

## Loneliness And Life Satisfaction Among Empty Nest Employed And Unemployed Mothers

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### Abstract

The empty nest transition is a developmental phase faced in midlife by the parents, where they experience various feelings and emotions related to this transition. The aim of the study was to explore the level of loneliness and life satisfaction in empty nest employed and unemployed mothers. It discusses the relationship between empty nest, loneliness and life satisfaction. The transition to the empty nest has been depicted as a time of crisis for most middle- aged parents, especially mothers. The sample comprised of 40 middle – aged empty nest mothers, which includes 20 employed and 20 unemployed mothers. The independent variables are empty nest and employment status, and the dependent variables are loneliness and life satisfaction. There are two hypotheses – Empty nest unemployed mothers will be more susceptible to loneliness than empty nest employed mothers, and Empty nest employed mothers will have more life satisfaction than empty nest unemployed mothers. UCLA loneliness scale version 3 and Satisfaction with Life scale was administered. Data was analyzed using t – testing. The finding of the study revealed that empty nest unemployed mothers experience more loneliness in comparison to empty nest employed mothers. Furthermore, the result findings showed that empty nest employed mothers have more life satisfaction than empty nest unemployed mothers.

**Keywords:** Empty nest, Mothers, Loneliness, Life Satisfaction, Employed, Unemployed.

### Introduction

Literature has often portrayed the transition to the empty nest as a time of crisis for most middle-aged parents, particularly mothers. When the child leaves, it is a significant event in the lives of both parents and the child. Although many parents perceive it as a positive event, but for others it can be a conflicted time. The term “**empty nest**” refers to when young adult “fledgling” children leave the parental home. This term was originally introduced in 1914 by the writer Dorothy Canfield, and is often associated with related concepts such as “empty nesters” (parents who live without their children) and the “empty nest syndrome” (the sadness and grief experienced when children leave home. The empty nest transition, or the period when children permanently leave the parental home, is experienced in midlife, whereby the parents expect their children to leave, become independent, and to successfully negotiate the demands associated with this life stage (Havighurst, 1953).

Loneliness has been defined as “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity” (Perlman & Peplau, 1984). Loneliness is a common, emotionally deplorable experience and is associated with adverse physical and mental health and an unhealthy lifestyle. Parents usually feel a mix of so many feelings and emotions which are very crucial to them. Mothers, especially fulltime mothers feel deeply lonely and miss their children and their companionship more than the fathers. (Adebowale, 2019). That is because, they put in a greater amount of their time and effort into nurturing and upbringing of their child/children, and thus have a stronger bond with them. Loneliness may occur in people of all ages, but it is believed to be a common and more serious problem for older people (Heylen, 2010). Researches have shown that acute loneliness and social isolation can impact gravely on well, being and, quality of life, with demonstrable negative health effects (Masi, Chen, Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2011).

Life satisfaction is the ultimate goal and every human being strive to achieve this goal throughout the life. Life satisfaction is a multidimensional concept related to psychological and environmental life conditions. Life satisfaction for Sumner (1966) is "A positive evaluation of the conditions of your life, a judgment that at least on balance, it measures up favorably

against your standards or expectations". In addition, frequent fluctuations in life satisfaction have been shown to be particularly harmful for health and longevity (Boehm, Winning, Kubzansky, & Segerstrom, 2015). Reduced social contact, being alone, isolation and feelings of loneliness have been associated with a reduced quality of life (Victor, Scambler, Bond and Bowling, 2000). Studies have been done on life satisfaction in relation to empty nest syndrome and found a substantial overall negative effect of becoming an empty nester (Piper & Jackson, 2017). In addition, studies done on empty nesters have found that loneliness is correlated with decreased life satisfaction (Fernández-Alonso et.al, 2012; Liu & Guo, 2007). Irfan, M., Kaur, N., Panwar, N., Thind, H. S. (2012) in their investigation found that the employment status also has an effect as the females those who were working and married, were low on anxiety with higher life satisfaction in comparison to the non-working married females.

### **Rationale**

Motherhood is an important and significant phase in the life of every women. They form a constant companionship with their children. So, when they leave, mothers experience sudden loneliness and emptiness. This would sometimes look normal but at times it grows into something much serious. Loneliness in their lives tends to lessen their life satisfaction. To them their life seems to be redundant and irrelevant without their children. So far different researchers have investigated the area of loneliness and life satisfaction in different age groups and in relation to different factors. A recent study examines loneliness and social isolation as a correlate of empty nest syndrome (Adebowale, 2019). Lai (2002) did a qualitative research pilot study, which was designed with the aim of exploring the experience of empty nest from two women's perspective. Most of the studies in these areas are focused on the elderly population and young adults. Fewer studies have been done on the middle-aged population in relation to loneliness and life satisfaction (Fernández-Alonso et.al, 2012). Very few studies have been carried out on the middle-aged empty nest females. So far studies are done on the china, northeast china, America, and Finland population which cannot be generalized. Fewer studies are done on the Indian population in relation to loneliness and life satisfaction in empty nest mothers. Hence, this study aims at exploring loneliness and life satisfaction in empty nest employed and unemployed.

### **Methodology**

**Purpose** - To explore the level of loneliness and life satisfaction among empty nest employed and unemployed mother.

**Research design** - Descriptive research design

**Hypotheses** –

1. Empty nest unemployed mothers will be more susceptible to loneliness than empty nest employed mothers.
2. Empty nest employed mothers will have more life satisfaction than empty nest unemployed mothers.

**Variables** –

**Independent variable**- empty nest and employment status

**Dependent variable**- loneliness and life satisfaction

**Sample** – The sample comprises of 40 middle-aged i.e., 20 employed and 20 unemployed empty nest mothers. The age ranged from 45 to 65 years.

**Inclusion criteria** –

1. Female participants ranging from 45 to 65 years of age will be included.
2. Only urban participants will be included in the sample.
3. The minimum educational level of the participant should be graduation.
4. Empty nest employed and unemployed mothers were included.

**Exclusion criteria**-

1. Women who run home business were excluded.
2. Widows and divorcees were excluded.

**Method of sampling** – Purposive sampling

**Tools used:**

1. UCLA Loneliness scale (version 3) designed by Daniel Russell (1996) to measure the subjective feelings of loneliness of the respondents. It contains 20 items and the respondents rate each item on a scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). The measure has high internal consistency (coefficient alpha = .96) and a test-retest correlation over a two-month period of .73. Convergent validity for the scale was indicated by significant correlations with other measures of loneliness. Construct validity was supported by significant relations with measures of the adequacy of the individual's interpersonal relationships, and by correlations between loneliness and measures of health and well-being.

2. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by William Pavot and Ed Diener to assess the satisfaction with respondent's life as a whole. The SWLS is a short 5-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one's life. It is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items are added up in order to yield a total score of life satisfaction. The possible range of scores is between 5 and 35, with greater scores signifying higher satisfaction with life. The SWLS has been demonstrated to have strong internal consistency and moderate temporal stability with Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 and 2-month test-retest reliability of 0.82. The SWLS also has acceptable convergent validity;

**RESULT**

**Table 1 – Showing the category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on UCLA Loneliness Scale**

Category	No. of Employed Empty nest mothers	Percentage	No. of Unemployed Empty nest Mothers	Percentage
1. Normal				
2. Mild	20	100%	6	30%
3. Moderate			10	50%
4. Severe			4	20%

**Table 1** shows the score category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on UCLA Loneliness scale. On the loneliness scale the higher the score the greater is the degree of Loneliness. In loneliness, 100% of the employed mothers experienced loneliness in normal category. As for unemployed mothers, 50% were moderate, followed by the categories of mild and severe with a percentage of 30% and 20% respectively.

**Table 2- Showing the category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on satisfaction with life scale.**

Category	No. of Employed Empty nest Mothers	Percentage	No. of Unemployed Empty nest mothers	Percentage
Extremely satisfied	14	70%	2	10%
Satisfied	6	30%	5	25%
Slightly satisfied			4	20%
Neutral				
Slightly dissatisfied			4	20%
Dissatisfied			5	25%
Extremely dissatisfied				

Table 2 shows the category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers. In satisfaction with life, maximum percentage (70%) of employed empty nest mothers were extremely satisfied and 30% were satisfied. Whereas, in satisfaction with life of unemployed mothers' maximum percentage (25%) were satisfied and dissatisfied respectively, followed by the categories of slightly satisfied and slightly dissatisfied with a percentage of 20% each. The least percentage (10%) of unemployed mothers were in the extremely satisfied category.

**Table 3 - Showing the means, SD and t-test of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on the UCLA Loneliness and Satisfaction with Life Scales**

Scale	Mean of Employed Empty nest Mothers	Mean of Unemployed Empty nest Mothers	SD	t-test
Loneliness	30.85	49.3	8.27	7.20**
Life satisfaction	31.55	21.35	5.26	6.25**

\*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05

df= 38

Values at 0.05 level = 2.02

Values at 0.01 level = 2.71

t-test was done to find out the significant difference between means of two independent samples. The results in the above-mentioned **table 3**. As shown in the table, the scores of unemployed mothers (M=49.3) are significantly higher than that of employed mothers (M=30.85). It means that unemployed mothers are higher in loneliness than employed mothers. Furthermore, the scores for Satisfaction with Life of employed mothers is(M=31.55) more than that of unemployed mothers (M=21.3). This indicates that employed mothers are higher in life satisfaction than unemployed mothers.

Since the t value calculated is greater than 0.05 and 0.01 level for both loneliness and satisfaction with life, thus, t value is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance, respectively.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the level of loneliness and life-satisfaction in empty nest employed and unemployed mothers. For this purpose, an attempt was made to assess loneliness in employed and unemployed empty nest mothers and life satisfaction in employed and unemployed mothers.

In the current study, purposive sampling method was used for collecting the data. A sample of 40 middle aged empty nest mothers were approached, 20 employed and 20 unemployed empty, with their age ranging from 45 to 65 years. To complete the objective of the study t-test was administered to find out the statistical significance. Table 1 shows the score category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on UCLA Loneliness scale. The result indicates that loneliness is experienced by employed and unemployed mothers alike, but in varying degrees. The scores showed that the unemployed mothers experienced mild, moderate and severe levels of loneliness, whereas, the employed mothers experienced only mild degree of loneliness. Parents in empty nest phase, especially mothers who have always had a close relationship with her child/children experiences sudden loss when their children leave home. For mothers, especially the full-time or unemployed mothers who have always identified strongly with their role as a parent, it becomes difficult to adjust to this empty nest phase.

Table 2 shows the category percentage of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on satisfaction with life scale. The data indicates the employed empty nest mothers are more satisfied with their lives than the unemployed empty nest mothers. This period of empty nest and the feelings and emotions that the parents, especially mothers go through, have a considerable effect on their life satisfaction as well. There are very few studies carried out on empty nest employed and unemployed mothers. Unemployed mothers spend most of their time at home, taking care of the household and various other things. A study done by Victor, Scrambler, Bond and Bowling (2000) found that reduced social contact, isolation, and feelings of loneliness have been associated with reduced quality of life.

Table 3 shows the means, SD and t-test of employed and unemployed empty nest mothers on the UCLA Loneliness and Satisfaction with Life Scales. On comparing the loneliness in employed and unemployed empty nest mothers it was found that the mean value of unemployed mothers was 49.3 and that of employed mothers was 30.85. The t value calculated was 7.20, which was greater than 0.05 and 0.01 level of significance. Thus, the t was found to be significant at both the levels of significance. The first hypothesis, that "Empty unemployed mothers will be more susceptible to loneliness than empty nest employed mothers" is thus accepted and confirmed by the results. Furthermore, on comparing the life satisfaction in employed and unemployed empty nest mothers, it was found that the mean of employed mothers was more than that of unemployed mothers. This indicated that employed mothers have a higher life satisfaction than the unemployed mothers. Since the t value calculated was 6.25 which is greater than 0.05 and 0.01 level, thus, t is significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference and the second hypothesis that, "Empty nest employed mothers will have more life satisfaction than Empty nest unemployed mothers, is accepted.

The findings of this study supported previous researches, that the empty nest employed mothers will experience less loneliness and higher life satisfaction. Whereas, the empty nest unemployed mothers will experience more loneliness and lower life satisfaction. A study done by Fernández-Alonso et al. (2012) found that more loneliness correlated with less life satisfaction in mid-aged women. Another study by Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) noted that parents who worked part-time or were homemakers were slightly more likely to report empty nest syndrome than those employed in full time work. The Social Perspective can explain the presence of loneliness, more in unemployed empty nest mothers as it takes into account the social context in which individuals develop their relationships. According to this perspective, an individual's behaviour is completely dependent upon his social environment. Unemployed mothers spend most of the time within the four walls of their homes. When their child leaves, they sometimes find it difficult to engage themselves in varied activities. If a person is socially isolated his or her possibilities for social comparison and personal control are diminished. Through social activities, people seek social acceptance and rewards, and long for self-esteem and respect. A socially isolated person may feel socially frustrated. (Perlman & Peplau 1982, p.128.) Sociological perspective assumes that loneliness is an outcome of social isolation which in turn is a consequence of the lack of integration in social networks. In addition, the Attachment theory was the foundation for an influential psychological theory of loneliness developed by the sociologist Robert S. Weiss. Weiss identified six social needs that, if unmet, contribute to feelings of loneliness. Those needs are attachment, social integration, nurturance, reassurance of worth, sense of reliable alliance, and guidance in stressful situations. Moreover, the feelings of loneliness were not associated with the frequency of contacts with children but rather with expectations and satisfaction of these contacts (Routasalo et al. 2006).

With reference to differences in life satisfaction, there are studies that show that unemployment is statistically significant and negatively associated with life satisfaction (Clark and Oswald, 1994; Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 1998). Jan and

Masood (2008) did a study in which they found that with an increase in age, the overall life satisfaction decreases. Liu and Guo (2008) did a study in which they concluded that “empty nest status” was negatively related with life satisfaction. Liu and Guo (2007) in a study found that loneliness was negatively correlated with quality of life and that reducing the level of loneliness may be helpful to improve the quality of life for the empty nesters. The difference in the level of life satisfaction experienced by empty nest employed and unemployed mothers can be explained through the Bottom-up theory. The distinction between bottom-up and top-down theories of life satisfaction was originally made by Diener (1984). Bottom-up theories of life satisfaction (or subjective well-being, SWB) are based on the idea that overall life satisfaction is the sum of its parts. That is, self-reports of life satisfaction represent a weighted average of satisfaction with different aspects (domains) of life, like work, relationships, family and friends, personal development, health and fitness. Our satisfaction with our lives in these areas combine to create our overall life satisfaction. The employed mothers have more life satisfaction maybe because they are satisfied in the many other domains of their life, and thus evaluate their overall life satisfaction in terms of satisfaction in different domains. In the case of unemployed mothers, their life satisfaction in the different domains may be less and so their perception of their overall life satisfaction is influenced by it. In addition, Middle age is also the point in life where some people might experience what is often referred to as a "midlife crisis." The term, coined in the '60s, refers to a crisis of self-identity and self-confidence that can happen around mid-age. When their children grow and become more independent, this is another sign that they are aging. And because so much of her life has centered on being a mother, the fact that her kids don't need her is also a little saddening. This would also lower the overall life satisfaction of empty nest mothers. The results indicate that the employed empty nest mothers have more life satisfaction. The reason for this is perhaps there are some who are able to deal more effectively with this crisis. They are able to confide in people who they trust, use rational thinking and set new goals in life.

There are also researches that suggests that when children move out, parents—and especially mothers—are not as unhappy as once was presumed (Radloff, 1980; Rubin, 1992). In fact, more recent research indicates that marital and life satisfaction increases once children leave (Dennerstein et al., 2002; Schmidt, Murphy, Haq, Rubinow, & Danaceau, 2004), especially for parents who recently launched their children and for parents who maintained regular contact with their children once they have left (White & Edwards, 1990).

The findings of this study suggests that employment status does have an effect on the level of loneliness and life satisfaction experienced by the empty nest mothers and that loneliness and life satisfaction is experienced in different levels. Additional studies could be done to find out various other factors which affect the life of empty nesters and their relationship to empty nest.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore the level of loneliness and life satisfaction in empty nest employed and unemployed mothers. Based on the quantitative analysis of the data and results, the research concludes that employed empty nest mothers experience more life satisfaction and are less susceptible loneliness, whereas, the unemployed empty nest mothers experience less life satisfaction and are more susceptible to loneliness as compared to employed empty nest mothers. The reasons for experiencing loneliness and life satisfaction in varying degrees, can depend on a lot of factors such as the employment status, middle age, and validity of the phenomenon. This research provides an understanding of factors, how and why they influence loneliness and life satisfaction in employed and unemployed empty nest mothers, which is theoretically contributive and practically important.

## **Limitations of the study**

- The sample size is small and thus affect negatively the generalizability. The data is collected from urban areas and therefore it is difficult to generalize it to rural population.
- The data is collected from middle – aged females who also maybe going through midlife crisis, menopause period and other stresses in life which would affect their responses.
- The study is confined to empty nest mothers only.

## **Recommendations for future research**

Findings from this study suggest several modes of future research. First, additional quantitative and qualitative studies comprising of more participants over a larger area could be surveyed using respective data collection methods to validate and generalize these findings on a greater scale. The generalizability of the findings of the study could be enhanced further by covering more rural and urban areas. The qualitative findings will help to support and validate the quantitative responses. This would also produce reliable statistical data which could be used to guide professionals in the counselling services, who have empty nest mothers as clients, to help them understand and better cope with this critical transitional phase of life course development.

Further studies can also be done to study the gender differences in experiencing the empty nest phase. There are studies which suggest that fathers find it more distressing to deal with the departure of their young ones, as compared to mothers. Comparisons between fathers and mothers of diverse backgrounds can also form one of the objectives of future research. Studies can also be done comprising of empty nest mothers with boomerang kids and could explore the experiences of empty nest mothers living in the same household with their boomerang children. Additional studies could be done to find out various other factors which affect the life of empty nesters and their relationship to empty nest.

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