

Coping with Empty Nest Syndrome

Objective

To identify how to cope with empty nest syndrome when your young adult child leaves home.

What to Know

Empty nest syndrome refers to the sadness, loneliness, anxiety, fear, or grief many parents feel when their children move out of the home.

Adolescent individuation, a normal process when young adults develop their sense of autonomy, includes separating from their family of origin. This healthy transition can involve the loss of a lifestyle that was part of your identity as a parent. In addition to a sense of loss, you might feel useless, without a real purpose. Research confirms that parents' sense of purpose is negatively impacted when their young adult children leave home, and many parents even experience profound grief.

Here are some suggestions for preparing for or coping with an empty nest.

Connect with others. Reconnect with old friends and enter social spaces that offer new connections. Schedule Zoom meetings with friends or colleagues or use an app like Bumble BFF. Lean on others for support. Investing time in rekindling or building friendships is a healthy distraction and reduces feelings of loneliness.

Set goals. Adopt a forward-thinking mindset to alleviate feelings of grief and rediscover your identity. Working toward the achievement of a goal can spark your motivation and give you a healthy perspective.

Take up a new hobby or career. Try out new activities in your area – a book club, yoga class, or even a walking group. Doing physical activities is a great way to expand your social circle and maintain your physical health. Perhaps taking an in-person community college class or exploring a new career path is the boost you need.

Reconnect with your partner. This might be the perfect opportunity to spend more quality time with your significant other. Reignite the romance and focus on creating a supportive, compassionate relationship. Many empty nesters become closer with their spouses after their children leave home.

Practice self-care. Set aside time each day to take care of yourself. What does relaxation and self-care mean to you? Perhaps it is taking a relaxing bubble bath, preparing a delicious meal, going for a hike, or writing in a journal.

Focus on the positive. You may feel sad about your child leaving home, but remind yourself this is a healthy, positive change. Celebrate your child's independence and feel excited about all the new opportunities ahead of them.

Keep in touch. Stay in contact with your child – physical distance does not mean there must be emotional distance.

Savor life. Slow down and enjoy pleasurable emotions and experiences. Perhaps you will take photos of flowers, plants, and trees while on a morning walk, or visit a museum and spend time appreciating art. When you are present to these moments, you feel more alive.

Practice self-compassion. Hold on during challenging times (mindfulness), understand you are not alone (common humanity), and give yourself the care and kindness you need. Be more present with yourself—and acknowledge the range of emotions you are experiencing.

Consider your “why.” Major transitions often lead to questions like, “Who am I and who do I want to be? What can I contribute to the world?” You might be struggling to find meaning and purpose right now because you have always identified as a parent and caretaker. Who are you if not the one tending, listening, helping, and guiding? What is your worth if you are no longer “needed” by your child?

Seek professional help. If your symptoms are severe and they persist, seek professional guidance. A counselor or therapist can offer grief support and help you manage your emotions.

Despite the emptiness you might feel, you have an opportunity to reconsider what really matters to you in this next stage of life. This worksheet will help you cope when your adult child leaves home.

What to Do

As you cope with empty nest syndrome, use this chart to record the activities you do to cope for the next two weeks. Write down the date and the activity. Refer to the above list of suggestions for ideas. Write down how you felt after doing the activity and whether the activity reduced your feelings related to empty nest syndrome.

Date	Activity	How did you feel after?	Did it reduce feelings of empty nest syndrome? Y / N

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Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you cope with empty nest syndrome? Why or why not?

Did you experience any challenges while completing this activity? What was hard? Easy? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn during this exercise?
