

THE KESW NEWS

PARENTS' DILEMMA: THE EMPTY NEST SYNDROME



A photo of a sleeping baby from the BBC News



A comic drew by Joanne Brandley

Preface

When I first heard about the inquiry project, I have to admit that I was quite annoyed by the fact that my summer holiday will not come until July. On top of that, I was expected to work 4 to 6 hours a week on it which makes it more irritating than my trial exam results. However, the inquiry project is undoubtedly a precious opportunity for students to go beyond classroom, to solve mysteries, to explore the world. Therefore, I set my heart on satisfying my curiosity. Since I studied abroad, I have been wondering how my parents feel - especially, how my mum feels. After spending more than 10 years taking care a child nights and days, suddenly one day, he/she left home. It makes me start to wonder when I was struggling to adapt a new culture, maybe my parents were also struggling to adapt to a new lifestyle. Thus, I hope people can have a greater understanding about these obscure parenting struggles through this project.



Picture from the health magazine

Empty Nest Syndrome

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According to the Wikipedia, empty nest syndrome is 'a feeling of grief and loneliness parents may experience when their children leave home for the first time, such as to live on their won or to attend a college or university'. Namely, as children begin to develop their social life or start school, parents may experience loneliness and grief. Women normally suffer more than men do and for those who are housewives, the sense of sadness may be more intense.

However, empty nest should not be treated as a clinical disorder rather than a transitional period in life. Although parents want to encourage children to become more independent, the process is often bittersweet and emotionally challenging¹. According to a research in China in 2007, empty nest elderly had a higher level of loneliness but a lower physical and mental scores compare to non-empty nest elderly².

The research also found that not only the number of empty nest families increases, but the parents that suffer from empty nest are becoming younger as well³.

You might think this may only happen in China since China is heavily influenced by Confucianism which expects woman to play the traditional role - taking care of families. But, what if I told you the same situation occur in the United States? In a study of middle-aged women who were first admissions to mental hospitals, 63% of women with some degree of maternal role loss (e.g. one child had left home) were depressed. 82% of houswives with maternal role loss who had over-protective relationships with their children were depressed⁴. Although only hospitalised women were studies, it gives a brief impression of the possible effects of the empty nest period if not handled properly.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/hk/conditions/empty-nest-syndrome>

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17703375/>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Zhao_Xudong2/publication/51866247_Empty_nest_syndrome_in_China/links/56efb11c08ae4b8b5e7577fe/Empty-nest-syndrome-in-China.pdf

⁴ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/350935?seq=1>

GENDER DIFFERENCE

Father as Breadwinner

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Although mothers are more likely to suffer from empty nest, research has shown that some fathers expressed feelings that they were unprepared for the emotional transition that comes with their child leaving home - Wikipedia

Compare to women, lack of research on how men react to the departure of children from home implicates that men may have a smaller effect or even be unaffected at this period. However, whether this is true is open to debate. First, fathers may lose opportunities for relationships with their children due to men's traditional role as a breadwinner. In a study, several father expressed the failure of taking advantage of the time when the children were still at home had caused them difficulties⁷. Besides, according to a study by Lewis et al. , 22% of men mentioned feeling very or somewhat unhappy about their child's departure. Lewis et al. found those 22% men had the most interest in their children, which caused them to have a more difficult time adjusting to the transition since they had the most to lose.

Therefore, we should not only focus on how mother reacts during empty nest, but we should also show concern to father that may be going through this transition.



Loneliness – picture from Confer.uk.com



Picture of a father from The Sunday Guardian

EMPTY NEST RELATED

What are the Symptoms?

Some common symptoms:

- Sadness
- Feelings of rejection
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Distress
- A loss of purpose and meaning in life
- Worry, stress and anxiety over the child's wellbeing
- Feelings of guilt over lost opportunities to be more involved in their children's lives before they left home
- Feelings of guilt for enjoyment of new-found and awaited freedom from responsibility

People at a higher risk:

- Those in an unstable or unsatisfactory marriage
- Those with a sense of self based primarily on identity as a parent
- Full-time parents
- Those with other stressful life events to deal with e.g. death of a spouse, retirement⁵
- Women who are overinvolved in the mother role and who have subjugated their needs to those of their children⁶

Coping

So, what can parents do? One of the easiest way to cope with empty nest is to keep in contact with their children. No matter it's via Whatsapp or Facetime, increasing communication between children and parents helps mitigating the syndrome.

Additionally, according to psychology today, reaching out for social support, healthy diet, plenty of sleep and exercise can also help. For some parents, they cope with the transition through hobbies, travel, and friendships, etc instead of focusing attention on the child's departure. (For example, when I asked my mum how she coped with empty nest, she told me she started to watch dramas, tidy rooms, and cooking.) In their increased spare time, parents can ease their stress through developing new hobbies or rekindle their relationship by spending more time together as the presence of children often decreases the marriage satisfaction. However, if the symptoms of empty nest are in any way overwhelming the individual, treatment with a professional is recommended.

P.s. Empty nest syndrome is not a clinical disorder but rather a transitional period. It affects parents in different way. Therefore, it is okay to feel emotional.



A video showing how mothers suffer from empty nest syndrome

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empty_nest_syndrome#:~:text=From%20Wikipedia%2C%20the%20free%20encyclopedia,attend%20a%20college%20or%20university.
⁶ https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/J_Myers_Empty_1989.pdf
⁷ https://d1wqtxs1xzle7.cloudfront.net/58362666/1989_Barber_Transition_to_the_empty_nest_Chap_1_Bahr_Peterson_Aging_the_Family.pdf?1549672253=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DBarber_Transition_to_the_empty_nest_Chap.pdf&Expires=1592846598&Signature=DN2iQJ1o3fSBQMuQhRcS-VGr-8eD8wABJb-WBfXWkiYD66Kfv6Q68p3qXxQVVGuke9NHHkxhvvDvvhFTI3RZ3RnOYUCJM29OiyZf8GOhpf6puQBUSmEeJiS8k347dG-m1WFItcFX80ELkfpkeZVvHAQdcarhlnnT1c-bpIpJBW4FZk1st5oDlrrUge4BSpZnQzTTbWlWskVPiiQieM8Ukeefb5VsZuj0RaFlbmK0ltdo624aokLK47HZKvvi9LnRfqwIMDOlvAo5Bn9TJwzrf-88-XsiGkkdQNU0BLEY1DosN0BI54YScyV9IVpLkow2og-hFfeRABjBuP~m58c8tw_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA

REVIEW

My thoughts

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It is very important that people don't dramatize empty nest syndrome. It is not a disease but a transitional period for the future. Besides, although this article emphasises a lot on the negative side of the empty nest period, there are also many positive perspective of the empty nest. For instance, parents finally have time to do their own things. In most cases, parents adjust themselves and become used to their new lifestyles. "One's identity may need to be reshaped, from parent of a child to parent of an adult child; this adjustment takes time." - which means parents don't have to be too worried about this since time will figure it out. Additionally, no matter the child leave home sooner or later, the effect of empty nest syndrome is not much difference. For more details about empty nest syndrome, I recommend this two articles: "The Empty Nest Syndrome: Myth or Reality?" and "Transition to the Empty Nest" by Clifton E. Barber. They describe a detailed explanation about the syndrome in an objective manner which I found informative and meaningful. Besides, YouTube has many videos about this syndrome and there is a

movie called Otherhood on Netflix which is related to this topic as well.

When I was first starting this project, I was distressed by the form of my presentation, whether it should be a video, an essay, an interview, a ted-talk or an animation. I couldn't decide. Before I did my research, I thought I was the only person in the planet notice that parents may have a distressing period after their child left - which was pretty arrogant. This thought made me think that it will be very difficult to find resources for reference especially when I was not sure whether my hypothesis on this transitional period exists. Moreover, it will take a lot of effort to collect primary resource hence I wanted to give up. Afterall, I started this project not for the credits, but for my own interest. Therefore, it seems reasonable to me to give up or waffle the work. However, I looked online and the term "empty nest syndrome" brought hope to me. When I continued to research, I found the information that I needed which gave birth of this article. Therefore, I learnt so much more than just the content that I had researched but resistibility and humbleness. Thank you!

THANKS FOR READING!



QUOTE OF THE DAY

“One Day You Are Going To Look Back And Be Glad That You Did Not Give Up.”