

The Empty Nest Syndrome: Myth or Reality?

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The "empty nest" period of life is mythologized and misunderstood. Attributes of the postparental period, normative and pathological responses, and implications for counselors are explored.

For many years the phenomenon of menopause—the formal cessation of the reproductive role—has been little understood and much maligned. Women and men alike avoid discussing the fearful and mysterious “hot flashes” and “mood swings” that accompany menopausal changes for some women at some times. Recently, the popular media have hinted at yet another dreaded event that may occur in midlife. When the last child leaves home, parents are left with an “empty nest.” An image of poor, sad little birdies emerges—an image that demeans and patronizes women entering the postparental phase of development.

As is true for menopause, the pros and cons of the empty nest situation are open to debate. When women’s identity is viewed solely as a function of their reproductive role, events such as menopause may be personally devastating (Barnett & Baruch, 1978). Furthermore, since motherhood is a major role for many midlife women, the advent of the “empty nest” places them in a transitional period, at risk for another mysterious occurrence—the empty nest syndrome. Like the syndromes associated with menopause, the empty nest syndrome does not affect all women the same way.

Reactions to the end of the childrearing years are not well understood. Hence, myths abound and midlife women are left with an array of conflicting feelings that may or may not be acceptable or “normal” to themselves or others. The purpose of this article is to review what is known about the empty nest and factors affecting adjustment to the postparental phase of development. Both individual and family development are affected, with important implications for counselors. The focus of the discussion is on the impact of this period on women, since most of the literature addresses women’s concerns.

DEFINING THE EMPTY NEST

The phase of the adult life cycle that occurs when the children are grown and no longer living at home is commonly termed the *empty nest* (Harkins, 1970; Junge & Maya, 1985), and less commonly known by the more neutral term, *the postparental period* (Borland, 1982). Oliver (1982) noted that societal preoccupation with the use of “language of the barnyard” when referring to women (e.g., “birds,” “chicks,” “old hens”) perpetuates both sexist and ageist attitudes. Thus, use of a more acceptable term is recommended.

Unfortunately, lack of a commonly accepted definition has hindered consideration of more appropriate terms, as well as research and clinical practice in this area. The variety of terms

and definitions for the postparental period both confuse and hinder the identification and treatment of women experiencing difficulty with this common midlife transition.

Harkins (1978) studied subjective definitions of the empty nest. Questionnaires were completed by 315 women (average age 49) to determine which of several proposed meanings most closely approximated their own personal definition of the postparental period. The most commonly rated definitions were: going away to school ($n = 130$, 41%), moving to a separate residence ($n = 124$, 39%), getting married ($n = 54$, 17%), graduation from high school ($n = 4$, 1%), and getting a first job ($n = 3$, <1%). No women defined empty nest as synonymous with their youngest child’s graduation from high school.

The results of Harkins’ study support the definition of empty nest as the time when children are grown and no longer living at home. Thus, the postparental period begins when the last child leaves home, for whatever reason. Rather than talking about an empty nest, reference to the postparental years provides a more professional and less derogatory definition of this concern.

The postparental phase of development is a 20th century phenomenon (Borland, 1982; Treas & Bengston, 1982). Increased life expectancy and children leaving home at an earlier age result in a significantly longer period of time for the average couple to reside by themselves. The postparental period is now a commonly acknowledged stage in the family life cycle, often eagerly anticipated and an enjoyable part of the life span. For some parents, however, the end of formal childrearing can be traumatic.

THE EMPTY NEST EXPERIENCE VERSUS THE EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

The empty nest syndrome is a maladaptive response to the postparental transition, which is stimulated by reactions to loss (Borland, 1982). Parents, especially mothers, may experience overwhelming grief, sadness, dysphoria, and depression (Kahana & Kahana, 1982). Borland (1982) identified role loss as a significant precipitator of this syndrome. Since they have devoted a large number of years to the parenting role, women, in particular, may be left with a major void in their daily lives. Not uncommonly, this can lead to an identity crisis and concern for how one is going to fill the time previously devoted to childrearing.

Furthermore, concern about the welfare of adult children, fledglings as it were, may contribute to feelings of anxiety, worry, and stress. Guilt over the “goodness” of one’s parenting skills in preparing children for adulthood may be apparent. When children seem happy and independent, as often occurs,

rejection may be experienced along with sadness over not being needed anymore.

Not all reactions to the postparental period are negative; however, even positive reactions can lead to conflicts. For enjoyment of new-found and awaited freedom from responsibility, for example, may create feelings of guilt. Feelings of relief, especially when children and parents were in frequent disagreement, may lead to additional feelings of guilt and worry about parenting skills.

The socialization of women, the mother role, and each woman's individual adaptation to that role contribute to the etiology of empty nest syndrome. Women who are overinvolved in the mother role and who have subjugated their needs to those of their children appear to be most susceptible to this syndrome (Black & Hill, 1984; Borland, 1982; Cooper & Gutmann, 1987).

Overall, relatively few women experience the plethora of negative emotions and adjustment difficulties that are diagnosed as the empty nest syndrome. Even when strong reactions occur, they typically are short-lived, particularly if women are able to invest in other roles to replace needs once met through mothering. Oliver (1982) studied postparental maladjustment and concluded that "... the problem is not the empty nest, the problem is the empty woman" (p. 194).

CORRELATES OF THE EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

This section reviews variables affecting reactions to the postparental period and characteristics of women most likely to experience difficulties. The few studies that exist since the 1970s focus primarily on women's roles in midlife.

Barnett and Baruch (1978) critically reviewed the available research on middle-aged women and found that reproductive roles, including menopause and empty nest, were frequently cited as the focal point of women's identity during midlife. The possible or potential role of work for adult women was neglected. Powell (1977) was one of the few to acknowledge the importance of meaningful work for women's psychological well-being.

Black and Hill (1984) also discussed the significance of meaningful work involvement for women. They found the key determinants for women's adjustment to the postparental period to be the degree of involvement in the maternal role and the ability to cope with situations as they arose. The majority of women interviewed did not consider the empty nest a traumatic experience. Rather, their attitude was one of anticipation, because additional time and energy would now be available for personal development. A significant finding was that trauma associated with the empty nest is directly related to adverse circumstances surrounding a child's departure from home. Thus, coping ability was of significantly greater importance than the presence of any of the other hypothesized predictor variables.

Harkins (1978) reported similar findings. Major distress associated with the empty nest occurred when children were "off time" in their development, not leaving home when anticipated. Having prepared themselves for the departure of the last child, parents whose children remained at home were faced with continuing parental responsibilities without wanting them. Other socially off-time phenomena occur when childbearing is delayed until later in life. The onset of the postparental era for women who postponed childbearing in favor of careers will occur later, possibly when developmental challenges

have changed. Reactions to the onset of the empty nest may differ in unknown ways for these women.

Whether children had departed or not, women who had developed alternative roles to coincide with the declining mothering role experienced less distress. Women affected by late childbearing may have prior work experience and may view work roles as more viable alternatives to mothering. Or, as seems common, they may have continued to work during childrearing and thus have adequate investment in alternative roles to attenuate the impact of the departure of their last child from the home.

Borland (1982) provided an historical, sociological perspective of the postparental period, focusing on the importance of meaningful work relative to adjustment to this life stage. In an effort to examine the changing roles of women, she subdivided participants into three age cohorts of 21-year intervals and the life cycle into four 20-year spans. The postparental period most likely occurred during the third 20-year span (ages 41-60).

Cohort I women, age 41-60 between 1940 and 1959, were provided with alternative roles to mothering during their postparental period. During World War II, they could have entered the labor force in response to the demand for people to fill positions vacated by men going to war. Alternatively, they could have taken care of grandchildren when young mothers joined the work force. They really were the first generation of women provided with role options. It was possible for them to replace the familiar maternal role with the equally acceptable work role. The social situation helped to make the transition less stressful; thus, few of these women experienced postparental maladjustment.

Cohort II women, age 41-60 between 1960 and 1979, were young mothers during World War II. These women either never gave up their pervasive maternal role or returned to it when the war ended. They are the displaced homemakers of the 1970s whose sole adult identity was in the salience of the maternal role (Borland, 1982). Cohort II women, therefore, are most likely to fall prey to the empty nest syndrome, because of their unique historical and sociological environment.

Cohort III women, age 41-60 between 1980 and 1999, have long been active participants in the work force and indeed fought for equality in that arena (Borland, 1982). The majority of these women may not experience the empty nest syndrome, as their identity is not linked solely to their maternal role. The work role is salient for them and contributes significantly to their sense of identity and self-esteem. Though not studied, these women also may be affected by the high divorce rate. Experiencing the empty nest as a single parent may be quite different from the transition experience for those who remain in a couple situation.

Work is a significant factor affecting adjustment to the postparental period. Qualitative aspects of the work situation have been identified as key variables when determining whether work is a negative or positive factor for adjustment (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Powell, 1977). These qualitative variables include level of occupation, opportunity for advancement, degree of power, degree of commitment, and tokenism (Barnett & Baruch, 1978). Powell (1977) found that women employed full time were least susceptible to the empty nest syndrome, followed by women employed part time. Unemployed women were most at risk to the empty nest syndrome.

The impact of the work role seems to lie in its value as an alternative for the mother role. Regardless of alternative roles available to women, the mother role remains primary. Loss of that role, whether planned or unplanned, will have an impact

on the individual's adaptation to the postparental period (Cooper & Gutmann, 1987; Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1972).

Borland (1982) and Harkins (1978) noted that the empty nest syndrome is most likely to be experienced by women who have very traditional attitudes toward women's roles in family and society, a significant involvement in the maternal role at the time they reach the empty nest period, no alternative roles available, other major life issues with which they are confronted at the same time, and children who are "off time." In the latter case, the empty nest period is either earlier or later than anticipated. As discussed below, the dynamics of the family life cycle also seem to be important in determining adjustment to the postparental period (Rohr, 1984).

THE EMPTY NEST AND THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Studies of the family life cycle offer for consideration anywhere from five to eight stages of development. Toward the latter end of each suggested life cycle, a stage specific to the launching of children from the nest is mentioned. This stage often marks the beginning of structural and emotional changes in the makeup of the family. Family adjustment to this stage is influenced by a variety of factors, most significantly the adjustment of individual family members to the arrival of this launching time (Nichols, 1984). Parental adaptation to the postparental period may range from a reluctance and/or refusal to view their children as potentially capable of leading autonomous, independent lives to a time of individual and marital renewal and growth.

Social and biological changes in the family life cycle have affected postparental families in the 20th century. These include increased longevity, marriage at an earlier age, fewer children per family, more effective birth control, and, even with so many children returning home, children leaving home at an earlier age (Treas & Bengston, 1982). The primary result has been a significant increase in the length of the postparental period—from 2 years at the turn of the century to 13 years in the 1970s (Borland, 1982). This increase represents a substantial amount of time for a husband and wife to be without children living in the home.

Until the 1930s, it was common for children to remain living at home for both financial and work-related reasons. Family responsibilities could be shared with adult children and, if they did choose to leave, boarders were often sought to fill the void of their departure. Borland (1982) depicted this as a conscious effort to "keep the nest filled" (p. 119).

Historically, the onset of World War II brought significant changes in the work force and the structuring of the American family. The close-knit, extended family living in close geographic proximity became a less normative occurrence.

Children were more mobile upon reaching adulthood and increasingly opted for early marriage and independence from the home. As more women have entered the labor force, especially in midlife, the "nest" has ceased to be the overriding concern for many women. In fact, Rohr (1984) found that the postparental transition today is significantly easier for women returning to work when their children are older.

The postparental period fosters reestablishment of the marital relationship and investment in other roles that also offer satisfaction (Fox-Lefkowitz, 1984). It is a time anticipated with pleasure by many of today's midlife parents. Unfortunately, the inability to maintain financial independence increasingly is

causing adult children to move back in with their parents, thus "refilling" the empty nest (Wise & Murry, 1987). The "return of the fledgling adult" (Clemens & Axelson, 1985) is not always easy for parents or children and can interfere with enjoyment of positive aspects of postparental development. Both financial and emotional dependence of adult children can be burdensome once parents invest in new roles to replace parental responsibilities.

Midlife couples also are caught in an intergenerational squeeze causing them to be called the "sandwich generation" (O'Rand & Henretta, 1982). Adult children are delaying their own move away from the parental home and grandparents are living longer, sometimes requiring assistance from children in their later years. This sandwich situation usually arises when the postparental couple were anticipating a period of freedom and financial and relationship growth for themselves. These unanticipated responsibilities may present a new set of problems, and the midlife couple may find that their nest is not quite so empty.

In other words, the empty nest is not always feared, is sometimes desired, and once achieved, loss of the emptiness can be troublesome. The majority of studies revealing predominantly negative effects of the empty nest period used hospitalized women as study participants. When nonhospitalized women were questioned, responses were far more positive regarding the effects of the empty nest on their life-style (Black & Hill, 1984). Nonhospitalized participants have reported greater marital satisfaction, more spontaneity and intimacy, increased time alone, greater happiness, more freedom, better financial condition, and less responsibility (Harkins, 1978). The postparental era for them was seen as a time when marital bonds could be re-examined and a deeper, more intimate relationship cultivated. With the stress of childrearing behind them, a postparental couple has more time and energy to devote to themselves and their future together.

There is a small but growing body of knowledge that suggests that the dynamics of the family life cycle vary among subcultures (Woehrer, 1982). Extended family networks, for example, are more prevalent among persons of lower socioeconomic status and ethnic minorities. There is more of a tendency in these families for parents and grandparents to provide care for children and grandchildren. Thus, the empty nest phenomenon may be less relevant or have less of an impact for them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

The postparental period, with all of its positive and negative potential, represents a major life change or transition. To assist midlife women with this transition, counselors need to be aware of the impact of language and media, the possibility of severe reactions, factors affecting adjustment, and the effect of this transition on the family life cycle. Implications exist for further research as well as clinical practice and prevention.

Counselors should be aware of the ambiguous and demeaning implications of use of the term *empty nest*. A more positive and professional stance would involve reference to this time as the *postparental period*. This may refer to a brief transitional event, an on-going life cycle state, or a pathological depressive reaction (Goren, 1983). The postparental period involves normative developmental challenges, as reflected in the first two definitions. The third definition suggests an emotional disorder or illness, and it is only for the latter that the term *syndrome* applies.

Although rare, empty nest syndrome does exist for some women in midlife. While extremely important for a few individuals, treatment strategies for severe pathology are beyond the scope of this article. At the very least, counselors should be aware of the symptoms of severe pathology, including longstanding depression and failure to invest in new life roles.

Because the postparental transition is primarily a normative stress, counselors need to be prepared to facilitate normative aspects of adjustment. This requires, first, knowledge of the variables that may affect adjustment, and second, awareness of strategies for intervention. It is important to obtain as much background information as possible to permit an understanding of the meaning of the transition to the midlife client. Factors to consider include the breadth, depth, and personal meaning of the maternal role, investment in any alternative roles, level of self-esteem, opinion regarding children's success or lack of success with independence, and marital satisfaction. Such information will assist in identifying key problem areas and selecting appropriate intervention strategies.

Since the empty nest is a normal phase of family development, all mothers are potentially vulnerable to the effects of this period. Identification of women at risk of experiencing adjustment difficulties in response to children leaving home is important. An early identification process would allow for proactive programs to reduce or attenuate the effects of this transition. Both individual and group counseling and education could be provided to help women prepare for the postparental period. Based on research findings, these programs should include exploration of roles and identification and enhancement of support systems. Career counseling could be useful to assist women in choosing satisfying careers and developing alternative means of life satisfaction beyond parental roles.

Black and Hill (1984) suggested that coping skills were of far greater significance than any of the predictor variables in determining adaptation to the postparental period. Therefore, counselors working with postparental adults may find it useful to focus on coping abilities. Both identification of existing coping styles and resources and training in new ways of coping may be helpful. This approach would have the added benefit of teaching skills that could be transferable and facilitate coping with other major life stresses and transitions. It seems certain that the development of coping skills will facilitate the process of transition from active parenting to the postparental period.

More research is needed regarding the postparental period and empty nest syndrome relative to counseling interventions. For example, assessment strategies for determining women at risk have not been identified nor have strategies for education, early intervention, or remedial treatment been proposed. Although the majority of women are not affected in a negative manner, coping with the departure of children from the home does remain a problem for some. Research on the impact of the empty nest on single parents and cultural and ethnic minorities also is needed.

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