

Emigration of children to urban areas can protect parents against depression

December 3 2012

Parents whose children move far away from home are less likely to become depressed than parents with children living nearby, according to a new study of rural districts in Thailand. The study, led by scientists at King's College London, suggests that children who migrate to urban areas are more likely to financially support their parents, which may be a factor for lower levels of depression.

Dr [Melanie](#) Abas, lead author from the Institute of Psychiatry at King's said: 'Parents whose children had all left the district were half as likely to be depressed as parents who still had one of more child living in the district. Although our study was conducted in Thailand, the findings are similar to previous studies in China.'

In Thailand traditionally children take responsibility for ageing parents. Local concerns that rising rates of rural-urban migration across South East Asia might have a [negative impact](#) on families and that older parents might experience [loneliness](#), [isolation](#) and [depression](#), have now been debunked by this research led by King's .

Protection against 'empty-nest syndrome'

The authors explain that parents can protect themselves from the so-called empty-nest syndrome. Dr Abas said: 'We found several protective factors against the empty-nest syndrome, some similar to those we see in the UK and US. Living in close-knit communities, seeing their children

regularly at family gatherings or holidays and the feeling that they had succeeded as parents by having a self-sufficient child living and working in the city all helped against the empty-nest syndrome.'

However, one of the key protective factors – unique to lower and [middle income countries](#) – is the effect of children [sending money](#) home. 'In a country with a less developed [welfare system](#), this makes an important difference to older parents' lives', Abas says.

In collaboration with the Mahidol University and Thammasat University, both in Thailand, researchers from King's studied nearly 1,000 parents aged 60 or over from 100 villages in rural Thailand to understand the effect of child migration on parents' depression.

Around 27 percent of the parents who had at least one child living close by – within the district – usually more than 100 kilometres away, had a depression, compared to 16 percent of those with all children living far from home – outside the district. One year later, 24 percent of parents with at least one child living within the district had a depression, compared to 9 percent of those with all children living outside the district.

Rates of depression varied as children moved out and back in to the district: 33 percent of those who had a child move back to the district were depressed compared to 20 percent of those who did not experience any child movement during the follow-up year.

Dr Sureeporn Punpuing, co-author from the Mahidol University in Thailand explained: 'We found that there were two main reasons children returned home. Children either returned home because something had gone wrong in their own lives, such as divorce or job loss, adding to parents worries or because of their parents' declining mental or physical health.'

More information: Abas, M. et al. "Migration of children and impact on depression in older parents in rural Thailand, South East Asia" *Archives of General Psychiatry* (December 2012)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Emigration of children to urban areas can protect parents against depression (2012, December 3) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-emigration-children-urban-areas-parents.html>

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