

Family Transitions Coaching

Creating Balance, Resilience, & Fulfillment

Empty Nest Transition or Syndrome?

By Ellen Neiley Ritter, Ph.D.

When is Empty Nest more than a very difficult transition that one has to get through and when is it a "syndrome" and one should consider going to a doctor for a consultation about depression?

As a time of transition, Empty Nest often is filled with a sense of loss – not only a loss of a child as they head off to pursue their new life, but also a strong sense of loss of your self as your role in life changes. You've always known that this day would come, and even though you are happy that your child is succeeding, this time of transition is difficult. Know that feelings of grief, sadness and emptiness are totally normal during this transition. So are the questions and anxiety of not knowing what the future will bring. While the early days of an Empty Nest Transition may seem bleak, there is a sense that ultimately you will be able to overcome, to cope with this change, and move forward. The support of friends and family, working with a coach, and trying to find some of the benefits of this new change in your life can help to ease this transition. It may not seem so at first but, by focusing on the positive aspects of your life, getting in touch with your dreams and interests, individuals experiencing Empty Nest Transition can and do get through this difficult period.

When does it become more? How do you know if you're suffering from "Empty Nest Syndrome" and should seek help from a doctor? For some, the questions, self-doubt, and concerns about the future become overwhelming. They become unable to see beyond the sadness, unable to feel as though there is any way they can get through this period. One of the more prominent features of depression is a preoccupation with negative thoughts, feeling and perceptions. There is a strong and prevailing sense of hopelessness and helplessness that does not go away and the sadness completely clouds any light or hope in the future.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA, 1994), a Major Depressive Episode is characterized by "a period of 2 weeks during which

there is either a depressed mood or the loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities" (p.320). Along with this period of sadness and lack of interest in seeing your friends or wanting to do any of the usual things which bring you pleasure, individuals with a major depressive episode also experience at least 4 of the following symptoms:

1. A significant weight gain or weight loss or a decrease or increase in your appetite
2. Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping much more than usual
3. Noticeable changes in how you walk and talk—you may appear restless or move very slowly
4. Extreme fatigue or loss of energy
5. Feeling worthless or having inappropriate guilt
6. Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
7. Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

If you think you are suffering from Empty Nest Syndrome, you should consult with your doctor to see whether medication might be advisable to help you move forward. Since antidepressants alone are only effective in about 50% of all individuals suffering from depression, you may want to consider also participating in some sort of counseling or coaching to help you get beyond the overwhelming negative thought patterns associated with depression and to begin to embrace this new phase in your life.

Remember, there is light at the end of the tunnel and help is available so you can come through the Empty Nest and flourish.

American Psychiatric Association, (1994).

Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, Fourth Edition. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

As the coach for Empty Nest Moms, Ellen Neiley Ritter, Ph.D. is committed to helping individuals and families to deal with difficult transitions. To sign up for a complimentary coaching session, please visit Ellen's website at www.familytransitionscoaching.com .