

Exploration of the Concept of An Empty Nest

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ABSTRACT

Empty nesting has become more and more prevalent nowadays. Children start moving out of their parent's homes for future endeavors. Departure of children from home leads to negative as well as positive consequences for their parents. Empty nest has changed the family dynamics. This study aims to explore the concept of the empty nest with different studies conducted on the subject. This includes the definitions and consequences by taking support of previous research. Indian and other studies covering marital quality, psychological well-being, coping strategies, and relationships with children of empty-nesters are discussed in this study. Additionally, cultural differences and experiences of empty nesters are included in the study.

Keywords: *Empty nest, Parents, Children, Family dynamics*

Emerging adulthood is a stage when young adults start exploring themselves and focusing on their careers. In most industrialized countries, young adults often leave their childhood homes for higher education and career opportunities. They face challenges of independence but while doing so they often forget the emotional experiences of their parents who are coping with sudden isolation. The word 'empty nest' refers to the house becoming deserted when children stretch their wings and leave the nest for their future lives (Arora and Khanam, 2023). Leaving parental homes for a career or marriage is a part of normal development and a natural process to become an adult. Many parents perceive this transition positively, while others find it difficult to deal with this time called "empty nest syndrome". The term 'Empty Nest Syndrome' was first introduced by Dorothy Canfield in 1914. Mitchell (2016) defined an Empty nest as "a family life course transition and post-parental phase that occurs when children have moved out and left the parental home". Darmayanthi and Lestari (2018) have defined an empty nest as "a phenomenon that occurs when the child begins to run their independent life."

Empty nest syndrome is a psychological phenomenon that remains unrecognized at the initial stage but if it is ignored, becomes chronic. Mostly retired parents are vulnerable to empty nest syndrome. Parents want their children to become independent, but it becomes painful when it actually happens. Specifically, mothers who were continuously busy with their children, from making their breakfast to ironing their dresses, suddenly experience a vacuum when their children leave home. It is more severe in the case of mothers who have a single child to adjust to an empty nest (Makkar, 2018). This change makes parents feel

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negatively leading to sadness and isolation however, others take this as a maturity process of their children (Bongyoga and Risnawaty, 2021). This experience causes a sense of loss and identity crisis among parents. This phenomenon is categorized into three transitional periods; when children are living with their parents, when one child leaves home and starts living separately, and when all children start living separately from their parents (Mitchell and Lovegreen, 2009). (Jhangiani et al., 2022) Despite such cyber support, parents feel alone and left out, starving for the love and belongingness given in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In the early years, typical Indian families were living in the joint family system. Later it was changed to a nuclear or extended family system. Pillay (1988) mentioned that in the Indian community, the traditional extended family system was where married sons and their wives lived with their parents. However, due to an increase in acculturation, this system became less prevailing (Jithoo, 1975). So, an increasing number of young people started leaving their families and living on their own leading to the nuclear family system. But in the current situation, the empty nest has become a new system that emerged due to children leaving their parents' homes and never coming back to their nests. Migration has mainly affected family relations and dynamics. (Litwak, 1960) Different members of the same family live in different places in the world. This has split the family structure. (Kaur and Sinha, 2023) Therefore, Migration has increased the physical distance between the migrants and their families.

Negative Effects of Empty Nest

When children leave their homes to pursue their future lives, parents go through different psychological problems. Mostly, parents miss daily interactions with their children. Some parents may experience depression or anxiety due to emptiness in their homes as well as their lives. When children are no longer at home, parents feel lonely because of an empty home. Universally, parents have their identity as caregivers. When children leave their homes, they lose that identity, purpose, and motivation (Arora and Khanam, 2023) leading to a feeling of emptiness in their lives. (Sepahvand et al., 2020) Parents may feel guilty during the empty nest phase for the inadequacy of their parenting skills and sometimes that guilt may occur due to the feeling of relief for not having fulfilled an active parenting role. Also, for some parents supporting their children's education is an additional financial burden leading to worries about retirement and financial stability. According to Thoit (1983), everyone has different roles as per their positions and functions in society and they are expected to behave according to their roles. When a person loses roles, they experience psychological problems. Therefore, the role change perspective states that when children leave home it will affect the physical and psychological well-being of parents.

Budhia et al. (2022) assessed the prevalence of empty nest syndrome in middle-aged adults in Eastern India. Their findings indicated prevalence of empty nest syndrome is higher among females than males. Furthermore, persistently feeling these emotions can cause severe psychiatric issues like depression or anxiety. Nonetheless, it is vital to understand that Empty-nest syndrome is more of a temporary psychological condition than a permanent psychiatric disorder. Bongyoga and Risnawaty (2021) stated that the absence of children at home may have a negative effect on the emotional well-being of parents. It can also affect the dynamics of the relationship between parents. The disruption in one domain can have an effect on the other domains. The researchers found that the absence of children at home leads to problems related to physical well-being, and family relationships of parents.

The elderly experience problems because of this transition. Old age is characterized by a decrease in physical strength and susceptibility to different health problems that can lead to

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death. Many people think about themselves as liabilities rather than a resource for family members (Pratiwi, 2023). According to Zhang et al. (2019), in China, empty nesters are prone to mental disorders. Living alone, having no or partial self-care abilities, financial crises, and chronic diseases lead to physical and mental health problems. Nayak, Siddhanta, and Panda (2022) stated that, in India gender, familial support, living arrangements, and financial stability play an important role in overall physical and psychological well-being among elderly empty nesters. Indian mothers face adjustment problems, especially among homemaker mothers. According to Lesse (1983), the biochemical or hormonal changes among middle-aged women in menopause trigger the problem of depression.

Positive Effects of Empty Nest

Not all parents will experience negative effects, however, some find joy and fulfillment in the empty nest phase. With time, many parents adjust to the changes and discover new opportunities for personal growth, hobbies, and reconnecting with their partner. (Afzal and Waraich, 2023) For some parents, it is a chance to prioritize their interests and needs as parenting responsibilities and demands get over. They utilize this time to rejuvenate spousal relationships by spending more time with each other and for their own hobbies which were difficult to pursue earlier. This newfound freedom helps them to reconnect with their old friends and social network which was neglected previously.

Learning new skills, and engaging in different hobbies or classes give parents a chance of self-discovery. Some may change their careers without any restrictions due to parenting responsibilities. Parents may feel a sense of accomplishment when their children move out for higher education. They feel proud that they raised their children independently and made them self-sufficient to care for themselves in the new world. This is a success of their parenting. According to Mansoor and Hasan (2019), Pakistani parents feel more satisfied and positive towards each other after their children leave their homes. Many mothers have started working and emails, video calls, and cheap airfares made parents convenient to contact and visit their children living outside the country (Rebecca, 2003). Similar views were presented by Alubaidi (2017) that due to constant touch with children, parents do not experience empty nests as a problem. Another view presented by Fingerman (2002) states that the empty nest problem is not as severe as it is described. Though parents feel empty it may not turn into empty nest syndrome. On the other hand, parents get freedom, a strong bond in a spousal relationship, and a chance to explore new purposes in their lives. Conversely, the relationship between parents and children improves after the child leaves home. MacLahans and Adams (1987) testified that parents who have children at home are less happy and more worried than parents whose children are living outside.

Coping Strategies of Empty Nesters

In today's digital world, parents try to embrace technology so they can stay connected with their children through social media sites. They stay connected with their children through digital platforms such as cell phones for internet access (Neeru, Sharma & Kaur, 2015). Some keep engaged in community programs, making new friends or meeting old friends, travel, and explore new places such that they can spend time with each other and meet new people. Peng, Luo & Li (2022) mentioned that empty nesters can obtain health-related information to improve their physical health. Social participation has become prevalent among Chinese empty nesters. Many prefer to stay healthy by joining yoga or fitness classes. This helps them improve their overall well-being. Sociability is important to reduce psychological distress and improve overall well-being (Singh and Misra, 2009). Socialization is the key strategy for coping with an empty nest. Many parents have adopted

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pets to reduce their feelings of emptiness. Chen, Zhu & Yin (2020) stated that raising dogs and taking them for outdoor activities are found to be positive ways to restructure the life of urban empty nesters.

Empty Nest and Cultural Difference

Empty nest experience depends on social and cultural norms and personal beliefs attached to certain expectations. Individualistic cultures may experience and react to the empty nest phase differently compared to collectivist and 'family-oriented' cultures. Baby boomers expect their children to leave their homes for schooling and careers. On the contrary, some ethnic groups may expect their children to leave their homes after marriage. Parents from Western cultures perceive their children as leaving home and living alone from the perspective of independence of the child. On the other hand, parents from non-Western cultures may perceive the same situation as a failure to have familial values and breaking families (Grodner, Lashley, & Golden, 2020). According to Grodner, Lashley, & Golden (2020), whatever culture the family is from, the parents have to learn to cope with these changes. If this transition does not go according to the expectations, it leads to negative consequences for both parents and young adults. Therefore, it is important to study the expectations and reasons of young adults for leaving their homes to understand how parents respond to the empty nest situation.

CONCLUSION

The present study is an attempt to review different studies conducted on the empty nest. In the light of views presented by different researchers, the study revealed that empty nest syndrome is a universal issue for parents and affects their physical and psychological health negatively and positively. Studies conducted by researchers stated that this is a transitional phase that every parent experiences when their children leave homes for a career or marriage. Some parents face problems like depression and anxiety after the departure of their children from home. But there are parents who take it positively by exploring themselves in a new way and guiding their children for their betterment. Many parents have learned to cope with their silent homes by developing social networks, joining hobby classes, or having a pet. To summarize, despite separation anxiety, parents have accepted the reality that their children have left their homes for the establishment and flourishing of their careers and families.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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