

No more 'empty nest:' Middle-aged adults face family pressure on both sides

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The "empty nest" of past generations, in which the kids are grown up and middle-aged adults have more time to themselves, has been replaced in the United States by a nest that's full – kids who can't leave, can't find a job and aging parents who need more help than ever before.

According to a new study by researchers at Oregon State University, what was once a [life](#) stage of new freedoms, options and opportunities has largely disappeared.

An [economic recession](#) and tough job market has made it hard on [young adults](#) to start their careers and families. At the same time, many older people are living longer, which adds new and unanticipated needs that their children often must step up to assist with.

The end result, researchers suggest, are "empty nest" plans that often have to be put on hold, and a mixed bag of emotions, ranging from joy and "happy-to-help" to uncertainty, frustration and exhaustion.

"We mostly found very [positive feelings](#) about adults helping their children in the emerging adulthood stage of life, from around ages 18 to 30," said Karen Hooker, director of the OSU Center for Healthy Aging Research.

"Feelings about helping parents weren't so much negative as just filled with more angst and uncertainty," Hooker said. "As a society we still don't socialize people to expect to be taking on a parent-caring role, even

though most of us will at some point in our lives. The average middle-aged couple has more parents than children."

The findings of this research were just published in the *Journal of Aging Studies*, and were based on data from six focus groups during 2009-10. It was one of the first studies of its type to look at how middle-aged adults actually feel about these changing trends.

Various social, economic, and cultural forces have combined to radically challenge the traditional concept of an empty nest, the scientists said. The recession that began in 2008 yielded record unemployment, substantial stock market losses, lower home values and increased demand for higher levels of education.

Around the same time, advances in health care and life expectancy have made it possible for many adults to live far longer than they used to – although not always in good health, and often needing extensive care or assistance.

This study concluded that most middle-aged parents with young adult children are fairly happy to help them out, and they understand that getting started in life is simply more difficult now. Some research has suggested that age 25 is the new 22; that substantially more parents now don't even expect their kids to be financially independent in their early 20s, and don't mind helping them through some difficult times.

But the response to helping adult parents who, at the same time, need increasing amounts of assistance is not as uniformly positive, the study found – it can be seen as both a joy and a burden, and in any case was not something most middle-aged adults anticipated.

"With the kids, it's easy," is a general purpose reaction. With aging parents, it isn't.

"My grandparents died younger, so my parents didn't cope with another generation," one study participant said.

Many middle-aged people said it was difficult to make any plans, due to disruptions and uncertainty about a parent's health at any point in time. And most said they we're willing to help their aging parents, but a sense of being time-starved was a frequent theme.

"It brings my heart joy to be able to provide for my mom this way," one study participant said. "There are times when it's a burden and I feel resentful."

The dual demands of children still transitioning to independence, and aging parents who need increasing amounts of care is causing many of the study participants to re-evaluate their own lives. Some say they want to make better plans for their future so they don't pose such a burden to their children, and begin researching long-term care insurance. Soul-searching is apparent.

"I don't care if I get old," a participant said. "I just don't want to become debilitated. So I would rather have a shorter life and a healthy life than a long life like my mom, where she doesn't have a life. She doesn't have memories. Our memories are what make us who we are."

An increasing awareness of the challenges produced by these new life stages may cause more individuals to anticipate their own needs, make more concrete plans for the future, reduce ambivalent approaches and have more conversations with families about their own late-life care, the researchers said in their study.

More information:

ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/handle/1957/36208

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