### Reframe the situation

Your nest isn't empty — it's being renovated!

Seriously. Mindset matters, especially in the face of big changes. When you're feeling low, try reframing the situation. Here are some examples:

- **Feeling guilty about enjoying your newfound freedom?** Keep in mind that, when you embrace change and [practice self-care](#), you set a good example. And your being happy gives your kid one less thing to worry about as they transition into adulthood.
- **Feeling lonely?** Remember: This isn't the end of your relationship with your child. It's a chance to develop a stronger, more meaningful bond. You've *finally* reached the stage where you can focus on what really matters, instead of getting caught up in the day-to-day squabbles that come with raising a kid. Now, you get to focus on enjoying each other's company.
- **Feeling purposeless?** You haven't lost your identity. You're *expanding* it in new and interesting directions.

### Find healthy distractions

One factor that can't be underestimated when it comes to empty nest syndrome is the change in your daily routine. We're creatures of habit and it can be hard to figure out what to do with newfound free time. Dr. Borland's suggestion? Look for healthy distractions.

"Finding meaningful activities to do in your free time is a really important way to cope in a time of uncertainty and transition," he explains. "Oftentimes, parents will get back into things they haven't done since they had children, things they did earlier in their life that they put on hold. Others get really into an activity they never had the opportunity to try before because they didn't have time."

While this is an exciting fresh start for your child, it can be an exciting time for you, too.

### Rekindle the flame

Your nest may be empty, but your bed doesn't have to be. A [2022 study](#) found that marital relationships frequently improve when children leave home.

"This is an opportunity for parents to rekindle their relationship," Dr. Borland notes. "It's not unusual to put your relationships to the side because you're focusing so much attention on your child or children's needs." If you're single, this might be a chance to dip your toe back into the dating pool.

At the same time, don't feel pressured to bring sexy back.

"It's going to come down to communication, to recognizing your own feelings and your partner's and not denying any of them," he continues. "You may be in different places. And that's OK." If you feel you aren't finding your way back to each other, or are questioning whether you *want* to, consider going to [couples therapy](#).

### Know when to get help

Everybody's empty nest journey looks a little bit different. And that's OK. But it raises a question: How do you know when run-of-the-mill empty nest syndrome has graduated into something more serious? Dr. Borland recommends reaching out to your primary care physician or a mental health professional if you:

- Don't feel your symptoms are improving with time — or worry they're getting worse.
- Experience [anxiety](#), [depression](#), stress or [panic](#) to a degree that interferes with your daily life.
- Experience [mood swings](#), like crying without warning or becoming excessively angry.
- Isolate yourself from others or stop doing activities you enjoy.
- Have difficulty concentrating.
- Hear from concerned loved ones that they've noticed a change in your behavior.
- Feel you can't experience happiness like you used to.

It's also important to keep tabs on your physical well-being. The following are good indicators you need additional support.

- [Sleeping too much](#) or too little.
- Being [tired or fatigued](#), even when you get enough sleep.
- [Changes in your appetite](#), like eating too much or too little.
- Sudden weight gain or [loss](#).
- [Changes in your sex drive](#).
- Gastrointestinal issues.
- Frequent [headaches](#).
- [Substance \(mis\)use](#).

If you don't already have a [therapist](#), talk to your primary care provider about getting a referral. Also, consider availing yourself of resources like empty nest support groups and self-help books.

### A new beginning

If you're reading this, you're probably standing at one of the great crossroads of your life. It's a challenging moment. Your child's path to adulthood won't always be smooth — and every member of your family is bound to make mistakes as you settle into a new relationship dynamic.

But remember: You've been preparing for this since the moment your child entered your life. Every recital, every long walk back from the bus stop and every sleepover laid the foundation for your kid to claim their independence. It's a scary moment, but one you can arrive at with pride. Just as you adjusted to life as a parent, you'll adjust to life as the parent of a full-fledged adult. It's going to be different. But different can be *so good*.



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