

# Navigating transitions: Correlations between empty nest syndrome, life meaning, and social support in women.

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## Abstract

Empty nest phase experiences vary significantly from person to person, yet empty nest syndrome emerges when parents respond maladaptive to the departure of their children, leading to various emotional and psychological challenges. The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between empty nest syndrome, meaning in life and social support among mothers. The sample comprised of 70 mothers who are currently in their empty nest phase. Empty Nest Syndrome Scale- Indian Form (ENS-IF), Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) were used to measure empty nest syndrome, meaning in life and social support, respectively. Results show significant negative correlation between the presence of meaning in life and empty nest syndrome, indicating that mothers who perceive a greater sense of meaning in life are less likely to experience empty nest syndrome. Furthermore, significant negative correlations were found between empty nest syndrome and various sources of social support, including significant others, family, and friends, suggesting that greater social support is associated with lower levels of empty nest syndrome. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was observed between the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, indicating that mothers who actively search for meaning are more likely to perceive meaning in their lives. Moreover, positive correlations were found between the presence of meaning in life and social support from significant others, family, and friends. These findings underscore the importance of addressing both existential concerns and social support mechanisms in interventions aimed at alleviating empty nest syndrome among mothers. These results provide insights into the factors that influence the experience of empty nest syndrome among mothers. By understanding the role of meaning in life and social support can help in building strategies to promote resilience and well-being, ultimately assisting mothers in navigating this transitional period more effectively.

**Keywords:** Empty nest syndrome, Meaning in life, Social support, Mothers.

## Introduction

Life is a series of transitions and one of the most profound changes that most parents face is the departure of their children from the family nest. The term 'Empty Nest' refers to a phase in the lives of parents when all their children have moved out for diverse reasons, including pursuits like further studies, employment opportunities, relocation to different cities, exploration of individual lives, or the initiation of independent adulthood, leaving the parental home empty [1]. This period signifies a significant change in the family dynamic as the household is no longer occupied by children. Parents may experience a range of emotions during this time, including a sense of loss, sadness, or even an opportunity for newfound freedom and personal growth. Parents maladaptive responses- a period of depression, identity crisis, adjustment, confusion,

role loss, and a lowered sense of well-being which occurs when the last child leaves the parental home is known as empty nest syndrome [2]. From pregnancy to childbirth, mothers are intimately involved in the early stages of a child's development, fostering a deep and nurturing connection. As the primary caregivers, mothers often invest substantial time and emotional energy in raising their children. Consequently, when the time comes for children to venture into independence, mothers may feel an emptiness as they have been actively engaged in their children's daily lives. While fathers undoubtedly share in the parenting responsibilities, the unique bond formed through maternal involvement tends to make the departure of children a more challenging experience for mothers, leading to a higher incidence of empty nest syndrome among them. Research shows that mothers are more likely to experience empty nest syndrome compared to fathers because they are

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the primary caregivers, leading to the loss of their salient role identity as mothers [3]. But at the same time, empty nest phase presents mothers with a unique chance to refocus on their lives. In India, where many mothers perceive motherhood as the primary source of meaning in their lives, the departure of children from home may indeed trigger a sense of loss or purposelessness. However, if mothers cultivate other sources of meaning in their lives, the empty nest period may potentially transform into a time of personal growth and fulfilment. By reframing the empty nest period as an opportunity for personal reinvention and self-actualization, mothers may emerge from this transition with a greater sense of fulfilment and meaning. Similarly, if mothers have a strong social support system, it can reduce the loneliness in the empty nest phase. While mothers are undoubtedly feel the absence of their children but having a good social support system might improve the experience. Rather than succumbing to loneliness, mothers with supportive networks may find themselves fostering deeper relationships with others. By surrounding themselves with understanding friends, family members and community networks mothers can navigate the empty nest phase with a sense of companionship and fulfilment. Understanding the relationship between empty nest syndrome, meaning in life, and social support among mothers we can understand on how we can not only prevent the syndrome but also enhance the empty nest phase. By recognizing the importance of meaning in life and social support, we can implement strategies to not only mitigate the negative effects of empty nest syndrome but also enhance the overall well-being of mothers during this transitional period.

### ***Empty Nest Syndrome***

Empty nest syndrome can be defined as “A symbol of a collection of symptoms that are present in dealing with feelings of loss when a child grows up and leaves the house” [4]. It can also be defined as “The experience of loss and identity crisis that parents encounter when all of the children are launched from the home” [5].

A study showed that empty nest unemployed mothers experienced more loneliness and less life satisfaction as compared to empty nest employed mothers [6]. A study shows negative relationship between empty nest syndrome and religiosity, where higher religiosity implies lower empty nest syndrome and lower religiosity implies higher empty nest syndrome [7]. A research conducted on resilience and empty nest syndrome in parents showed that resilience is inversely proportional to empty nest syndrome [8].

### ***Meaning in Life***

Meaning in life can be defined as “An individually constructed, culturally based cognitive system that influences an individual’s choice of activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth, and fulfillment” [9]. It can also be defined as “a multidimensional construct consisting of the cognisance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and the accompanying sense of fulfilment” [10].

A study shows that employing positive coping strategies significantly influence the sense of meaning in life like including feelings of inner peace, satisfaction with one’s present and future life, as well as spirituality and faith. Whereas, the lack of such strategies was associated with loss of meaning and feelings of confusion [11]. A study shows that individuals in later life stages shows higher presence of meaning in their lives, whereas those in earlier life stages report higher levels of searching for meaning [12]. Another recent study shows higher meaning in life and quality of life in male older adults as compared to female older adults [13].

### ***Social Support***

Social support can defined as “the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for by others, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations” [14]. Perceived social support can be defined as “an individual’s subjective judgement that their social network will provide effective help during times of need” [15].

A study shows that there is a significant positive relationship between perceived social support and happiness while significant negative relationship between perceived social support and social media [16]. Another research study indicates that individuals experiencing depression alongside inadequate social support shows decreased rates of recovery [17]. A study also shows that there is a significant relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem [18].

### ***Methodology***

#### ***Aim***

The purpose of this study is to investigate and understand the complex relationships among the variables empty nest syndrome, meaning in life and social support among mothers.

#### ***Hypotheses***

1. There is a significant relationship between empty nest syndrome and meaning in life among mothers.
2. There is a significant relationship between empty nest syndrome and social support among mothers.
3. There is a significant relationship between meaning in life and social support.

#### ***Sample design***

The study comprised 70 mothers residing in urban areas of India who are presently experiencing the empty nest phase, wherein no children reside with them. The mother’s age ranged from 45 to 55 years.

#### ***Measures***

1. **Empty Nest Syndrome Scale- Indian Form (ENS-IF)** developed by Jhangiani et al. (2022), is a tool designed to assess the extent of the Empty Nest Syndrome among empty nesters, specifically in Indian population.
2. **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)**, developed by Steger et al. (2006), is a tool designed to assess two

**Table 1:** Shows the Mean and Standard deviation data of the sample.

	Empty Nest Syndrome	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning	Significant Other	Family	Friends
Mean	112	21.3	20.1	19.7	20.7	17.7
Standard deviation	41.7	5.37	5.59	6.24	5.91	6.78

**Table 2:** shows the correlation between Empty Nest Syndrome, Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, Significant other, Family, Friends and Social Support.

	Empty Nest Syndrome	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning	Significant Other	Family	Friends
Empty Nest Syndrome	—					
Presence of Meaning	-0.649	—				
Search for Meaning	-0.01	0.263	—			
Significant Other	-0.466	0.418	0.02	—		
Family	-0.474	0.528	0.081	0.576	—	
Friends	-0.399	0.496	0.151	0.288	0.528	—

dimensions of meaning in life: (1) Presence of Meaning (how much respondents feel their lives have meaning), and (2) Search for Meaning (how much respondents strive to find meaning and understanding in their lives).

- 3. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)**, developed by Zimet et al. (1988), is a tool designed to assess perceived social support from friends, family and significant other.

### Procedure

The study involved mothers who were currently experiencing the empty nest phase. Participants were briefed on the research objectives and asked to provide informed consent. Standardized psychological tests were then administered to assess various factors, including empty nest syndrome, meaning in life, and social support. Gratitude was expressed to all participants for their valuable contributions to the study.

### Results

The research used t-test analysis to understand the relationship between empty nest syndrome, meaning in life and social support. Table 1 presents mean and standard deviation data, Meanwhile, Table 2 illustrates correlations among empty nest syndrome, presence of meaning, search for meaning, significant other, family, friends and social support.

### Discussion

The study aimed to explore the relationship between empty nest syndrome, meaning in life, and social support among mothers, providing valuable insights into the psychological well-being of mothers during the transition to an empty nest phase. The results found several correlations. Firstly, a significant negative correlation was identified between the presence of meaning in life and empty nest syndrome ( $r = -0.649$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that as the sense of meaning in life diminishes, the severity of empty nest syndrome tends to increase among mothers. A study which was conducted on Minangkabau elderly women also found a negative correlation between the meaning of life and emptiness syndrome [19]. Secondly, significant negative correlations were found between significant others

and empty nest syndrome ( $r = -0.466$ ,  $p < .001$ ), family and empty nest syndrome ( $r = -0.474$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and friends and empty nest syndrome ( $r = -0.399$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This implies that lower levels of social support are associated with higher levels of empty nest syndrome, highlighting the importance of social connections in mitigating its effects. A research which was conducted on empty nest related psychosocial stress suggests that social support programs can strengthen family resource and improve family well-being [20]. Thirdly, a significant positive correlation was observed between the search for meaning and presence of meaning ( $r = 0.263$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that individuals who actively seek meaning in their lives are more likely to perceive their lives as meaningful. This finding underscores the dynamic nature of meaning-making processes and their relevance in shaping one's overall life satisfaction. This is similar to a research which also found a positive correlation between presence of meaning and search for meaning [21]. Significant positive correlations were also found between significant others and the presence of meaning ( $r = 0.418$ ,  $p < .001$ ), family and the presence of meaning ( $r = 0.528$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and friends and the presence of meaning in life ( $r = 0.496$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that higher levels of social support are associated with a greater sense of meaning in life among mothers. A longitudinal study was conducted on social support and meaning in life in older people, it suggests that greater anticipated support is linked with a deeper sense of meaning over time [22, 23]. Moreover, significant positive correlations were found between family and significant others ( $r = 0.576$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as between family and friends ( $r = 0.528$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that individuals who feel supported by their family members are also likely to feel supported by their significant others and friends, and vice versa.

### Conclusion

This study involved 70 Indian mothers in the empty nest phase and aimed to explore the relationship between meaning in life, social support, and the prevalence of empty nest syndrome. Results reveal significant negative correlation between the presence of meaning in life and empty nest syndrome,

indicating that mothers who perceive a stronger sense of purpose are less likely to experience the syndrome's adverse effects. Furthermore, the study highlights significant negative correlations between empty nest syndrome and various sources of social support, including significant others, family, and friends, underscoring the protective role of social networks. By recognizing these correlations, interventions can be tailored for both existential fulfilment and social support systems, thereby reducing the challenges associated with the empty nest phase. Ultimately, such targeted interventions have the potential to enhance mothers' resilience and well-being during this transitional period, fostering a smoother adjustment and improved quality of life for mothers experiencing empty nest syndrome.

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