Empty Nest Syndrome

PROF. DR. SHERINA MOHD SIDIK

PSYCHIATRY DEPARTMENT,
FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES,
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA (UPM)
Content

Definition

Empty nest syndrome and depression

Health services utilization

Coping strategies

Symptoms

Associated factors

Home-based care

Conclusion
The empty nest syndrome can be defined as:

- The **loneliness** and **sadness** of parents in response to their **children’s departure from home** (Long & Martin, 2000)

Empty nest refers to the time when children are grown and no longer living at home.

The migration of their children, leaving behind an ‘**empty nest**’ is usually due to:

- Marriage
- Studies
- Work
- Living in their own home
  - because they have a family of their own (Abraham, 2012)
Symptoms

Symptoms of emptiness syndrome:

i. sadness
ii. continuous grief
iii. feeling lonely
iv. feeling useless
v. feeling a void in their lives
vi. feeling incomplete in their relationship with their spouse

(Abraham, 2012)
Empty Nest Syndrome

- Being recognised worldwide, including in Malaysia
- Many studies in China
  - Liu & Guo
  - Urban communities: Beijing
  - Rural communities: Yuan’an County
  - Medium sized cities: Taiyuan, Shanxi Province
Associated Factors

- The process of **urbanization** and the **development** of the **economy**:  
  - For example, some **farmers** go to the **big cities** to work and live, while their **parents** remain living in **rural areas** (Liu & Guo, 2007)

- The **attachment** of **parents** to their **children** increases their feelings of love;  
  - The departure of children plays a **significant role** in the **loneliness** of their parents (Liu & Guo, 2007)
  - It is very important to provide social and emotional support for the parents especially in elderly (Liu & Guo, 2008)
Associated Factors

- Significant differences between rural and urban empty-nester old people in Hunan province, China (Su et al, 2012):
  1. Gender
  2. Education level
  3. Marital status
  4. Economic status
  5. Self-perceived income
  6. Insurance
  7. Frequency of children visits
  8. Religious beliefs factors
Guo et al’s study (2016) on Mental Health and Related Influencing Factors among Elderly in Taiyuan, China found that empty-nest elderly were mostly:
- Male
- Married
- Higher education level
- Higher income
- Living in urban areas

A study in rural areas of Jerantut, Pahang found that mothers were more prone to empty nest syndrome compared to fathers (Nik Norliati and Suriati, 2016)
The study among empty-nest elderly in rural areas of Yuan’an, China (Liu & Guo, 2008) found that they had:
• Lower life satisfaction
• Lower income
• Poorer relationships with children
• Less social support
• Higher prevalence of chronic diseases
• More feelings of depression and loneliness compared to the not-empty-nest elderly.

"Empty-nest status" was negatively related with life satisfaction.

Depression was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction.
A baseline investigation of Zhejiang Major Public Health Surveillance in China conducted in 2014, showed that among 9215 participants aged 60 years and above, more than half (57.4%) were empty nest elders (Zai et al, 2015)

- The prevalence of **depressive symptom** was higher in **empty nest elders** (11.6% vs. 8.6%, \( p<0.001 \))
- **Empty nest** was **positively** associated with **depressive symptom**, OR (95%CI) was 1.223(1.045, 1.431)
Another study in the rural area of YongZhou, China found that the prevalence of depressive symptoms among empty nesters was 74.5% (Xie et al, 2010)

The empty-nest group, in comparison with the non-empty nest group, had higher levels of depression.

Multivariate linear regression analysis showed associations between depressive symptoms and:
- Health service & support utilization
- Negative coping style
- Religious beliefs
- Socio-economic status
- Marital status

One major area of concern was the health service utilisation.
In the rural areas of Yuan’an County, China, empty-nesters had contacted physicians less frequently (39.2%) than the non-empty-nest group (50.8%) (p<0.05) (LiJuan et al, 2007)

More reports of unmet health-care needs were made by the empty-nesters (40.0%) as compared with the non-empty-nest group (29.2%) (p<0.05)

The most commonly reported barriers were:
- Cost (64%),
- Lack of coverage by the health care plans (37%)
- Inability to find help (28%)
Non-visiting rate among empty-nest elderly (37.7%) was significantly higher than that among non-empty-nest ones (32.7%) (Zhou et al., 2015)

Non-hospitalization rate among empty-nesters (36.1%) was slightly higher than that among non-empty-nesters (31.6%)

Financial difficulty was the leading cause for both non-visiting and non-hospitalization of the empty-nesters
Both non-visiting and non-hospitalization among empty-nest seniors were independently associated with (Zhou et al., 2015):

i. low-income households
ii. health insurance status
iii. non-communicable chronic diseases

The non-visiting rate was also found to be higher among the empty-nesters with lower education and those from rural areas.
Support from **spouses** could decrease feelings of loneliness in the elderly
- Couples in China are often encouraged to stay together because the Chinese culture discourages divorce and separation (Chen et al., 2006)

- Social support from:
  - **Friends**
  - **Neighbours**
  - **Other family members** (Liu & Guo, 2007)

Formation of Senior Associations help the empty-nest elderly to participate in **social activities** including:
- Singing
- Dancing
- Calligraphy
- Fishing
- Taijiquan (a kind of traditional Chinese shadowboxing)
Home-based Care

A study in Beijing, China found that another major care need by the empty-nest elderly was **home-based care** (Liu et al, 2015)

In view of their physical conditions, these elderly had:

- Need of support based on their own physical and security problems
- They would like to have aging-in-place
- Home-based care by housemaid employment
- Or institutionalized care
Support from children

- Social support from children is of vital importance in ensuring the well-being of elderly parents:
  - the 'kenang budi’ (appreciate kindness) concept is applied (Wan Ibrahim and Zainab, 2014)
- Kenang budi in the culture of Malay society means the importance of children’s obligation to pay back their parents’ sacrifice (Suriati 1999)
Support from children

- The study in rural areas Pahang reported that all (100%) of the elderly studied received support from their family even though they lived alone (Nik Norliati and Suriati, 2016)
  
  i. Children who lived close by
     a. Visit them frequently and
     b. Took them to hospitals or nearby village clinics
        - to receive their regular medical check up
        - medication (if needed)
  
  ii. Children who live far away would telephoned them frequently

  iii. Adult children would often bring their parents to socialize: Eg weddings & other festivities which increase their elderly parents’ happiness
Support from children

- By receiving constant family support:
  - Most respondents stated that they did not feel lonely when living alone (65.9%) (Nik Norliati and Suriati, 2016)
- Similarly, Wan Ibrahim and Zainab (2014) also reported that majority of elderly in rural areas were satisfied with various support and help from their children
  - Children remain crucial in helping elderly parents
Support from neighbours and relatives

Nik Norliati and Suriati (2016) also found that neighbours replace children’s role in looking after the elderly when their children have migrated out of the village.

- there are always neighbours who would come to visit at home and help to buy groceries.
Support from friends

- Cultural trait in Malaysia (Nurizan et al., 2013)
  - Maintain good relationships with neighbours
  - Neighbours usually assist the elderly in performing daily activities
    - Going to mosque
    - Religious activities such as Quranic classes are good support for elderly (Nik Norliati and Suriati, 2016)

- Activity among friends are beneficial for an elderly living alone
  - May reduce the feelings of loneliness after the decease of the spouse
  - Maintains the ability of an elderly in contributing to the society
Richelle (2012) suggested that **lifelong learning** is crucial in helping older citizens to stay active.

Activities such as learning and reading Quran was one of the ways for the elderly to live actively (Nik Norliati and Suriati, 2016).
Other suggestions in coping with empty nest syndrome include:

1. Accept the change: Focus on helping your child to succeed and live independently and at the same time cherish the freedom and release from responsibilities that you are going to have.

2. Acknowledge your feelings even if you think that no one understands. Allow yourself to feel sad / lonely.

3. Give yourself time to adapt to the feelings.

4. Create rituals to acknowledge your feelings such as planting a tree or re-decorating your child’s old room.

5. Share your feelings with your spouse. Discuss your plans and future plans with him/her.

(Mayo clinic April 2018)
6. Spend more time with your partner. Go for vacations, have long talks and / or walks together, or any other activities you both enjoy doing together.

7. Seek advice from friends or family members who may share the same experience.

8. Prayers according to your own religion may help you to find peace.

9. Keep a journal to express your feelings.

10. Pursue back your hobbies. It’s time for you to enjoy again what you used to love.

(Mayo clinic April 2018)
References


References


References


Thank you