

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/how-to-deal-with-empty-nest-syndrome-at-christmas

How to deal with empty nest syndrome at Christmas

When the kids aren't home for Christmas, it's not easy. The festive season is often seen as a time for family and friends, with back-to-back TV adverts showing people tucking into turkey dinners and enjoying mince pies together. So when you're home alone without extended family, things can seem too quiet - making what should be a joyous time feel lonely.

What is empty nest syndrome?

"Empty nest syndrome is a phenomenon rather than a psychiatric label. It specifically refers to the time when a family's last child leaves home on their road towards independence," says Counselling Directory member [Erica Spencer Green](#).

"The term empty nest syndrome has been around for decades and is an interesting metaphor for this particular time in family life. When we think about it literally, a nest is a place where eggs are laid, chicks hatch, and then fledge," she explains.

There are many reasons why people may experience empty nest syndrome. Children may have left home for university and live too far away to return for [Christmas](#), or they may live and work abroad. Although the phrase is usually used to refer to [parents](#) missing their children, grandparents may experience empty nest syndrome if they can't see their grandchildren as frequently as they would like.

According to a [survey](#) published in 2021, almost half (47%) of UK parents with children at university worry about empty nest syndrome. Of the 2,000 people polled, 94% said they were not ready for months of peace and quiet, particularly at Christmas.

"[Christmas](#) can be a particularly challenging time of year when it coincides with the departure of the last child," says Green. "There can be a sense of emptiness and a change in status as our roles as parents shift dramatically in nature.

"Christmas is often a time of celebration, joy, happiness, and togetherness," she adds. "What happens though when we put this alongside the various senses of [loss](#) and change often connected with empty nest syndrome? This situation can be overwhelming as it often creates emotional confusion."

Loneliness at Christmas

[Social isolation](#) is already a common problem around the holidays. Christmas is the loneliest time of the year for over 1.5 million older people, with those who have lost a loved one struggling the most, according to research by [Age UK](#). According to the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#), there were nine million lonely people in the UK before the pandemic, including younger people.

There are many reasons for [loneliness](#) around Christmas, including [bereavements](#), family disputes, lost relationships, loss of income or physical and [mental health](#) problems.

How to handle empty nest syndrome at Christmas

Empty nest syndrome and [loneliness](#) can have a detrimental impact on [confidence](#), [self-worth](#) and sense of purpose. Sometimes, parents may feel guilty or ashamed for wishing their children were at home, when they want them to live their own lives too.

If you are struggling as an empty nester, there are steps you can take to cope during the [festive season](#).

Be adaptable

"My advice in the lead-up to [Christmas](#), especially when you have had a significant change in family dynamics, is to be as fluid as you can," says Green.

"Offer a range of options for meeting up, open your mind up to new ideas of how to celebrate, and ease yourself into the notion that new Christmas traditions will be created as your kids, fully-fledged, explore the world around them," she says.

"The chances are, they might want to bring these new discoveries back home to try out and share - which could, in turn, enrich the experience of Christmas for you all."

Remember that your home will always be their home

It's normal to miss your children when they leave home, particularly at [Christmas](#). However, it's important to remember that your home is a secure base for your kids to return to when they need or want to.

"As a container, a nest is very safe but it has limitations," says Green. "It might be helpful to see our nests as bases from which, not in which, to explore the world."

Be creative

Even if your children or extended family can't be with you at Christmas, there are many ways to keep in touch. Whether it's a phone or [Zoom](#) call, technology allows us to stay connected no matter where we are physically.

"We need to get creative and generate new ways and means of communicating from afar and staying connected," says Green.

Make alternative arrangements

Feeling [lonely](#) is extremely difficult, but it's important to remember that you are not the only one having a hard time. Friends and neighbours may well be experiencing loneliness or isolation too. Inviting them round for [Christmas](#) lunch is a great way to socialise and beat the blues.

Think about people you haven't connected with for a while and make the effort to get in touch. Someone may be struggling in secret - and a quick chat can make a huge difference to both of you.

Look after yourself

Empty nest syndrome and loneliness can lead to [stress](#), [low mood](#) and [anxiety](#), which can make day-to-day activities seem much more difficult. It's important to [go easy on yourself](#) and take things one step at a time.

There is a lot of pressure to be happy and sociable at Christmas, but you need to make time for yourself and the things you enjoy. This might mean a quiet evening reading in the bath, or going for [walks](#). Give yourself a break if you need to – [self-care](#) is important.

It's also important to speak to your doctor if [anxiety](#), [depression](#) or another [mental health problem](#) is impacting your life.

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Egton Medical Information Systems Limited has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. For details see our [conditions](#).

Last updated by: Lydia Smith 22/12/2022	Originally authored by: Lydia Smith 12/12/2021
Peer reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP 22/12/2022	

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/how-to-deal-with-empty-nest-syndrome-at-christmas

Discuss How to deal with empty nest syndrome at Christmas and find more trusted resources at [Patient](#).



To find out more visit www.patientaccess.com
or download the app



Follow us

