



EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

The big day has finally arrived. Your youngest child is going off to college. You and your spouse have joked about it for 25 years, planning the party you'll have when all of your kids have finally left home. You're surprised to find a few months later that you're feeling sad, irritated with your spouse, and you can't figure out why.

What is this strange feeling?

Empty nest syndrome describes the grief and emptiness many parents experience when their children leave home. This grief is often difficult to recognize since children moving out and developing independence is seen as a normal, healthy event in most American families. While some amount of sadness is normal, a grief response of several months might indicate empty nest syndrome.

What are the signs?

Most parents who experience empty nest syndrome feel intense sadness, often crying excessively. They may find themselves feeling useless now that they don't fill the same parenting roles. Many parents report that they spend a great deal of time in the child's bedroom focused on memories of them. Some parents avoid social contact and the activities they used to enjoy. Empty nest syndrome can lead to depression when it is not addressed.

Who is at risk?

Although most parents experience some grief when children embark on their own, some parents have traits that increase the likelihood of a complicated, more enduring grief process. In general, women are more likely than men to be deeply saddened when a child leaves home. Parents who experience simultaneous life changes such as retirement or caring for aging parents are more prone to an intensified reaction. Also, parents who report that their self-identities are very closely linked to their children have greater difficulty achieving a healthy separation.

What can you do to address empty nest syndrome?

- Accept that your feelings of sadness are normal
- Try to schedule a weekly chat on the phone with your child.
- Send your child brief e-mails about what's happening at home
- Make care packages for your child which include the things they will need in their new, more independent lifestyle
- Never attach strings to the things you provide and accept that the child may drastically reduce contact as they adjust to their independence
- Use some of the time and energy you've directed towards your child and channel it into hobbies or career pursuits

When should you seek treatment?

If you try various ways to address the issue but overwhelming sadness lingers, treatment is needed. Discuss your feelings with your family doctor as soon as possible. The depression you feel might be effectively treated with anti-depressants, and discussing your feelings with a counselor can also help.

Can't this be a happy time?

Many parents report that children leaving home is a time of happiness and healthy life changes. These parents take satisfaction in their children achieving independence, and they also maintain a healthy relationship of their own that brings happiness and fulfillment. Anticipating this life change, the good and the bad, increases the likelihood of a healthy adjustment.

How can EAP help?

EAP counselors are trained to provide emotional support and direction for people experiencing empty nest syndrome. It is important to know that you are not alone in your feelings, that the sadness you feel when your child moves away is a normal grief process. The same skills you used to raise a healthy child can be utilized to restore your happiness and life satisfaction.