



The Mulberry Report

Solutions For Life

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The Empty Nest Syndrome

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At least once a week Jennifer will slip into her daughter's bedroom, sit on the bed, look around the room nostalgically, and lovingly pick up and hold a stuffed animal that has been on the pillow ever since she left home to move on with her life. Jennifer isn't necessarily depressed; and is fully able to function, but occasionally waves of sadness will sweep over her along with a feeling of loneliness and of missing her children. Jennifer is experiencing what has come to be known as "Empty Nest Syndrome," an emotional state felt by many parents—more women than men—when the last child leaves home.

It is true that for many parents the occasion of the last child leaving home is an event that is looked forward to and even celebrated. Many parents enjoy achieving this major milestone. Unmade beds, back talk and broken curfews are no longer issues. It can be gratifying for parents to see the fruit of their labor, to know their child-rearing efforts have paid off, their children grown up, moved out, and begun to accomplish their goals.

For fathers the empty nest syndrome may have a different impact than for the moms. At this stage many fathers are trying to establish a different connection with their children. It's possible that dad has some regrets in that he wasn't always able to provide the time for them, and now that he has a bit more time to give, they don't have much time for him. As one father put it, "We've worked very hard to teach our kids to be independent, but now we're saying, "Whoa, don't get that independent."

While missing the absent children is normal, a sense of hopelessness or loneliness and a feeling that life is over may suggest a more serious problem. No longer feeling a need to wake early to fix breakfast is one thing, but staying in bed all day is another. To withdraw from normal daily activities, not socialize with friends, not spend enough time with a spouse and not follow normal routines can suggest an onset of depression and even a need for counseling.

The severity of the reaction to having become "empty nesters" may reflect the quality of the parent's relationship with their child. A strong, healthy relationship results in a less painful transition to becoming empty nesters. Strained or hostile relationships, as well as a parent's need to keep a child dependent, can lead to an increased sense of loss and pain. Another consideration is tied in with a mother's sense of personal identity. If she sees herself only as "mom" then when this role is decreased there is the risk that she will feel less satisfied with herself.

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"I don't remember growing older, when did they."

- Fiddler on the Roof

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In addition to problems for individual parents, some people find that the empty nest syndrome uncovers some problems in their marital relationship. Sometimes they find that they have invested many years of their married lives in their children to the exclusion of also focusing on each other. They may have been great parents but failed to nurture their own relationship and find that they have grown apart, have little in common, and hardly know each other.

There are several things parents can do to turn the empty nest syndrome into a welcome celebration.

- Start by preparing early on. Talk about it. It is not something to be feared or dreaded but rather a natural development in life that has its own worthy rewards and benefits.
- Become well-rounded. Don't put yourself in the position that the only things meaningful in your life are your children. Make time for yourself so you are better prepared for the time you will have when parenting becomes a non-daily task.
- Turn more to your spouse. Do what is necessary to reconnect and redefine the marriage. Make your marriage the priority and become the friends you were when you first began your marital journey.
- Adjust your attitude. After all, the real reason you had children is so they will grow up and become independent and successful rather than be dependent and spend a life meeting your needs.

Finally, if you find yourself struggling with becoming empty nesters and it is causing you to feel a sense of loss, despair and withdrawal, seek out professional counseling to help you move on with your life.

Mr. Wannemuehler began his clinical social work career at St. Mary's Hospital prior to joining the Mulberry practice group in 2003. His specialty area is marital counseling. His professional career covers 30 years.