

Empty nest syndrome

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Summary

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Empty nest syndrome refers to the grief that many parents feel when their children move out of home.

This condition is typically more common in women, who are more likely to have had the role of primary carer.

If one child has moved out and you still have others living at home with you, plan in advance for the day when your nest will be empty of all children.

Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed.

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Empty nest syndrome refers to the grief that many parents feel when their children move out of home. This condition is typically more common in women, who are more likely to have had the role of primary carer. Unlike the grief experienced when (for example) a loved one dies, the grief of empty nest syndrome often goes unrecognised, because an adult child moving out of home is seen as a normal, healthy event. Upset parents may find few sources of support or sympathy. In many cases, empty nest syndrome is compounded by other difficult life events or significant changes happening around the same time, such as retirement or menopause.

Loss of motherhood

Empty nest syndrome can afflict both parents, but mothers seem to be most susceptible. Many mothers may have dedicated 20 years or more of their lives to bringing up their children, and see motherhood as their primary role. This is true even for most working mothers. Once the last child moves out, the mother may feel that her most important job is finished. Similarly to anyone experiencing redundancy, the mother may feel worthless, disoriented and unsure of what meaning her future may hold. However, most mothers adapt in time. Psychologists suggest that it may take between 18 months and two years to make the successful transition from 'mum' to independent woman.

Some parents are more susceptible than others

Research suggests that some parents are more susceptible than others. People who suffer the most from empty nest syndrome tend to have things in common, including:

- Change is considered stressful, rather than challenging or refreshing.
- They found moving out of home a difficult and emotional experience.
- Their marriage is unstable or unsatisfactory.
- Experiences such as weaning their babies from the breast, or sending their children off to school, were emotional and painful.
- People who rely on their roles for self-identity are more likely to feel bereft than people who have a strong sense of self-worth.
- People who are full-time parents are more often affected than people who also have other duties to perform (such as paid employment).
- Parents who worry that their children aren't ready to take on adult responsibilities tend to experience more grief.

New challenges

The challenges faced by parents experiencing empty nest syndrome include:

- Establishing a new kind of relationship with their adult children.
- Becoming a couple again, after years of sharing the home with children.
- Filling the void in the daily routine created by absent children.
- Lack of sympathy or understanding from others, who consider children moving out to be a normal, healthy event.

Other difficulties

The grief of empty nest syndrome may be compounded by other life events happening at the same time, including:

- Retirement
- Redundancy
- Menopause
- Death of a spouse.

Working again

Some full-time mothers (and fathers) return to work or retrain. Suggestions include:

- Write up a list of all those things you promised you would do 'one day' and start making those dreams a reality.
- Set achievable goals to start with, for example, short courses are probably more realistic as a first step, than launching into a three year degree.
- Network with friends and associates to uncover employment opportunities.
- Join professional associations or hobby groups.
- Consider volunteer work to expand your network of contacts.

Coping with stress and depression

Your child moving out of home is a significant stress. Suggestions for coping include:

- Acknowledge your grief (even if you feel that no one else seems to understand) and allow yourself to feel upset.
- Rituals, such as funerals, help us to come to terms with difficult changes. Create your own rituals to help acknowledge your feelings. Suggestions include planting a tree, or redecorating your child's old room.
- Discuss your thoughts, feelings and future plans with your spouse.
- Seek advice and support from other friends who understand how you feel, some of them may also have experienced empty nest syndrome.
- Give yourself time to adapt to the changes. Don't expect too much of yourself, particularly in the first few weeks or months.
- Pursue your hobbies and interests now that you have more time.
- Some people find that keeping a journal is helpful, while others find peace through prayer. Do whatever feels right for you.
- Put off making any big decisions - such as selling up and moving to a smaller house - until you feel you have adapted.
- Keep up regular routines and self-care, such as eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly.
- Seek professional help if you feel overwhelmed.

Planning in advance

If one child has moved out and you still have others living at home with you, plan in advance for the day when your nest will be empty of all children. Small changes made over time will mean less of a shock when your last child moves out. You may find, with thought and careful planning, that the occasion of your last child leaving home will offer a little happiness too, as you can then implement your plans for an independent life with your spouse.

Where to get help

- Psychologist Referral Service - Freecall 1800 333 497
- Parentline Tel. 132 289

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Alcohol facts

Learn all about alcohol - includes standard drink size, health risks and effects, how to keep track of your drinking, binge drinking, how long it takes to leave the body, tips to lower intake.

Allergies explained

Allergy occurs when the body overreacts to a 'trigger' that is harmless to most people.

Animals and child safety

Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets.

Anxiety and fear in children

You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings.

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The Department of Health celebrates, values and includes people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, cultures, bodies and abilities.

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