

The Empty Nest Syndrome

What is the empty nest syndrome?

The empty nest syndrome refers to the time in family life after the children have grown up and moved on to college, work, marriage, or their own independent lives. For parents, this can be a time of strong feelings. Some experience joy, fulfillment, and relief. Others feel loneliness and anxiety, or a mixture of both good and bad feelings.

Some couples enter a second honeymoon period. Single parents can now date without worrying about what their children think. Parents are free to focus on their own financial, emotional, and social needs.

So why does it hurt so much?

For some parents, this time is marked by the pain of loss and the anxiety of letting go. They may find themselves asking: "What is my purpose in life?" "My work is done. Who needs me?" Or they may feel bitter: "Look what all my hard work has gotten me now."

Single parents may have an even harder time than couples. They may have to reinvent almost every aspect of their lives and may feel more alone than ever before.

In each phase of life there are tasks to be accomplished. When children leave home, it is the parents' task to make the transition from full nest to empty nest. Those who do not, live in the past. Those who do, look toward the future.

How can I better understand this change?

Change itself -- whether moving, marriage, having children, or letting children go -- is very hard, and it is normal to be confused and upset.

How you deal with this change can affect you for a long time. It is best to deal with it when it first occurs by planning, talking about your feelings, and getting concerns out in the open. Not doing so only allows the feelings of loss, fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem to grow stronger. When this happens, you may begin to feel that things are out of control.

You can make things easier by doing some of the following:

- Don't run from the problem. Pretending nothing has changed will harm you in the long run.
- Recognize that this is a difficult time for you. Single parents especially may feel very alone.
- Single parents should plan on having someone to lean on for a few weeks. If your children know you have someone, they can relax, and you'll feel better, too.
- Talk to your spouse about your feelings. You may find you share the same emotions.
- If you and your spouse have been putting off dealing with problems until the children left home, start dealing with these problems now. Otherwise, you may build another pattern of avoidance.

Too close or too distant?

This is also the time to examine the relationships among family members. Pay particular

The Empty Nest Syndrome

attention to how emotionally close or distant people are to each other.

If a parent and child were particularly close, they may have a hard time separating emotionally. If you find that all you think and talk about are your children, you may be hurting more than you realize. You need to remember that parents and children need to develop their own lives.

Being too distant can also present problems. You may be pushing your children away emotionally, perhaps because you are angry or resentful that they want to leave you. This can lead to lasting feelings of bitterness and anger.

You may feel guilty for not having spent more time with your children when they were home, and this guilt may stop you from paying attention to your own needs. The best time to make an extra effort to get close to your children may not be soon after they leave home but after they have had some time on their own.

Here are some ways to help let go of your kids in a healthy way:

- Be clear with adult children that they are free to make their own way in life.
- Encourage your children to maintain relationships with each other. Siblings can be great support for each other once they have left home.
- Focus on the successes and strengths of your children.
- Recognize that they are adults now and it's up to them to let you know if they need you.

What can I do?

- Do a life inventory. Think of all the things you have been waiting to do once you had the time.
- Work to establish a more adult rapport with your children. Seeing them as adults will help you treat them as adults.
- Really think through what you want to happen in the next 10 to 20 years. Remember, when you had children you planned ahead 20 years, so plan now for the next 20.
- See if you are having recurring negative thoughts about yourself ("I did a bad job as a parent." "I'm just going to grow old and die alone." "No one needs me anymore.") If you are, try to change these thoughts. Get validation from friends that they are not true.

When might I need professional help?

While this is a normally difficult time, there are some warning signs that you may need help from a professional. You may need help if:

- There is a significant decrease in your ability to do the things you used to do regularly, like work and socialize.
- There is a significant change in your sleep cycle or in how much you eat or weigh.
- Several months later you are still markedly unhappy, anxious, or upset or you feel you cannot deal with the change.
- You and your spouse are becoming more distant and not addressing what it means to be living without children at home.

Written by Daniel Rosen, C.S.W.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.