

Adjusting to an Empty Nest

■ by Brian Smith McCallum, MS, LPC



Families - like individuals - develop through the life span. Families experience growth and joy as well as crises and transitions. One major alteration in the family structure is the departure of children, who eventually leave home to pursue higher education, careers, marriage, etc. Though the process of young adults leaving home is natural and normal, parents can experience it in different ways. For some parents, this period is one of celebration of a job well done in addition to a time of freedom and reduced responsibility; yet, for others, this change brings a profound sense of loss.

A phenomenon known as the Empty Nest Syndrome grew in popularity in the 1970s; it referred to parents' experience of loss and sadness when their children came of age and left home. Since then the existence of Empty Nest Syndrome has been challenged and debated in both the popular press and clinical literature. Empty Nest Syndrome, to be sure, is not a diagnosable condition, but some parents do indeed experience difficulty in the "empty nest" phase of the family life cycle. The range of feelings can include grief, anxiety, depression, regret, insecurity, emptiness, loneliness, even loss of purpose/meaning/identity, or an acute awareness of one's mortality and the aging process (especially if parents need to care for their own parents).

Mothers or fathers who stayed at home to raise children can experience the empty nest as disruptive to their roles and routines. Likewise, spouses in unsatisfactory marriages can struggle in this period. The "hiddenness" of the loss associated with the empty nest can compound the suffering, too; society often does not acknowledge the conflicting feelings that arise during this family stage. Furthermore, others may impose expectations that this juncture should be accompanied with a sense of joy, accomplishment, and relief.

Hope, however, is available during this rite of passage. To those experiencing difficulty, it's crucial to implement positive coping strategies. The following are some practical, behavioral strategies that can alleviate the potential void:

- Return to or join the workforce
- Volunteer
- Develop new hobbies
- Rekindle relationship with spouse
- Exercise
- Write in a journal (and keep a gratitude log)
- Talk to friends, church leaders, counselors about grief and loss
- Rejuvenate your spiritual life with an emphasis on spiritual formation

The maxim "once a parent, always a parent" holds true. Yet the relationship parents have with adult children changes from controlling and directing to advising and supporting. To this end, parents can remain in contact with adult children on a consistent basis - whether in person or via digital technology (think mobile phones, email, text, Skype, Facebook, Twitter). Parents can also reflect on, and draw comfort from, what they have taught their children and the values that they've instilled in them. As Proverbs 22:6 advises, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (ESV).



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