



Empty Nest Syndrome

Empty Nest Syndrome refers to feelings of depression, sadness, and/or grief experienced by parents and caregivers after children come of age and leave their childhood homes. This may occur when children go to college or get married. Women are more likely than men to be affected; often, when the nest is emptying, mothers are going through other significant life events as well, such as menopause or caring for elderly parents.



More mothers work these days and therefore feel less emptiness when their children leave home. Also, an increasing number of adult children between 25 and 34 are now living at home. Psychologist Allan Scheinberg notes that these "boomerang kids" want the "limited responsibility of childhood and the privileges of adulthood." Children may also return home due to economics, divorce, extended education, drug or alcohol problems or temporary transitions.

Symptoms

Feelings of sadness are normal at this time. It is also normal to spend time in the absent child's bedroom to feel closer to him or her.

If you are experiencing empty nest syndrome, monitor your reactions and their duration. If you are feeling that your useful life has ended, or if you are crying excessively or are so sad that you don't want to see friends or go to work, you should consider seeking professional help.

Causes

As noted earlier, when a woman is at the stage in life when her kids are leaving, she may also be going through other major changes, like dealing with menopause or coping with increasingly dependent elderly parents.

Recent research suggests that the quality of the parent-child relationship may have important consequences for both at this time. Parents gain the greatest psychological benefit from the transition to an empty nest when they have developed and maintain good relations with their children. Extreme hostility, conflict, or detachment in parent-child relations may reduce intergenerational support when it is most needed by youth during early adulthood and by parents facing the disabilities of old age.

At one time, it was commonly thought that women were particularly vulnerable to depression when their children left home, experiencing a profound loss of purpose and identity. However, studies show no increase in depressive illness among women at this stage of life.

Treatment

When a child's departure unleashes overwhelming sadness, treatment is definitely needed. Discuss your feelings with your general practitioner as soon as possible. You may need antidepressants, and you almost certainly could use some counseling to get your feelings into perspective.

Meanwhile, look to your friends for support and be kind to yourself. There are practical things to help you feel better.

For instance:

- Buy some pay-as-you-go mobile phone vouchers or prepaid calling cards for your son or daughter so that keeping in contact is financially viable.
- Try to schedule a weekly chat on the phone.
- Send your child brief e-mails of what's happening at home.
- Make care packages for your child with anything from groceries to a set of towels for her new apartment.
- Try not to overdo it in the beginning, and don't attach any strings to the gifts.

Time and energy that you directed toward your child can now be spent on different areas of your life. This might be an opportune time to explore or return to hobbies, leisure activities or career pursuits.

This also marks a time to adjust to your new role in your child's life as well as changes in your identity as a parent. Your relationship with your child may become more peerlike, and you will have to get used to giving your children more privacy.

Many suggest preparing for an empty nest while your children are still living with you. Develop friendships, hobbies, career, and educational opportunities. Make plans with the family while everyone is still under the same roof, so you don't regret lost opportunities: Plan family vacations, enjoy long talks, take time off from work. And make specific plans for the extra money, time, and space that will become available when children are no longer dependent on you and living at home.

Source: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

About MINES & Associates

For over 25 years MINES & Associates has been a nationally recognized business psychology firm that provides a variety of services to corporate employers including employee assistance programs (EAP), managed mental healthcare, organizational development and psychology services, wellness programs, behavioral risk management, disease management, PPO services, and a number of other technology based services. MINES & Associates is divided into two main divisions, Organizational Psychology and Health Psychology, and currently serves a diverse portfolio of clients in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico, and the UK. Please log on to <http://www.minesandassociates.com> for the latest news and information on MINES & Associates.