

Empty Nest Syndrome: Loneliness and Social Support among Middle-aged Parents

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Abstract. This study explored the dynamics of empty nest syndrome and its relationships with middle-aged parents' feelings of loneliness and the need for social support. As the Philippines was known for having this kind of family values, this study explored the different psychological impacts on Filipino parents when their child or children moved out of their nest. This study also aimed to provide a more thorough knowledge of how individuals navigated this transition, which could ultimately direct the creation of solutions to support middle-aged parents in thriving as they got used to the "empty nest" stage. This study utilized the explanatory-sequential mixed method design. Middle-aged parents (40-64 years old) living in specific municipalities of Laguna were the respondents/participants of the study. The sampling method used was convenience and purposeful homogenous sampling, and G*Power was used to compute the suggested sample size. 74 respondents were gathered for the quantitative phase, and 5 participants for the qualitative phase. Two adopted tests were used for quantitative data gathering, and a researcher-made interview guide was used for the qualitative phase. Statistical tools used were frequency distribution, percentage, weighted mean, and Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient or Spearman rho. Thematic analysis was also used in the qualitative aspect of the study. Results showed that middle-aged parents experiencing empty nest syndrome had a low level of loneliness (mean score 1.96) and received high social support (mean score 5.76). A significant negative correlation ($r = -0.680$, $p < 0.001$) existed between social support and loneliness, indicating that increased social support reduced loneliness. The lived experiences of these parents revealed themes such as sadness, coping strategies like social media and spiritual interventions, emotional support from friends, adaptation to social changes, maintaining relationships, and adjusting to new parental roles.

Keywords: Empty nest syndrome; Loneliness; Social support; Middle-aged parents; Psychological impacts; Thematic analysis.

1.0 Introduction

The transition to an empty nest stage, where children moved out of the family home, represented a significant and often challenging period for middle-aged parents. This phase profoundly impacted their emotional well-being, usually leading to feelings of loneliness and an increased need for social support. Swaim (2022) said that most parents in the post-prenatal stage, where their child begins to leave their home, will allow them to explore adult life without their responsibilities to their child. The empty nest stage, therefore, becomes a crucible for examining the quality of relationships and fostering new connections, both within and outside the family structure. This event can profoundly impact the household dynamics, parental roles, and overall well-being (Bermudez-Hyun, 2023). However, other parents also struggle to adapt and may experience feelings of loneliness, depression, and occasionally loss of purpose. In the context of the Philippines, a country renowned for its strong family values and close-knit family structures, this transition was particularly poignant. According to Goyala (2019), Filipinos are family-oriented, which is integral to their lives. Middle-aged parents, typically between 40 and 64, grappled with

a new reality that disrupted their daily routines and emotional equilibrium. (Morin, 2022); Brennan (2023); Psychology Today (n.d.), Sepahvand et al. (2020); Bougea et al. (2020); Ablanque and Singson (2022); and Thibodeau et al. (2020) all mentioned that empty Nest Syndrome is a term used to describe the melancholy and anxiety parents experience when their children leave the nest. Both men and women are affected, and it causes feelings of loss, sadness, concern, grief, wrath, and dread. Additionally, parents may have conflicted emotions of pride in their children's accomplishments.

This study aimed to explore the dynamics of empty nest syndrome and its relationships with middle-aged parents' feelings of loneliness and the need for social support. In addition to adding to the body of knowledge already available on Empty Nest Syndrome, this study also intended to shed light on the distinct difficulties and support systems that middle-aged parents face in a local setting by looking at this phenomenon from a broad viewpoint. Filipino culture strongly emphasizes close-knit family bonds and intergenerational living arrangements. As the Philippines has been known for family values, this study explored the psychological impact on Filipino parents when their child or children move out of their nest.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-method research approach, specifically the explanatory sequential design. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), this method entails gathering both qualitative (open-ended) and quantitative (closed-ended) data to address research inquiries or hypotheses. Integrating these two data types in the research design could be achieved through merging, explaining, transitioning from one dataset to another, or incorporating the data into a broader framework. As mentioned by Wasti et al. (2022), a mixed-methods paper assisted in gaining a comprehensive understanding by combining insights gathered from interviews or observations with data on the occurrence of characteristics within a population, as obtained through surveys. Creswell and Hirose (2019) mentioned that the sequential explanatory approach could be utilized when this study aimed to enhance the quantitative results with qualitative insights. Consequently, the qualitative data was employed to interpret and provide additional explanations for the findings obtained from quantitative data analysis. This approach consisted of a two-phase data collection method.

2.2 Research Locale

This study was conducted in the province of Laguna, specifically its three municipalities, Los Baños, Calamba City, and Cabuyao City. According to the 2020 Census, the province of Laguna had an overall population of 3,220,412. The population of middle-aged individuals in the Municipality of Los Baños was 24,665, Calamba City had 103,931, and Cabuyao City had 74,437. Aside from considering the convenience of the research locale, the researcher specifically chose these three municipalities as they had many middle-aged individuals in the province of Laguna. Furthermore, these three municipalities offered a rich and diverse setting for studying Empty Nest Syndrome. The varied settings, economic activities, educational institutions, and community structures presented an opportunity to explore the nuances of loneliness and social support among middle-aged parents in different local environments.

2.3 Research Participants

The study respondents were middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome from the selected municipalities of Laguna, such as Los Baños, Calamba City, and Cabuyao City. The respondents of the study had a total of 74 middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome. The initial sample size that was computed by G*Power was 84. However, due to the lack of respondents in the locale, only 74 individuals could participate in the study. In this study, the respondents should have the following criteria for them to be qualified in this research: a) should have a child or children who left home for some reason, such as going to college or university, working in another place far from home, getting married, deciding to live on their own, etc., and b) must be in the middle-aged stage or 40-64 years of age. On the other hand, the study participants were chosen according to the results of the quantitative data collection. Five (5) participants obtained extreme levels of loneliness and social support from the quantitative results of the study.

2.4 Research Instrument

This research utilized research instruments to gather the data and answer this study's objectives. These instruments included two standardized adopted research questionnaires and one researcher-made interview guide question validated by the experts. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) was used to determine the respondents' loneliness levels. This standardized test is a 20-item scale based on the concept of Daniel Russel. This is designed to determine one's feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The scores on the scale range from 20 to 80. Higher scores indicated a higher level of loneliness. For the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), it was indicated that the measure was highly reliable, both in terms of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .89 to .94) and test-retest reliability over one year ($r = .73$). 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 correlations between loneliness and measures of health and well-being.

Another adopted instrument to be used is the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support which Gregory D. Zimet developed. The MSPSS is a 12-item self-administered questionnaire designed to measure the perceived adequacy of social support from three sources: family, friends, and a significant other. Each of these three dimensions was assessed with four items. Response choices were a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree). This could be interpreted as the mean scale scores falling between 1 and 2.9, categorized as indicative of low support, while scores ranging from 3 to 5 signify moderate support, and scores from 5.1 to 7 indicate high support. While this approach appeared to offer enhanced validity, it may pose challenges if respondents were scarce within any of the specified groups. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and its subscales have shown strong internal consistency across multiple and very diverse subject groups. Across the 13 subject groups evaluated in six studies, coefficient alphas for the total scale ranged from .77 to .92 (mean = .87). Cronbach alphas values ranged from .81 to .93 (mean = .87) for the Family subscale, from .78 to .94 (mean = .88) for the Friends subscale, and from .79 to .98 (mean = .88) for the Significant Other subscale. The construct validity was also established in the MPSS.

For the qualitative data collection, the researcher created a researcher-made interview guide with questions about their lived experiences of having the empty nest syndrome. This consists of eight (8) interview guide questions that helped them describe their lived experiences as middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome. Five experts in the field validated the questions to ensure their validity. The validators were composed of one (1) research adviser, one (1) research director, one (1) qualitative analyst, one (1) Psychologist and one (1) psychology professor.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The quantitative data collection involved administering two adopted tests to the study's target respondents online using Google Forms. The qualitative data was collected via Zoom Meetings and in-person interviews adhering to health protocols during this post-pandemic era.

For the procedure, the researcher first researched the number of middle-aged parents living in Laguna's three municipalities, such as Los Baños, Calamba City, and Cabuyao City. G*Power was used to determine the suggested sample size of the target respondents. A "Call for Respondents" post on social media, which consisted of the criteria of the qualified respondents, was used. After determining the study's respondents, the researcher started the data-gathering procedure.

For the quantitative phase, the researcher included the letter of informed consent to the respondents in Google Forms indicating the background and purpose of the study. The respondents agreed with the informed consent before proceeding to the questionnaire. After agreeing to the informed consent, the researcher administered the two adopted tests, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, using Google Forms. After collecting the quantitative data, the researcher chose the respondents with extreme levels in both test results for a follow-up interview for the qualitative data phase.

For the qualitative phase, the researcher asked for the participants' availability and preferred mode of the interview (online or face-to-face). Before conducting the interview, the participants were sent informed consent. Once the informed consent was signed, the researcher and the participant scheduled the interview. The interview was conducted via Zoom Meeting and face-to-face, depending on the participant's availability.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

In this study, the privacy and security of the respondents were the utmost priority of the researcher in adherence to Republic Act No. 10173, or the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The ethical guidelines specified in the LCBA Research Manual were also followed. Anticipating these challenges in advance is essential to prevent any potential issues that could emerge during the study. Informed consent was utilized in this research to gather the data from the respondents. The researcher ensured that questionnaires were not used that contained offensive, discriminatory, or inappropriate language that could potentially harm the participants. Preserving the privacy and confidentiality of the respondents was the top priority, primarily for their safety and to prevent the identification of their identities by readers. All the names of the participants were not included in this study. With this, the researcher clearly stated that exclusive access to the respondents' information was granted only to them, and all data and information collected for the study were maintained confidentially and anonymously. Furthermore, individuals considering participation in the research were briefed on the study's procedures and potential risks. Lastly, participants were not obligated to join the research; they retained full autonomy in completing the questionnaire and could opt out of the study without facing any consequences.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Loneliness of Middle-Aged Parents with Empty Nest Syndrome

Table 1. Level of loneliness of middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1. How often do you feel "in tune" with the people around you?	3.19	Sometimes	3.5
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	2.36	Rarely	12
3. How often do you feel there is no one you can turn to?	2.18	Rarely	17
4. How often do you feel alone?	2.28	Rarely	14
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	3.24	Sometimes	1
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	3.08	Sometimes	8
7. How often do you feel you are no longer close to anyone?	2.12	Rarely	20
8. How often do you feel that those around you do not share your interests and ideas?	2.42	Rarely	10
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	3.14	Sometimes	7
10. How often do you feel close to people?	3.18	Sometimes	6.5
11. How often do you feel left out?	2.14	Rarely	19
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	2.20	Rarely	16
13. How often do you feel that no one knows you well?	2.22	Rarely	15
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	2.16	Rarely	18
15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	2.51	Rarely	9
16. How often do you feel that there are people who understand you?	3.22	Sometimes	2
17. How often do you feel shy?	2.38	Rarely	11
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	2.34	Rarely	13
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	3.18	Sometimes	6.5
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	3.19	Sometimes	3.5
General Assessment	1.96	Low Level of Loneliness	

Table 1 shows that middle-aged parents experiencing empty nest syndrome reported a low level of loneliness, with a mean score of 1.96 on the UCLA Loneliness Scale. This finding suggested that while some parents did experience loneliness, it was not pervasive across the sample. The low levels of loneliness reported by the participants suggested that contrary to some expectations, many parents adapted relatively well to the transition, especially when they had strong social support networks. According to Sissons (2023), the American Psychological Association described loneliness as a cognitive and affective pain or unease resulting from being alone or believing that one is alone. Loneliness can affect people of all ages, and finding connections and support may help to alleviate those feelings. Chai (2022) also mentioned that loneliness is a universal emotion that people may experience several times. Factors include lack of companionship, being left out and disconnected from someone close to them or being far away from family and close friends. Furthermore, according to an article by Jargon

(2022), the middle-aged stage of life can feel quite busy and isolated. Balancing work and family responsibilities often leaves little room for cultivating friendships, especially for women.

3.2 Social Support of Middle-Aged Parents with Empty Nest Syndrome

Table 2. Level of social support of middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1. A particular person is around when I am in need.	6.00	Strongly Agree	3.5
2. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows.	6.03	Strongly Agree	2
3. My family tries to help me.	6.03	Strongly Agree	3.5
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	6.05	Strongly Agree	1
5. I have a special person who is a real comfort source.	5.89	Strongly Agree	6.5
6. My friends try to help me.	5.46	Strongly Agree	10
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	5.28	Strongly Agree	12
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.	5.70	Strongly Agree	8
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	5.62	Strongly Agree	9
10. A special person in my life cares about my feelings.	5.81	Strongly Agree	7
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.	5.89	Strongly Agree	6.5
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.	5.34	Strongly Agree	11
General Assessment	5.76	High Social Support	

Regarding social support, Table 2 showed a high level of support, with a mean score of 5.76 on the Multidimensional Perceived Social Support Scale. This high social support indicated that many parents had strong social networks that provided emotional, instrumental, and informational support during this transitional phase. The American Psychological Association (2021) mentioned that having social and emotional support is advantageous to an individual. This could help improve their autonomous problem-solving skills by elevating their self-worth and self-reliance. Additionally, Raypole (2023) stated that emotional support can help a person feel less alone, and it is not always easy to give this kind of support to other people due to their different circumstances. This kind of support can also help people with mental and physical conditions improve their quality of life. A study by Mohd et al. (2019) revealed that factors such as being with the whole family, having a wide range of social networks, often bonding with loved ones, having emotional and social support, and being supported by the whole family could be linked to reducing symptoms of loneliness and depression in Asian adults.

3.3. Relationship Between Social Support and Loneliness Among Middle-Aged Parents with Empty Nest Syndrome

Table 3. Analysis of the relationship between social support and loneliness among middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome

	Social Support	p-value	Remarks	Decision
Level of Loneliness	-.680	<0.001	Significant	Reject Ho

Table 3 shows that higher levels of social support were associated with lower levels of loneliness. The quantitative data thus suggested that social support played a crucial role in mitigating the loneliness experienced by middle-aged parents during the empty nest stage. A study by Gan et al. (2020) found that perceived social support is related to less loneliness, which may ultimately result in improved life satisfaction. The findings also showed that social support and loneliness mediated the participant's life satisfaction. Another study by Zhang and Dong (2022) found a low level of loneliness in people with high levels of social support. These results indicate that increasing social support could be a useful strategy for lessening loneliness, which could have some guiding and reference value for enhancing mental health.

3.4 Lived Experiences of Middle-Aged Parents

The qualitative phase of the study provided additional insights into the lived experiences of middle-aged parents. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several themes.

Worried and Feelings of Sadness

The theme, Worried and Feelings of Sadness, was derived from the five participants' responses on how they described their feelings after their child /children had left home. These themes appeared frequently in the respondents, capturing the emotions that the participants were going through while adjusting to being apart from their loved ones—especially their children. Based on the responses showed a deep sense of worry and sadness stemming from the impending separation. Participant 1 and 2 expressed concern about their child's departure, highlighting the conflicting emotions of sadness over their absence and relief over their newfound independence.

One participant stated, *“Of course, the worry comes first because he is very close to me... a small quantity of a mama's boy. ... it is not happy because he is just starting to be away from me. However, of course, I also felt sad because you do not know if he is always in our house. However, I also felt relieved because he is living independently now”*.

It also emphasized their anxiety as a parent, especially considering the vulnerability of their daughter in a new environment. These sentiments were also shared by Participant 3, who articulated the fear of potential dangers their child may encounter and stated,

“At first, as you said, the first feeling. Sadness, fear, not because I do not trust my child, but because of what might happen... who they might be with”.

Moreover, the subordinate theme of "Worried" was recurrent throughout the responses, reflecting the pervasive anxiety experienced by the participants. Participant 4 underscored their worries, particularly regarding their youngest child's safety, while also acknowledging the bittersweet nature of their independence and stated:

“There are worries because my youngest is a girl. When they are far from you, you worry somehow... I am also happy because they will learn on their own”.

Participant 5 shares a different perspective, with the subordinate theme “Used to this Feeling of Being Alone,” noting their adaptation to solitude due to previous separations, yet the underlying worry still lingers. The participants' displays of fear result from their deep love, worry for their kids' welfare, and separation sadness. This complex emotional landscape highlights the importance of family ties and the difficulties of letting go. This theme emphasizes the deep attachment between parents and children and the emotional challenges associated with significant life transitions, such as children leaving home for the first time. Understanding the psychological impact of these transitions is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems that promote smoother adjustments for parents and children.

According to Morin (2022), Empty Nest Syndrome refers to the melancholy, and sometimes distress, that parents experience after their children leave home. It affects both men and women and causes feelings of loss, sadness, worry, grief, anger, and dread. An article by Psychologs (2023) mentioned that parents experience numerous emotions as their children pursue their educational journey and venture into the world beyond home. Witnessing their children's educational and personal advancements filled them with pride and a sense of accomplishment, as they perceived each milestone as a step towards independence and self-discovery. However, alongside these positive sentiments, parents also grappled with feelings of anxiety, particularly when their children study in foreign lands. Concerns about their safety, adaptation to new cultures, and exposure to different influences weighed heavily on their minds. Additionally, there was a deep-seated fear of growing emotionally distant from their children as they became absorbed in their studies and lives. Finally, Boctoy (2023) mentioned that Empty Nest Syndrome encompassed several stages parents experienced when their child moved out of the home. Initially, there was a sense of denial, where parents hoped for frequent visits but realized their home was no longer the center of their child's life. This led to feelings of grief and loneliness as parents grappled with a sense of aging and loss of purpose. Recognizing these emotions could be vital in overcoming the negative effects. As time passed,

there was acceptance and relief, where parents understood the benefits of separation and took pride in their child's independent life. There is a stage of joy and freedom as parents embrace newfound opportunities and enjoy greater personal freedom, financial stability, and time for their interests and relationships. This supported the results from the quantitative phase that while the parents generally felt that people understood them, there were still days that they felt lonely due to their child's departure. These systems would be designed to cater to the emotional requirements of families, thereby nurturing resilience, promoting well-being, and cultivating robust familial interactions amidst substantial life transitions.

Engagement, Communication, Social Media, and Spiritual Intervention

This theme emerged from the responses of the five participants about the strategies that helped them cope with their feelings of loneliness. The responses highlighted the importance of being engaged in employment or productive activities as coping mechanisms. The subtheme "Engaging themselves to Work" from Participant 1 stated,

"I did not do much because I also had work, so I did not experience extreme sadness because I had other distractions... my work became my form of leisure," which means they found support in their work, viewing it as a form of leisure or distraction from negative emotions.

This suggested that engaging in meaningful work could provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment and serve as a buffer against stress and loneliness. Engaging oneself in work could become a significant coping mechanism for middle-aged parents facing an empty nest. With fewer responsibilities at home, parents could immerse themselves more fully in their careers, viewing work as a distraction and source of fulfillment to fill the void left by their children's absence. Participants 2 and 3 highlighted the subtheme "Constant Communication," particularly through messaging apps, as a vital coping strategy. They needed to know the whereabouts of their loved ones, especially in potentially dangerous areas, emphasizing the role of communication in providing reassurance and a sense of security. This indicated that maintaining regular contact with others could help alleviate anxiety and fear, especially in uncertain circumstances.

Participant 2 stated, *"I always talk to them on Messenger... especially at night. I want to know where they are if they have gotten home."*

Constant communication, whether through messaging apps, phone calls, or video chats, became essential for maintaining connections with adult children who have left the nest. Parents found comfort in staying updated on their children's lives, offering support from a distance, and feeling reassured about their well-being. Another coping strategy stated by Participant 4 was using social media while engaging in other physical activities, which explains the subtheme "Usage of Social Media and Engaging to Farming Activities." Social media could play a similar role in keeping parents connected to their adult children, providing glimpses into their activities, milestones, and experiences. Platforms like Facebook or Instagram have allowed parents to stay involved in their children's lives, although virtually, and share moments of joy and pride. The last subordinate theme from Participant 5 was "Spiritual Intervention."

As mentioned, *".....In a way, I cannot be with them anymore, but I read the Bible as my outlet because when they got married, it was during the pandemic."*

Spiritual intervention could offer comfort and guidance to parents navigating the transition to an empty nest. Turning to faith, prayer, or religious practices could provide comfort during times of loneliness and uncertainty, offering a sense of hope and purpose beyond the immediate challenges of adjusting to an empty household. Overall, the subordinate theme highlights the complex nature of coping strategies and the importance of addressing individual needs and preferences in promoting resilience and emotional well-being. This also supports the quantitative results wherein coping strategies highlighted in the original context can be highly relevant to middle-aged parents experiencing empty nest syndrome, offering various avenues for managing feelings of loss, maintaining connections with adult children, and finding fulfillment and meaning in this new stage of life.

According to Margolis (2023), the workplace holds significant potential in addressing the loneliness crisis. Purposeful initiatives like the Surgeon General's "Inside Scoop" can foster authentic colleague connections. Having a close friend at work enhances commitment, productivity, and overall contentment with one's job. Encouraging interpersonal bonds at work enhances employee happiness and positively impacts performance. Similarly, according to Robinson and Sheldon (2024), if one is hesitant about initiating spontaneous phone calls, especially during times of loneliness, one can send a text to arrange a suitable time for a call. Alternatively, establishing a weekly schedule for phone conversations with a friend or family member could provide a comforting routine to anticipate during lonely moments. Also, engaging in a hobby or pursuing an interest could lessen feelings of isolation while reinforcing one's sense of purpose and significance. Correspondingly, Saltzman et al. (2020) cited that people often use social support as a coping mechanism during times of crisis. This presumption depends on preexisting good relationships or the availability of technology to preserve these connections. Finally, a study by Adamczyk et al. (2022) discovered that reduced satisfaction with social connections and increased daily spiritual experiences correspond to lessened feelings of family and social loneliness. Daily spiritual experiences' positive impact on life's purpose specifically pertained to loneliness within specific domains and became evident among lower satisfaction levels with social and intimate relationships.

Adaptation and Adjustment to Various Aspects of Social Interaction

Adaptation and Adjustment to Various Aspects of Social Interaction was the theme that emerged from the participants' statements. They discussed how their social lives had been impacted by various factors such as work commitments, distance, and technological advancements. Despite the challenges of being an empty nester, the participants demonstrated resilience and flexibility in maintaining social connections and routines. The subordinate theme derived from the responses of Participants 1 and 2 was the "Socially Active," which both exhibited a pattern of remaining socially active despite their respective circumstances.

Participant 1 stated, *"It is the same... I am still friendly with everyone. Of course, when you have work, you have many companions. Especially my colleagues. We always go out, eat here, and hang out there when we meet. it's always work,"* emphasizing the importance of maintaining friendships and socializing with colleagues, while Participant 2 mentioned *"Social life... still normal. Just the same. On weekends, I pick them up. Moreover, we always go to the mall. I do not like swimming, just the mall. My spouse and I, the two of us, eat out. When we pick up the others, we go to the mall first. Just the mall, hahaha."*

These responses suggest that social engagement remained a priority for these individuals, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of connection. Another response highlighted a focus on work as a distraction or engagement. Participants expressed contentment with their job and implied that the demands of work help lessen feelings of loneliness or detachment. This theme suggested that individuals may find support or fulfillment in immersing themselves in their professional responsibilities, thereby mitigating the impact of social isolation.

Participant 3 said, *"Because I am here, I have work. So I do not have time to think about it too much. Because of the amount of work, I have here, it is like it entertains me."*

Engaging themselves in work can serve as a distraction for middle-aged parents coping with empty nest syndrome. On the other hand, Participant 4 acknowledged the role of technology, particularly social media platforms like Messenger, in linking the distance between themselves and others. Participants perceived technology as a compensatory mechanism for maintaining social connections despite physical separation. As stated,

"The distance does not affect much... it is like things like Messenger in technology compensate it."

This indicated the importance of digital communication tools in facilitating social interaction and reducing feelings of loneliness. Technology, particularly social media platforms, could play an important role in bridging the gap between middle-aged parents and their children who have left home. Parents have used social media to stay connected with their children, sharing updates, photos, and messages to maintain a sense of closeness despite

physical distance. Another response reflected a sense of acceptance towards their situation. Despite experiencing prolonged separation from family due to work abroad, Participant 5 expressed a lack of significant emotional impact. This theme suggested that individuals became accustomed to certain social dynamics or conditions, leading to a sense of normalization or adaptation.

"It is still the same. It is like I have been far from my family abroad for a long time. So, it feels like nothing has changed. It is like working, coming home late at night," as stated by Participant 5.

Some middle-aged parents may have already adjusted to the empty nest phase of life, particularly if their children have been away from home for an extended period. They may have developed coping mechanisms or routines that have helped them navigate feelings of loneliness or loss, ultimately reaching a point of acceptance or normalizing their circumstances. To support this, Poudel et al. (2020), several studies revealed that social support can be perceived from a variety of sources, such as family, friends, partners, and teachers, that is related to positive outcomes. Munyan (2021) stated that social support refers to people who frequently interact with and are familiar with a person or thing. Interpersonal relationships are the foundation of social stability and are essential to mental health. Social support can greatly influence the individual's mental health on their physical, interpersonal, and psychological level. If the individual lacks social support, it could also negatively affect their mental and physical health. Finally, according to an article by Psychology Today (n.d.), empty nest syndrome represents a chance to revamp one's life after raising children to cater more to adult priorities. Although parents experiencing empty nest syndrome felt the absence of their children, they also experienced a degree of liberation from the daily duties of child-rearing. This newfound freedom often allowed them to redefine or rejuvenate their identities. This also supported the quantitative results, which showed that middle-aged parents can still be sociable despite their situation as empty nesters. By recognizing the challenges and employing various coping strategies, these parents can effectively navigate this transitional period and find fulfillment and purpose in their lives beyond parenthood.

Emotional Support, Companionship, and Connection From Friends and Loved Ones

The theme, Emotional Support, Companionship, and Connection from Friends and Loved Ones was derived from the participants' statements about the social support they received during the empty nest stage of their lives. The responses revealed the importance of the different kinds of social support from significant people in their lives. The constant presence of a supportive friend who listens and helps whenever needed emphasizes the importance of having someone to share thoughts and experiences with. One participant stated,

"For me... I always have someone with me. He is the one I always talk to; whenever I need something, he helps me. He is the only one who listens to me when I share something."

Participant 2 expressed the value of companionship through simple activities like sharing a meal, indicating that even small gestures of togetherness could bring happiness. It was also shared how their bond with colleagues provides emotional support despite limited opportunities for outings, emphasizing the importance of conversation and shared experiences during breaks. Other participants shared similar sentiments, emphasizing friends' availability for companionship and support in times of need.

The other participant mentioned, *"I have many friends here, those I work with on the farm. When I need something, I have someone to talk to and be with... like that."*

Finally, Participant 5 discussed finding support in various social circles, including family and friends from Bible study, highlighting the role of these connections in coping with feelings of solitude. This describes the essential role of a supportive friend in providing emotional support. Their emphasis on having a constant companion who listens and actively assists when needed highlights the profound impact of interpersonal relationships on emotional well-being. This indicates the significance of having someone with whom one can share joys, sorrows, and everything in between, demonstrating how genuine connections can serve as pillars of strength during challenging times. These shared experiences of middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome also foster a sense of belonging and purpose, helping parents navigate the newfound freedom and redefine their identities outside their caregivers' roles. Middle-aged parents may grapple with empty hours once filled with parental

responsibilities. However, parents may also seek support in diverse relationships, including friendships, extended family, and community groups. Engaging in social activities, volunteering, or pursuing personal interests can help fill the void left by the empty nest and provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment. These responses demonstrate the nature of emotional support and relationships from friends and family. This also supports the quantitative data results, which revealed that despite the challenges middle-aged parents face when their children leave home, they feel well-supported by their social networks. It emphasizes how interpersonal relationships support people's mental health, highlighting the basic human desire for empathy, understanding, and companionship.

According to Sourjah (2021), instrumental support encompassed all the tangible help individuals received from others. It manifested as selfless assistance or providing useful items that alleviate their concerns and enhance their well-being. Contrary to the misconception that instrumental support lacked emotional depth when offered by family and friends, it carried significant emotional weight for the recipient. Receiving instrumental support ultimately had a positive impact on one's mental well-being. In addition, Gümüşsoy et al. (2020) reiterated that social support includes the emotional and practical support one receives from their social network and how well they employ it. It is also mentioned that much social support that was obtained while pregnant reduced anxiety. In other words, social support—from peers, organizations, communities, and family—helped people feel less stressed and improved their mental and physical health.

Maintaining Stable Relationships

This theme showed the importance placed on the participants in keeping their relationships steady and consistent despite various circumstances or changes in their lives. Each participant's response reflected their efforts to uphold stability and continuity in their interactions with others. The participants emphasized maintaining their same friendly demeanor despite any sadness or loneliness they might have experienced. Their commitment to remaining cheerful and sociable suggested a conscious effort to preserve the stability of their relationships.

One participant stated, *"It is just the same... because I do not think much about the sadness, so my interactions with others remain the same. I am still cheerful and friendly."*

Most participants shared the same sentiments, expressing that they remained unchanged in their interactions with others. This consistency implied a desire to maintain stable and reliable relationships without allowing external factors to disrupt them. It also highlighted the role of busyness in sustaining their relationship with someone despite physical distance. By keeping themselves occupied with work, they could mitigate loneliness and maintain a stable connection with the other person.

In maintaining stable relationships, middle-aged parents facing empty nest syndrome might have consciously prioritized the stability of their relationships with their spouse, friends, and other family members. With their children no longer living at home, parents might have sought to strengthen and maintain connections with their remaining family members and friends to fill the void left by their children's departure. One participant stated,

"No, nothing has changed. It is the same. How I was before is how I still feel towards others."

By upholding a consistent and positive demeanor, parents might have strived to reassure themselves and others that they were adapting well to this new phase of life and could still maintain fulfilling relationships outside of their role as parents. Middle-aged parents may also find solace and support in stable relationships with their adult children, even if they no longer live at home. Parents may maintain regular communication with their children and stay involved despite the physical distance, thereby preserving a sense of connection and continuity in their parent-child relationships. The results support the quantitative results that highlight the vital role that supportive relationships play in promoting overall well-being and mental health. By understanding and nurturing these social connections, individuals may be better equipped to fight loneliness and experience greater fulfillment. It is also about prioritizing quality over quantity in social interactions, investing time and effort to build strong and supportive connections with others, and being there for those experiencing loneliness or social isolation.

To support this, Chung and Kim (2023) mentioned that social support and a feeling of community were found to be favorably correlated with age-friendly environments. Reducing loneliness in an age-friendly setting requires social support. A study by Asghar and Iqbal (2021) indicated that social connectedness and interpersonal support were considerably favorably correlated and that hopelessness and loneliness were negatively correlated with both. Conversely, lower levels of interpersonal support were found to be a major predictor of greater hopelessness in adults.

Various Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship

The main theme of the participants' responses was "Various Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship." This theme described the evolving dynamics and shifts in roles, responsibilities, and interactions between parents and their children. The participants highlighted the aspects of parental support and financial independence. The transition from providing financial support to their child to recognizing their child's ability to sustain themselves financially was discussed. One participant stated,

"When he left, I did not ask for any salary because I had a job. Since he started working, I have not given him any money because he already has a job..."

This reflected a significant change in the parent-child relationship, where the child became more self-reliant, leading to adjustments in the parental role. Another participant mentioned,

"It is not an obligation. If they give, okay. If not, no problem."

This perspective emphasized that children were not obliged to help their parents financially. It showed a shift from traditional beliefs that children should provide financial support for their parents as they age. The participants acknowledged their child's employment status and refrained from providing financial assistance, recognizing their child's ability to support themselves. This highlighted a supportive parental attitude towards fostering financial autonomy in their children. One response reinforced the theme of supportive parents while indicating a shift towards providing urgent assistance rather than regular financial support. This suggested a deeper understanding of parental support, focusing on addressing immediate needs rather than continuous provision. As stated,

"As long as they need something, they must tell me. It is manageable to go to them if something urgent or needs to be given to them."

This implied the ongoing parental instinct to protect and care for their children, even as they transitioned into adulthood. Middle-aged parents might find relief in providing immediate assistance to their children when needed, reaffirming their role as nurturers and providers, though in a different capacity. The response from Participant 2 showed the subtheme of vigilant parents who closely monitor their children's activities and well-being, even when they are away. The participant stated,

"I check more often if they are already in their dorm... I also make sure their GCash account has money because if they need something, I can send it right away," which demonstrated a proactive approach to parental care and protection by taking steps like verifying their child's whereabouts and making sure they had enough money.

This indicated a trend toward more parental supervision and engagement in their kids' lives, especially in the digital age when surveillance devices were easily accessible. With their children living independently, middle-aged parents may constantly worry about their well-being and safety, especially without daily interactions and oversight. On the other hand, Participant 5 explained the subtheme of evolving parent-child bonding dynamics. The participant reflected on the transformation of their relationship with their child following significant life events, such as marriage. The shift from regular bonding activities to a redefined dynamic emphasized the impact of life transitions on the parent-child relationship and the need for adaptation and adjustment to maintain connection and closeness. The statement,

"We no longer have our bonding moments eating out. Because now he is married. Now he bonds with his spouse. It is not like when we were together, and we bonded outside, even without any occasion," emphasized the emotional impact of empty nest syndrome on middle-aged parents.

As their children embark on their life journeys, parents may experience a profound sense of loss and nostalgia for the close bonds they once shared. The absence of regular interactions and shared experiences may prompt middle-aged parents to reevaluate their relationships with their children and seek new ways to connect and maintain closeness despite physical distance. The themes and subthemes discussed in the context of various changes in the parent-child relationship offer valuable insights into the experiences of middle-aged parents facing empty nest syndrome. This also supports the quantitative results, which reveal the complex understanding of loneliness among middle-aged parents; on average, parents are experiencing a low level of loneliness. This suggests that many feel adequately supported and connected within their social circles or family networks. However, the results also highlight a significant difference between feeling understood by others and lacking companionship. By recognizing and understanding these dynamics, parents can navigate this transitional phase with greater awareness, resilience, and emotional support.

According to Mansoor and Hasan (2019), children somehow choose to move away from their family homes for reasons like marriage, pursuing higher education, or advancing in their careers. The outcomes suggested that parents commonly feel a sense of relief when their children leave home as their parental duties conclude. Consequently, this situation enabled couples to revive and experience a more affectionate relationship. These results could be explained by the fact that parents came to terms with the inevitability of their children leaving the nest to establish their own families and pursue their professional paths.

Various Adjustments and Strategies in Life

The main theme from the participants' responses is "Various Adjustments and Strategies in Life." This theme encompassed how individuals cope with the challenges and changes they encounter. Participants 1 and 4 highlighted the importance of occupation and companionship in fighting feelings of loneliness. It was mentioned that

"I have a job that keeps me occupied... and I always have someone with me. That is why I do not think much about feeling lonely," which means having a job that keeps them occupied and having constant companionship, which served as a distraction from negative emotions.

This distraction could provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment, helping parents cope with loneliness. This response suggested that engaging in meaningful activities and having social support were essential strategies for adjustment. On the other hand, one participant expressed a sense of normalcy in their life, indicating minimal adjustments despite facing challenges. Their casual attitude toward adjustments suggested resilience or adaptability to circumstances, viewing them as part of everyday life rather than significant disruptions. As stated by Participant 2,

"How did I adjust? I did not; it was just normal. Like... How did I adjust? I did not. It just feels normal to me. I am okay. I am happy."

Another response highlighted the engagement in social and religious activities as a strategy for adjustment. Participant 5 participated in various activities throughout the week, keeping themselves busy and fulfilled, thus reducing feelings of boredom or loneliness. This implied that middle-aged parents may find support and companionship through participating in community activities, joining clubs or groups, or attending religious services. These activities provide opportunities for social interaction, support, and a sense of belonging.

These themes highlight the importance of resilience and adaptability in navigating life's transitions. By embracing change, seeking support, and finding new sources of meaning and purpose, middle-aged parents can embrace the empty nest phase of their lives with optimism and resilience. The empty nest allows parents to reevaluate their priorities, pursue their interests, and invest in their well-being. By embracing this newfound freedom and

autonomy, middle-aged parents can proceed on a journey of self-discovery, fulfillment, and renewed purpose beyond their roles as caregivers. To support this, Ablanque and Singson (2022) said that as parents reach the empty nest stage, they frequently face several difficulties that make them feel exposed on multiple levels. However, they also discover chances to create coping strategies to get through this new stage of life between these obstacles.

Parental Challenges and Emotional Adjustment

The theme, Parental Challenges and Emotional Adjustment emerged from the various struggles and emotional adjustments experienced by parents due to the absence or separation from their children, particularly in the context of modern communication dynamics and changing family structures. For middle-aged parents, the departure of their children marked a significant transition in their lives, prompting them to confront feelings of loss, loneliness, and uncertainty about their roles and identities outside of parenthood. Moreover, the themes highlighted the importance of acknowledging and addressing the emotional needs of middle-aged parents during this transitional period. Empty nest syndrome was not merely a temporary phase but a profound emotional adjustment that required support, understanding, and self-care. By recognizing and validating their sadness and longing, middle-aged parents could begin to navigate this transition with greater resilience and self-awareness. Participant 1 showed a sentiment of not dwelling too much on sadness despite missing their child, reflecting a common struggle of balancing emotions amid separation. Meanwhile, Participant 4 shared the same sentiments and acknowledged the shift in dynamics from immediate, personal interactions to virtual communication, emphasizing the longing for the physical presence of their children.

"Maybe sometimes. The situation is just different. In other words, the situation has changed because when they are beside you, it is immediate, and there is a personal touch. Now, it is via messenger or just verbal... Sometimes you cannot help but miss them, but that is how it is," as stated.

Meanwhile, responses from Participants 2 and 3 showed the worry and uncertainty that often accompany parental separation, particularly during challenging times like the pandemic. Their concern about the well-being of their child and the difficulty in discerning their true state due to distance underscored the emotional toll that parental separation could take. It also showed the emotional vulnerability of middle-aged parents grappling with empty nest syndrome. Concerns about their children's safety, happiness, and success in the absence of direct parental supervision could heighten parental anxiety and contribute to feelings of distress and apprehension. Participant 3 stated

"You know, what really bothers me is not knowing if they are okay or not. Maybe they are not okay but don't open to me because they don't want me to worry. I'm not sure, I don't know if they are eating properly because of this and that. That's it, during the pandemic. That's when I really worried a lot."

Finally, one participant's reflections on missing routine activities and bonding moments with their child strongly resonated with the experiences of parents navigating empty nest syndrome and stated

"Of course, I miss my child whom I served every morning, cooked their meals, prepared their things for work, did their laundry, and so on. Of course, I miss those tasks now that they are married because I no longer hang their uniform for work... I miss that kind of routine with my child now that they are married"

The absence of familiar routines, such as preparing meals, doing laundry, and engaging in leisure activities with their children, could intensify feelings of emptiness and nostalgia for middle-aged parents. To summarize, parental challenges and emotional adjustment, coupled with feelings of sadness and longing, emphasize the profound impact of empty nest syndrome on middle-aged parents. By acknowledging the emotional complexity of this transition, fostering meaningful connections with their adult children, and embracing opportunities for personal growth, middle-aged parents can navigate this period of change with resilience, grace, and a sense of optimism for the future. According to the quantitative results, while the parents generally feel that people understand them, a notable subset still experience a sense of loneliness due to a perceived lack of companionship. This could be attributed to busy schedules, geographical distance from friends or family, or life transitions.

To support this, a study by Riswanaty and Bongyoga (2021) revealed that the individual's empty-nest syndrome has an impact on aspects of family life quality, particularly emotional well-being, which is characterized by the subject's feelings of melancholy 1-3 months following the child's departure. Other elements, such as family relations, parenting, and physical and material well-being, vary in each subject. According to Bougea et al. (2020), empty nest syndrome has been linked to various things. Different cultural backgrounds of men and women deal with the empty nest phase differently and have different coping techniques. Depression, behavioral problems, and cognitive decline are all signs of emotional suffering brought on by the empty nest.

3.5 Proposed Action Plan

Table 4 presents the proposed Building Stronger Connections: Supporting Middle-Aged Parents in Transition Action plan, which is composed of three areas of concern: Loneliness and Social Support Assessment, Awareness Of The Lived Experiences Of Middle-Aged Parents With Empty Nest Syndrome, and a Personal Growth and Exploration Program.

Table 4. Proposed action plan

Area of concern	Objectives	Activities/ Strategies	Person involved	Time frame	Source of fund	Success indicators
Loneliness and Social Support Assessment	To identify specific areas of loneliness and social isolation experienced by parents.	Psychological testing and assessment (individual and/or group) Group therapy sessions/peer facilitation	Psychologist/ Counselor Middle-aged Parents Government Representative	Every six months	DSWD Municipal Budget	Several middle-aged parents have successfully undergone psychological testing and assessment.
Awareness of the lived experiences of middle-aged parents with empty nest syndrome	To raise awareness on the stages and experiences of middle-aged parents once they reach the empty nest stage of their lives.	Webinar: Empowering Empty Nesters: Navigating Empty Nest Syndrome with Resilience and Community Support	Middle-aged parents Family Members Mental Health Professional	Every 1 st of June (World Parents' Day)	DSWD	A number of middle-aged parents and their children successfully joined and learned in the webinar to become aware of the empty nest syndrome.
Personal Growth and Exploration Program	To encourage self-exploration and personal growth among middle-aged parents.	The seminar workshop focused on self-discovery exercises such as journaling, vision boarding, and guided reflection.	Middle-aged parents Family Members Mental Health Professional	Annual Activity	DSWD Municipal Budget	A number of middle-aged parents and their children successfully joined and learned in the seminar workshop.

Loneliness and Social Support Assessment

This program addressed loneliness and social isolation among middle-aged parents through psychological assessment and personalized interventions. Its objective was to pinpoint specific areas of loneliness experienced by parents and then offer tailored support to enhance their social connections. Activities within the program included psychological testing and assessment to understand the extent of loneliness and group therapy sessions or peer facilitation to provide a supportive environment for parents to share experiences and learn coping strategies.

Awareness of the Lived Experiences of Middle-Aged Parents with Empty Nest Syndrome

The program aimed to shed light on the often-overlooked phenomenon of empty nest syndrome experienced by middle-aged parents. Through a webinar titled "Empowering Empty Nesters: Navigating Empty Nest Syndrome with Resilience and Community Support," the program intended to offer a platform for discussion and support. By involving middle-aged parents, family members, and mental health professionals, the initiative recognized the multi-faceted nature of this transition. It sought to provide insights into the stages and experiences encountered

by parents as they navigated this significant life change, ultimately fostering resilience and community connection in the face of empty nest syndrome.

Personal Growth and Exploration Program

The program was designed to address the personal growth needs of middle-aged parents by facilitating self-exploration and development beyond their roles as caregivers. Participants were encouraged to embark on a journey of self-discovery and fulfilment through a seminar-workshop featuring activities like journaling, vision boarding, and guided reflection. The program acknowledged the importance of holistic support in fostering individual growth and a sense of purpose by involving middle-aged parents, family members, and mental health professionals. It sought to create a supportive environment where participants could explore their identities, aspirations, and values, ultimately empowering them to lead more fulfilling lives beyond their parenting responsibilities.

4.0 Conclusion

The research identifies specific aspects of parental loneliness, highlighting the vital function that family support plays throughout the empty nest syndrome phase. It proves that social support and loneliness significantly correlate negatively, emphasizing the value of strong social networks. Understanding parents' real-life experiences helps us better grasp coping mechanisms and the need for emotional support. The suggested mental health program provides middle-aged parents with a workable solution to their loneliness. To further improve support networks, future research should concentrate on longitudinal studies, various family dynamics, cultural variances, digital social networks, and the assessment of mental health programs.

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