

# Empty Nest Syndrome

Some parents find this terminology incomprehensible. Isn't a parent's role to raise good, strong, independent children who can live on their own one day? Yet many parents have difficulty with children moving out of the home for a variety of reasons.

- Change is considered stressful, rather than challenging or refreshing.
- The children found moving out of home a difficult and emotional experience themselves.
- 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.
- Parents often find their social life revolves around their children and their children's lives.
- People who are full-time parents are more often affected than people who also have other duties to perform (such as working outside of the home).
- Parents who worry their children aren't ready to take on adult responsibilities tend to experience more grief.
- And parents who simply grieve the loss of daily contact with their child.

## 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.

## Some steps to take to help ease the grief of separation include:

- Writing up a list of all those things you promised you would do 'one day' and start making those dreams a reality.
- Setting achievable goals to start with, for example, short courses are probably more realistic as a first step, than launching into a three-year degree.
- Networking with friends and associates to uncover socializing opportunities.
- Joining professional associations or hobby groups.
- Considering volunteer work to expand your network of contacts and to fill the void.

## Working through feelings of depression or anxiety

- Acknowledge your grief (even if you feel that no one else seems to understand) and allow yourself to feel upset.
- Rituals help us to come to terms with difficult changes. Create your own rituals to help acknowledge your feelings. Suggestions include mentoring a child through volunteer work, planning "care packages" if your child is away at school for weekly delivery... slowing down to every other week... then monthly... and then quarterly.
- 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 or develop new ones 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 your 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.

*Empty nest syndrome* refers to the grief that many parents feel when their children move out of the home and is a normal response to this event. As with any grief, emotional work is necessary to acknowledge feelings and move forward. You are not losing your child; it is the normal next stage in parenthood. This condition is typically more common in women, who are more likely to have had the role of primary caregiver. Remember, you are not alone!

Contact our FOP Mental Health Ministry if you are interested in joining an *Empty Nest Support group*: [mhm@smoth.org](mailto:mhm@smoth.org).

