

An East Anglian expert's top tips on coping with empty nest syndrome

Autumn has finally arrived, and one thing that's certain at this time of year is the influx of youngsters up and down the country heading off to university – with many leaving home for the first time.

And while freshers are incredibly excited to be heading off to pastures new, their parents and guardians may be feeling a sense of sadness, unease, and inexplicable worry.

If this is you, don't fret, as you're not alone – and there is even a term for it.

'Empty nest syndrome' refers to the feelings parents have when their children grow up and eventually move out of the family home.

And one woman who knows all too well the turmoil that this phenomenon can bring is Nesta Reeve.

Nesta is the consultant clinical psychologist and clinical lead for Norfolk and Suffolk Wellbeing Services - but she is also currently experiencing the first-hand effects of empty nest syndrome herself, as one of her daughters has just made the big move to university.

Explaining how common it is to feel this way, she says: "It's related to the feelings that parents have when their children leave home, and when this happens, parents

Find out how to adjust to life once your kids have flown the nest. By **Danielle Lett**

are often left with a feeling of loss or worry as there's been such a change in the household dynamic. If someone's role as a parent has been their main focus, they're now left with this sizeable gap in their life which is completely understandable."

While empty nest syndrome isn't a clinical condition itself, the feelings that may it may bring can potentially lead to a number of side effects including anxiety, depression, a loss of appetite, and interrupted sleeping patterns.

"It's a type of adjustment – and if you've spent all of your efforts over the past 18 years bringing up your children, it's huge when you haven't got that focus in your life anymore. It leaves a big hole, and that's where that sense of loss comes in – so it's all about dealing with that adjustment, and looking for ways to fill that void."

And while evidence suggests women are more affected by empty nest syndrome than men tend to be, fathers can also experience these feelings too.

"My daughter has just gone to university, and my husband said

to me how surprised he was at the emotional impact it had on him. He said he was worried about her, as you just don't know what they're getting up to in their day-to-day lives, and you're much more distant from them.

"But as I said before, it's a very common feeling. It's normal to wonder if you've equipped your child with enough skills to exist in the world more independently. You want them to make friends, have a good time, and do well, and you're less in control of that once they've left home."

With all of that in mind, Nesta has a number of tips to help parents better cope with the sudden emotional changes that come with empty nest syndrome.

Firstly, keeping in touch is key – but remember that boundaries are important.

"Respect that your son or daughter wants their independence, but staying in touch with them so you've got a healthy level of communication is vital. You want to know they're doing alright, but also that they can come to you with any



A lot of children will be flying the nest for the first time at this time of year - find out

problems they might be having, even though they're out of home."

Secondly, be sure to spend time focussing on yourself and your own wellbeing now you have the time to.

"Start by having review of what your life consists of, and what you can add to it that you didn't have before, such as a hobby, or going to the gym, or even getting a pet. Whatever is it that might make your life feel fuller, now your brood have flown the nest."

And thirdly, make time for each other.

Once your children have left home, this can often highlight underlying problems within your relationship that might've previously taken a backseat.

"You've now got time for each other, without the distractions of children, so spend time reigniting your relationship with your partner. Find out what your joint aims and interests are, so you can do things together."

And don't forget, empty nest syndrome is incredibly common – especially at this time of year.

Talking to someone such as a friend or coworker can help alleviate your feelings, and remind you that you're not the only person going through it right now.

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"Reaching out about it can really help reduce the sense that your feelings are excessive. I found it useful speaking to someone else at work who is also going through it too right now. By simply reflecting and sharing how you're feeling with someone else, you quickly realise it's not abnormal - and quite the opposite.

"And remember that the world has been so different in the last 18 months due to the pandemic. Parents will have spent more time with their children, as they've been studying at home. So from that aspect, it's been a more intense year, and therefore incredibly normal to feel such a strong emotion when your children fly the nest," she adds.



It's natural to feel overwhelmed when your child moves away from home for the first time

Picture: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



how to cope with such a big change

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One of the best ways to cope with empty nest syndrome is to spend more time with your partner or friends

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