**Empty Nest Syndrome**

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“People make a lot of jokes about the empty nest. Let me tell you it is no laughing matter. It is really hard”-Michelle Pfeiffer

The other day, a friend mentioned that both her children had settled abroad for good and that she was planning to visit them. Her gleeful voice betrayed the underlying despair that comes with having to face an empty house that was earlier hustling and bustling with kids. The irritating yet comforting pitter patter of their little feet all over the place, their melodious giggles and irksome bawling, their fuss over food, their odd timings of pick-up and drop to and from school, their adolescent tantrums, their examination anxieties, their broken bones, their ailments and such associated activities though no longer in existence, keep echoing around silent rooms. Generally, since a mother is more engaged with the children, there is a likelihood that she may suffer more compared to the father, whose out-of-home affairs keep him preoccupied with matters other than rearing children.

The empty nest concept is more of a western origin. The reason is that in the East, the idea of a joint family system has lived on for centuries. Generations upon generations lived and died in a particular ancestral home. From great grandfathers/mothers to great granddaughters/sons, all occupied a room in these old set-ups. Marriages took place and there was always some room for new entrants to the family. Married daughters left for their in-laws’ home while sons brought home their wives. In this scenario, with such close-knit relations, no one felt lonely or dejected as they all remained under one roof. One can find plenty of literature on the pros and cons of the joint family system but at the same time, one cannot deny that it kept loved ones together.

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As circumstances changed and the tendency towards nuclear families increased, we saw how the demand for privacy for each family member also grew. Tired of constant interference, people found solace in moving out from the shelter of quizzical eyes to live a life in accordance with their personal likes and dislikes. Agreed that people are blessed with just one life and have every right to live by their wishes, but these usually come with a heavy price as a bagful of liabilities and responsibilities accompany this package deal. Where many willing hands used to volunteer to help out in precarious situations, people need to hire or request strangers for assistance. This also led to greater expenses and demand for earning more; forcing young housewives to find jobs to add to the family’s income.

Now, with the explosive boom of feminist movements and the desire for equality among different genders, the probability that the empty nest syndrome should be on the decline has proved incorrect. Despite the fact that they may have been instrumental in causing their parents to go through this unique depression, many end up suffering from the same ailment. This can be attributed to a number of causes as discovered by researchers whose studies indicate some common characteristics in human beings who somehow cannot come to terms with their children’s absence. For them, change is stressful as against being refreshing or challenging. As their emotions run high, such experiences can be devastating. They may be going through problems in their own marriages. They may feel pulled away from a role they took pride in; leaving them with a sense of worthlessness. They could be full-time parents whose life suddenly loses purpose. They may be affected by intense apprehensions that their offspring may not be fully prepared to handle their responsibilities as adults.

According to psychologists, once afflicted, it may take from a few months up to a couple of years to emerge from the syndrome. It may subside as, and when, parents watch their young ones thriving and happy or they are able to divert their attention to some productive occupation. In the joint families of yore, little children, in the form of nieces and nephews, were there to fill the vacuum when a child left for higher studies or settled far away, but this is no longer the case as bigger families disintegrate into smaller units. Another problem, which some parents face, is determining the type of relationship with their adult and independent children. Having led them by hand, it becomes quite difficult to perceive them as totally broken away from their apron strings.

Research conducted by a group of Chinese psychiatrists refers to statistics issued by the China Bureau of Statistics [China Statistical Yearbook 2020], which says that while adults aged 60 and above accounted for 17.9 per cent of the total population by the end of 2018, the total number of empty-nest elderly could reach 118 million by 2020 and the proportion of families with empty-nest elderly would reach 90 per cent of all families in China by 2030. China being the most populous country in the world, these are disturbing numbers. Similar studies have been conducted in other countries, but except for a news item, nothing much has been done on this front in Pakistan, even though it is quite prevalent in our country but generally not admitted in so many words.

We make huge houses hoping that our children will stick around with us until our lifetime. This appears to be a bit on the selfish side because by doing so, we are perhaps laying obstacles in the path of our children’s progress in an attempt to chain them to brick and mortar and, thus, restrict their flights. Once fledglings learn the art of flying after they have been nurtured by their doting parents, they leave the nest to live by themselves, but unfortunately, we are reluctant to learn from nature. Besides, our traditional expectations that in our old age, our children would be there to support us both physically and economically also contribute to causing empty nest syndrome when these are not realized-a kind of payback for efforts, in raising them during childhood.

Parents harbouring such wishes need to check their aspirations otherwise chances are that they may become victims of this mental disorder. If such a tragedy does strike, it would be important to know how to cope with it. They must first acknowledge the nature of their problem. Second, they should try to divert their attention towards activities, preferably those that involve people. If that is not to their liking,

perhaps gardening or attending to pets or pursuing hobbies that were not practical with children around, could be good for distracting their thoughts. Getting together with other parents in a similar situation and sharing the same feelings can also be one way to overcome the syndrome.

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