

Empty Nest Syndrome

As the fall season arrives, many parents find themselves sending their children off to school for the first time. Whether they are sending them to kindergarten or off to college, many parents experience a feeling of sadness, depression, and loneliness when their children are not around the home as much as they had been. These emotions can also be experienced when a child has been recently married and is no longer living at home. The term “empty nest syndrome” is not identified in medical text books, but it is a way of identifying the feelings of sadness and loss that many parents, both men and women, experience when their children are no longer around the home. If these emotions are not addressed, it can affect not only the individual experiencing them, but also the relationship between that person and their children, and/or other individuals with whom the person is involved.

Right now, about thirty percent of the nation’s 78 million baby boomers are, or are about to be, “empty nesters.” This is a time when many parents will be going through changes in their family and will be looking to outside help to support them through this difficult time.

Reactions to having an empty nest

It is quite normal for a parent to feel some sadness at this time. It is also normal to cry now and again - and it is even normal to go into the absent child’s bedroom and sit there for a while in an attempt to feel closer to him or her. Those feelings are natural, and should not cause shame.

If, on the other hand, there are feelings that useful life has ended, there is excessive crying, or if there is so much sadness that the person doesn’t want to be with friends or go to work, then professional help should be sought, especially if these severe symptoms go on for longer than a week.

Commonly, when a woman is at the stage of life where her kids are leaving for college, she may also be going through other major changes like dealing with the menopause, or trying to cope with increasingly dependent, elderly parents. This is a challenging time and it is no disgrace to need help of various kinds to get through it.

This also marks a time when it is important to adjust to a new role in the child's life as well as changes in identity as a parent. The relationship with the child may become more peer like, and it may be beneficial to start to get used to giving the child more privacy. Meanwhile, one can look to friends for support.

There are practical things that can be done to help ease the transition. For instance:

- Buy some “pay as you go” mobile phone vouchers or prepaid calling cards for the child so that keeping in contact is financially viable.
- Try to schedule a weekly chat on the phone.
- Send the child brief e-mails of what is happening at home.
- Make “care packages” with anything from groceries to a set of towels for their new apartment. This should be minimal in the beginning, however.

Coping with stress and depression

The child moving out of the home is a significant stressor. Suggestions for coping include:

- Acknowledge grief (even if no one else seems to understand) and allow oneself to feel upset.
- Create rituals to help acknowledge feelings. Suggestions include planting a tree, or redecorating the child's old room.
- Discuss thoughts, feelings and future plans with the spouse.
- Seek advice and support from other friends who understand such feelings. Some of them may also have experienced empty nest syndrome.
- Give oneself time to adapt to the changes. One shouldn't have unrealistically high expectations, particularly in the first few weeks or months.
- Pursue hobbies and interests or volunteer, now that there is more time.
- Some people find that keeping a journal is helpful, while others find peace through prayer.
- Put off making any big decisions - such as selling and moving to a smaller house - until feeling adapted.
- Keep up regular routines and self-care, such as eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly.

- Seek professional help if feeling overwhelmed.

Planning in advance

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

Further information can be found at:

www.marriage.about.com

www.emptynestsupport.com

www.apa.org

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Reference:

Pung, E. (November 2005). Empty nest syndrome. *Mental Health Matters*. 3(1). Gratiot Medical Center: An Affiliate of MidMichigan Health.