



# Empty Nest Syndrome In Relation To Life Satisfaction Among Middle Aged Adults

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## ABSTRACT

Empty Nest indicates the emotional and psychological distress and misery experienced by parents when their children move out of their homes and live independently. (Woll, M. 2022). Life satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to a person's overall wellbeing, happiness and contentment with life (Hall, A. 2014)

This research explores the relationship between empty nest syndrome and life satisfaction of middle aged adults. A total of 249 parents, including 120 fathers and 129 mothers aged between 45 to 65+ years, were surveyed. The study's objectives and hypotheses were constructed to meet the research aim, using the Empty Nest Syndrome Questionnaire and Life Satisfaction Scale for data collection. The findings suggest that there was a significant gender difference in empty nest syndrome, while there was no significant gender difference in life satisfaction of middle aged parents. Additionally, there was a negative correlation between the two variables signifying that an increase in empty nest syndrome led to a decrease in life satisfaction. Limitations and future implications of the study were also discussed. Moreover, the parents were encouraged to engage in self-care activities, mindfulness, pursue hobbies and interests and were motivated to seek social support. The findings of the study can be used to develop interventions to help middle aged adults manage their feelings of isolation caused because of empty nest and improve their life satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Empty Nest Syndrome, Life Satisfaction, Gender, Indian parents, Wellbeing

**Affiliation:****Empty Nest Syndrome**

Empty Nest is a phase experienced by middle aged parents when their children become adults and are ready to live independently, away from their family homes with regard to higher education, marriage, job prospects etc. The term Empty Nest implies that the Nest or the house of the parents becomes vacant and deserted when their children who are the light of their parents lives come out of their shells and stretch their wings, thereby leaving the nest. The expression Empty Nest Syndrome was first put forward by Dorothy Canfield, a social activist and writer in the year 1914 (Harkness, S. 2008).

Empty Nest Syndrome experienced by parents is a period of sadness, unhappiness, depression, isolation, grief, remorse and loneliness. This period of transition and adaptation can be taxing and exigent for the parents. Research finding suggests that mothers tend to be impacted and affected more as compared to fathers (D'Souza, A. 2016).

**Impact of Empty Nest Syndrome among Indian parents**

Indian parents are highly vulnerable to the empty nest phase because Indian society is a collectivist culture. The collectivist culture promotes the ideas of togetherness and has its roots in joint family system, over involvement, over protection and interdependence. As compared to individualist/western culture that gives greater emphasis on independence and freedom, the collectivistic society is more oriented towards interconnectedness, association and intimacy (Gentleman,A.2006). A typical Indian household always revolves around the children. Parents stay connected with major life decision making to minor decisions of their children's life. Being available for their children 24/7 for good 18-20 years of their lives and then suddenly no longer being surrounded by them because of migration to another city or country for higher education can be a challenging and arduous situation to be in.

Parents during this transition may encounter and report desolation while they get used to all the changes that are taking place and the fact that they no longer have to be around them. Some of the positive and negative symptoms associated with empty nest parents are mentioned below

(Piya & Birgid, 2014)

### Negative Aspects of Empty Nest Syndrome experienced by parents

- Feelings of loneliness, isolation and separation
- Constant fear, anxiety, stress and worry for their children
- Difficulty coping with the daily changes taking place
- Struggling with age related issues, loss of a loved one, menopause, retirement etc.
- Having trouble in concentrating, sleeping, pursuing/obtaining pleasure
- Changing emotions, excessive sweating, and night-time sweats
- Excessively missing their children
- Inability in adjusting to new routines
- Sense of loss and loss of purpose
- Sinking into depression, seeking help from alcohol, relationship and marital issues
- Less contact with their children

### Positive Aspects of Empty Nest Syndrome experienced by parents

- Having more time to socialise, engage in hobbies
- Working on their intimate relationships
- Attaining a sense of freedom
- Engaging in self growth and self-care
- Finding new purpose in their life

### Signs of Empty Nest Syndrome

Empty Nest is a common transition period experienced by parents when their children leave home. Empty Nesters tend to experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and loss. (Morin,A.2022)

- o Parents may experience a sense of loss of purpose and motivation.
- o With the empty nest period, parents may feel things getting out of their control and as a result they might feel angry, irritated, frustrated.
- o Parents may feel emotionally distress and may experience emotions like being sad, nervous and anxious for their children to getting worried about the fact that they are getting older, to being frustrated because of loss of control.
- o It is common for empty nesters to worry and be anxious about their children. The fact that it is a long distance relationship is what makes the parents worry and stress more.
- o Parents may feel extremely alone after the departure of their children.

## Stages of Empty Nest Syndrome

Carin Rubenstein, a social psychologist and the author of the book “Beyond the Mommy Years” (2007) talked about three stages and phases of empty nest syndrome period.

1. Grief - This phase is characterised by parents experiencing emotions like sorrow, despair, woe, grief and anguish. Mothers usually find it hard to let go of their children and are usually seen to be emotional.
2. After the grief stage, parents may encounter a feeling of relief. They finally accept and get acquainted with the transition period. They may start shifting their focus and engage in new hobbies and leisure activities.
3. Joy - Rubenstein describes this stage to be of gratification and pleasure. The parents have learnt to move on and the feelings of unhappiness are replaced by feelings of independence and autonomy.

## Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is the extent to which an individual positively perceives the overall quality of his or her life. It can be described as an individual's wellbeing that can be understood in terms of other life domains like relationship with people, mood, emotions, goals that have been accomplished, self-concept etc. Life satisfaction is considered to be a part/aspect of subjective wellbeing. Life satisfaction is often confused with happiness. Happiness can be understood as a instantaneous moment which is usually transitory. Life satisfaction, on the other hand, is long lasting feeling. It incorporates an individual who is satisfied and happy with all or major aspects of his/her life. (Ackerman,E.2018)

## Factors affecting Life Satisfaction

There are many factors that play a significant role and contribute in life satisfaction. Research has shown that there are some factors that affect the life satisfaction of people (Ackerman,E.2018). These are –

1. Life chances and life events are found to be considerably connected with satisfaction. Significant life event factors such as power, need, the need of protection, honor, beauty etc. also promote in life satisfaction.
2. Flow of experience is also highlighted to be responsible in life satisfaction. Some unforgettable experiences like love, respect, excitement, safety, security, etc contribute significantly in life satisfaction.
3. Veenhoven, 1996 pointed out that evaluation of life is also a crucial factor. It refers to an assessment of all the life events, experiences and factors.

**TABLE 1** – Literature Review on Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction

<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>RELEVANT FINDINGS</b>
Dutta (2022)	The results revealed that 70% of the parents (N=200) reported that they were highly impacted after their children left home. The parents also reported that they lost interest in celebrating Indian festivals and felt they had nothing to do. They found it hard to adjust with the changes that were taking place in their lives too.
Nayak (2022)	A longitudinal study was carried out wherein data was collected from 72,000 individuals to understand the depression levels among empty nesters and non-empty nesters. Results revealed that 30% adults had depression out of which 43% were empty nesters.
Murugan (2022)	Conducted a study on 281 empty nesters and the results revealed that 61% of the participants were lonely, 17% reported to have depression and 52% experienced low to minimal social support. Loneliness and depression were found to be correlated.
Vivekananthan & Ponnusamy (2022)	Investigated how empty nesters are abused and neglected in India. Some of the kinds of abuse highlighted were physical and mental abuse and torture, disrespect, crime etc. The role of NGOs and police in helping these individuals was also highlighted.
Maurya & Kothari (2020)	Coping strategies utilised by empty nesters were evaluated. Some of the common techniques used by parents were venting, planning, humour, denial etc. Mothers typically sought help from emotional support and engaging in religious activities.
Ivanova (2020)	Assessed the life satisfaction of empty nest stepparents and biological parents. Stepmothers have much better satisfaction with life than biological mothers. Apparently fathers with biological children from a former partner are more happy with their lives.
Bougea, Despoti & Vasilpoulos (2020)	Explored the lives of empty nest couples and the psychosocial stress associated with it. Parents from different cultural backgrounds perceive

the empty nest differently, so does their adaptation strategies. Social assistance services must be intended to increase parent well-being and build family resources.

- Dhar & Anand (2019) A longitudinal study was carried out to understand the mental, emotional and financial aspects of aged parents. 8,371 empty nesters (N=10,000) reported of feelings of loneliness and isolation, felt emotionally vulnerable and socially withdrawn.
- Piper & Jackson (2018) Investigated the life satisfaction of empty nest couples and non-empty nesters. The result findings demonstrated that there was a decrease in the life satisfaction of empty nesters when compared with non-empty nesters. Majority of the empty nesters reported of negative experiences and thereby resulting in poor mental health.
- Osarenren & Udejaja (2018) Understood the life of empty nest teachers in Laos. The results revealed that there were significant social adjustment issues faced by the empty nest teachers and some teachers also reported of strained family relationships thereby leading to emotional difficulties.
- Tahan, Askari & Ahangri (2017) Examined the usefulness and benefits of group therapy in improving the life satisfaction of empty nesters by strengthening acceptance and commitment among two groups -15 experimental and 15 control. Based on acceptance and commitment, the experimental group had 90-minute therapy sessions, whereas the control group received no treatment. The findings revealed that the group that was given the therapy sessions experienced an increased life satisfaction in adults suffering from empty nest syndrome. As a result, it might be regarded as a therapeutic strategy.
- Ubaidi (2017) Studied the challenges that parents in their middle adulthood face with special reference on empty nesters. Some of the issues and problems faced by couples in middle adulthood are retirement, menopause, andropause, divorce, depression, empty nest, etc. The findings suggest that the most vulnerable parents are those who battle with having an empty nest or who

are in an unsatisfactory or insecure relationship, those who grapple with high self-identity, and those who have no external employment.

Rehman (2016) Utilised interview method to understand the life of parents after their son migrated to different countries. The parents of the migrated children encounter feelings of isolation, forlornness, despondency and unhappiness.

## Research gap

The various research cited above gives an insight about empty nest syndrome among Asian families (primarily Indian and Chinese parents). There has been a significant amount of research done in the Western culture or the individualist culture. However, Indian parents are highly vulnerable to the empty nest phase because Indian society is a collectivist culture. Empty nest syndrome is a relatively new concept and due to lack of understanding and cultural differences, it has not been studied and emphasised to a great extent especially in the Indian context. There is limited research on empty nest syndrome and the life satisfaction of Indian parents. The present research aims to bridge the research gap so identified based on the review of literature carried out for this study and thereby, provides useful insights in the Indian context. The current research also aims to understand the gender differences (if any) that exist among the Indian middle-aged parents and how their life changes because of the transition period.

## Rationale

Empty Nest is a transitional and challenging phase in a parent's life when their children leave their parental home and stretch their wings and fly away to pursue higher education, for better job opportunities or get married and settle down. Various researches have been conducted in order to understand the life of parents post the departure of their off springs. Empty nest is ubiquitous. Indian families and parents are more vulnerable to empty nest as compared to the western culture because Indians belong to collectivistic culture. There is a paucity of literature review on this issue especially in the Indian context. This research paper aims to assess empty nest syndrome in relation to life satisfaction among Indian mothers and fathers. There is a need to investigate the relationship between empty nest syndrome and life satisfaction. This paper also intends to be cognizant of the impact of the flying away of the children on the life satisfaction of the parents. Lastly, this paper attempts to analyse the gender differences on the impact of empty nest syndrome on the life satisfaction of Indian adults.



## Methodology

### Aim and objectives

To study empty nest syndrome in relation to life satisfaction among middle aged adults.

1. To investigate gender differences in empty nest syndrome among middle aged adults.
2. To investigate gender differences in life satisfaction among middle aged adults.
3. To determine the relationship between empty nest syndrome and life satisfaction among middle aged adults.

### Hypothesis

H1 – There will be no significant gender differences in empty nest syndrome among middle aged adults.

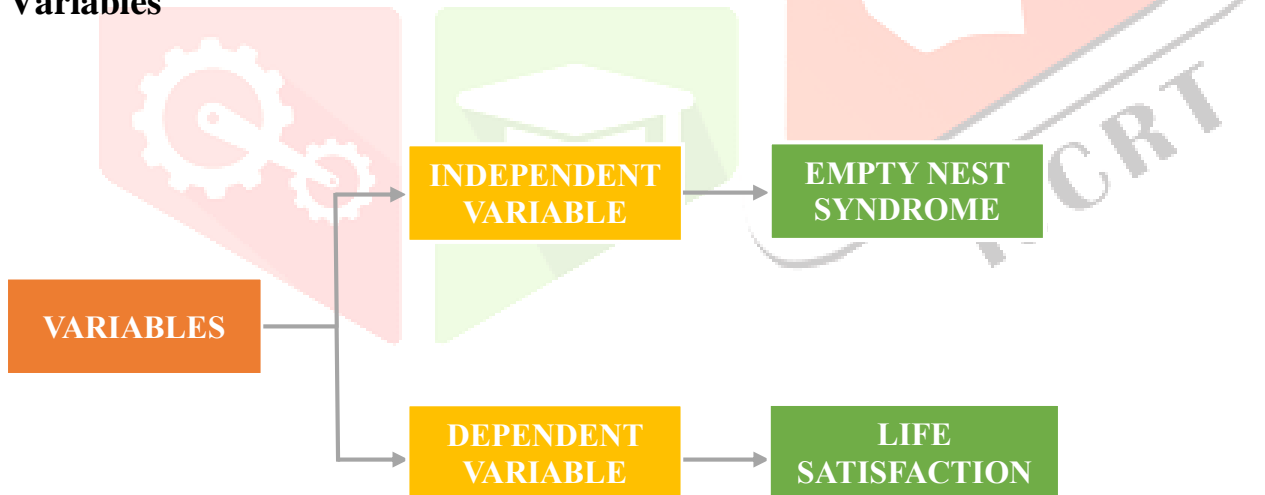
H2 - There will be no significant gender differences in life satisfaction among middle aged adults.

H3 – There will be no significant relationship between empty nest syndrome and life satisfaction among middle aged adults.

### Research design

In the present study, correlational research design is adopted. A correlational design examines the relationship between two or more variables and can be used to predict or explain a phenomenon.

### Variables



### Sample selection

Purposive sampling, a type of non – probability sampling was utilised for this research. A sample comprising of 249 middle aged adults i.e., 129 mothers and 120 fathers aged between 45 – 65+ years, residing in different parts of Delhi NCR was drawn.

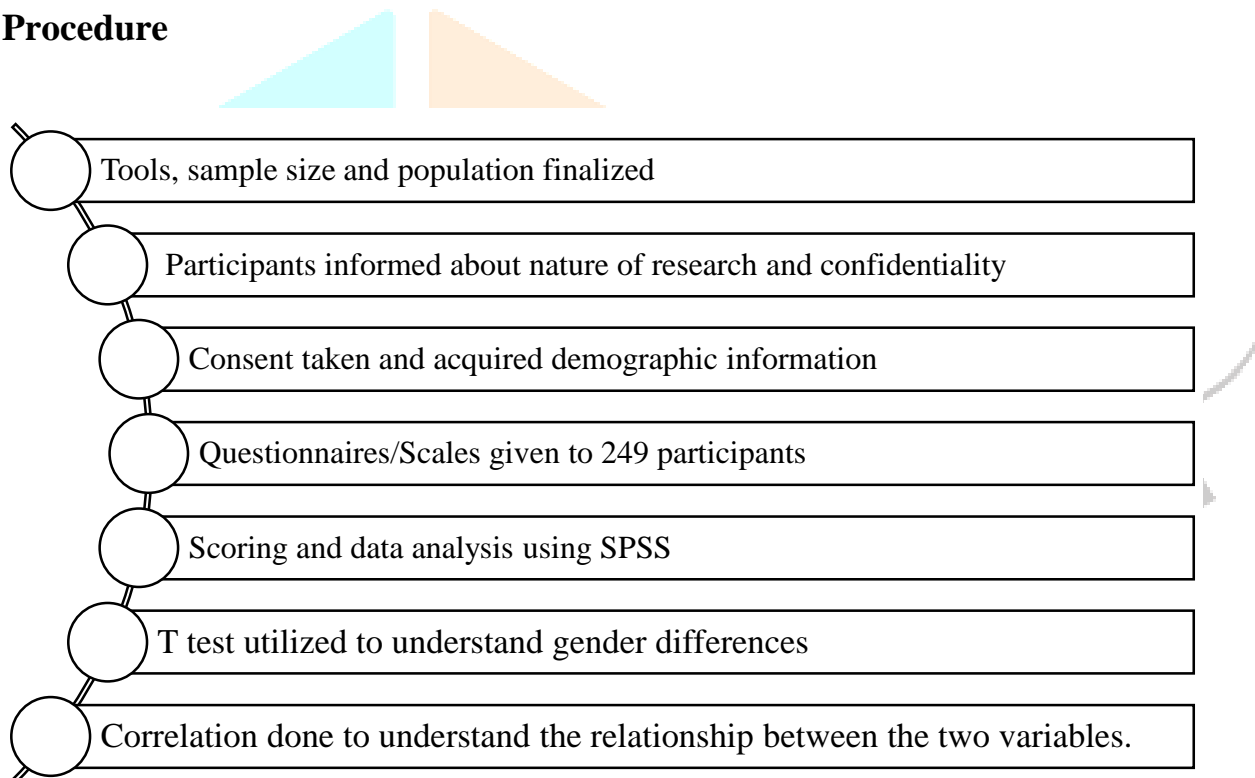


## Instruments/Tools Employed

To measure the occurrence of empty nest syndrome among middle aged parents, the Empty Nest Syndrome Questionnaire (ENS) developed by Mbaeze and Ukwandu (2011) was utilised. The questionnaire comprises of 29 items (16 items in Part B and 13 items in Part C), with responses rated on a five-point Likert scale. Out of the 29 items, some items were positively scored, and some were negatively scored. The questions/statements are designed in a way that access various feelings like anxiety, depression, mood swings, isolation etc experienced by parents. The Empty Nest Syndrome Questionnaire (ENS) developed by Mbaeze and Ukwandu is a reliable and valid tool.

To measure the life satisfaction of empty nesters The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin (1985) was employed. The SWLS is a fairly valid and reliable psychological assessment tool that is designed to measure an individual's overall life satisfaction.

## Procedure



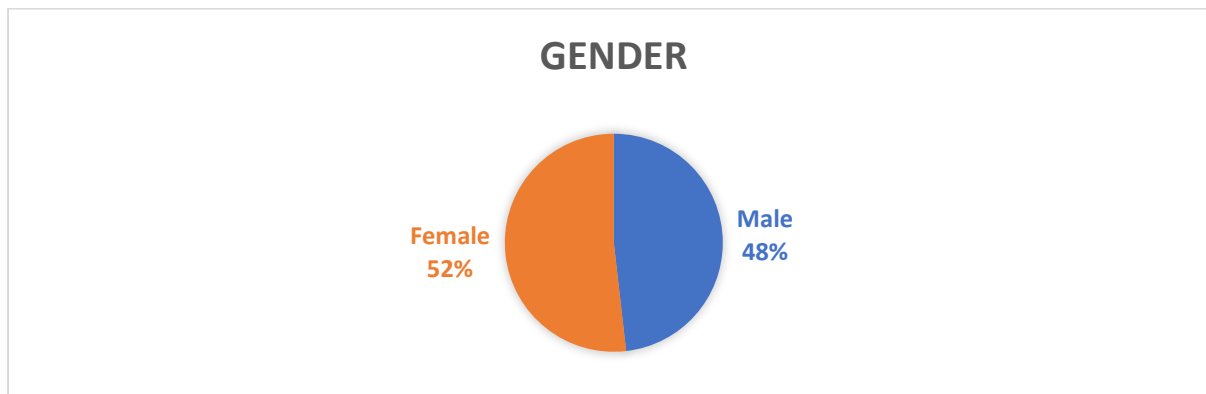
## Statistical Analysis

Mean and standard deviation were computed for descriptive analysis of the data and for finding out gender differences. This was followed by t test and correlation to find the statistical difference between the two variables.

# ANALYSIS

## Demographic information of Empty nest parents

Chart 1 - GENDER



The gender discrepancies are demonstrated in Chart 1. Gender was a significant factor in the current investigation, which involved 249 parents whose children had left home. Out of the total participants, 120 (48%) were identified as fathers and 129 (52%) were identified as mothers.

Chart 2 - AGE

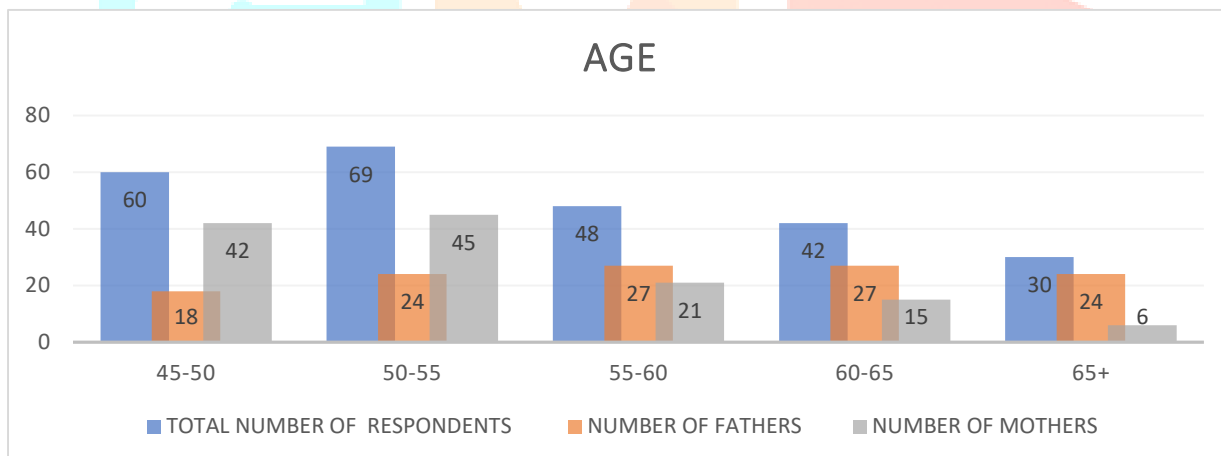
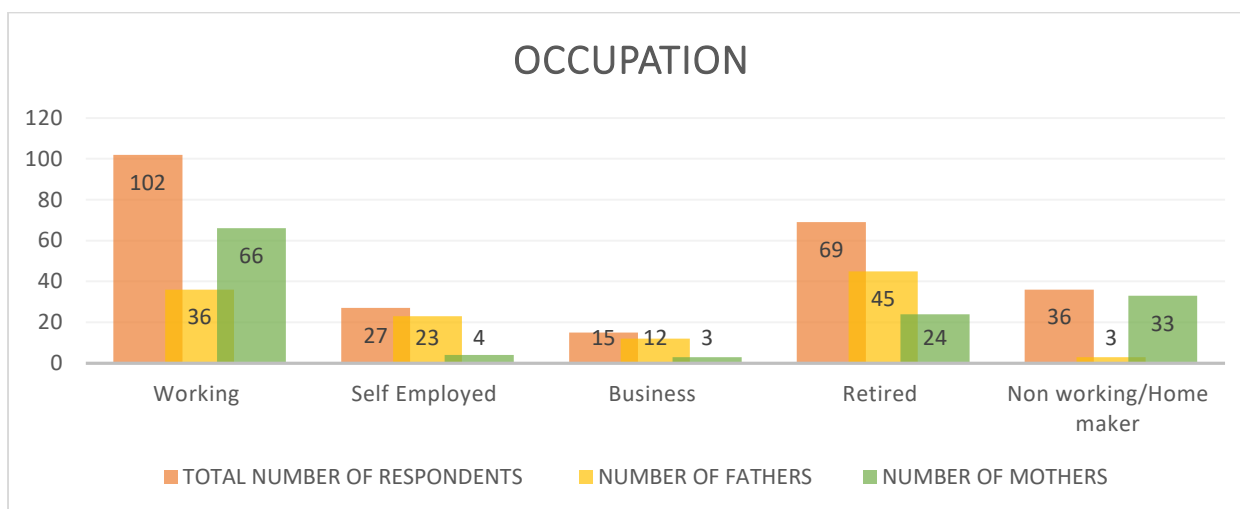


Chart 2 illustrates the age range of parents who no longer have children living with them. This study focused on adults who are in middle age. About 71.09% of the parents in the study were between the ages of 45 and 59, while 29% of the participants were considered older adults.

**Chart 3 - OCCUPATION**



The occupation of the participants is detailed in Chart 3. The chart shows that 41% of the participants were employed in various sectors, such as private, government, and public. Additionally, 17.7% of the participants were retired.

**Chart 4 - MARITAL STATUS**

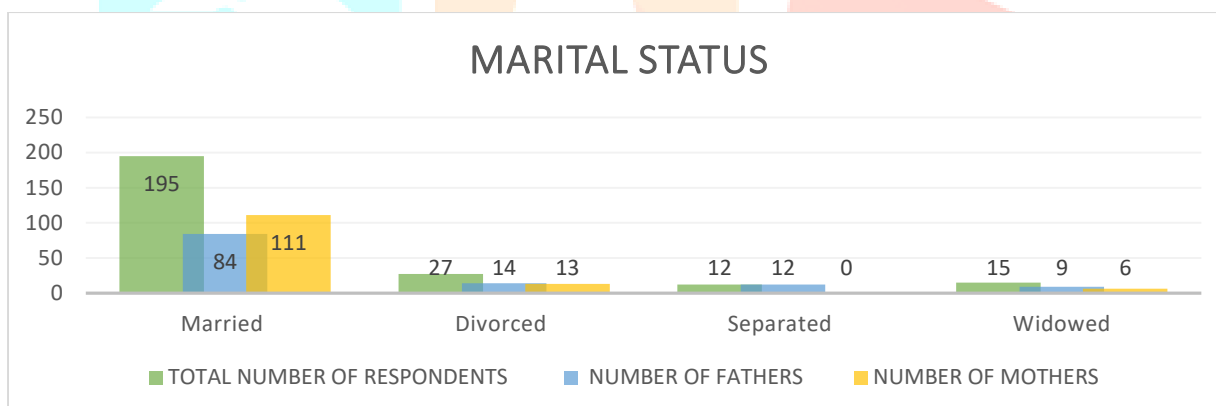
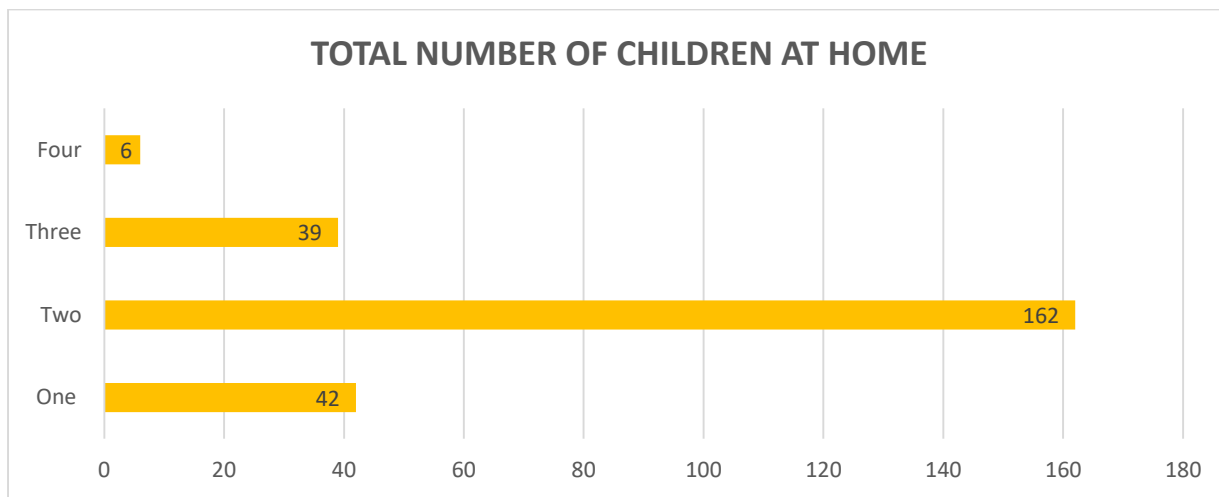


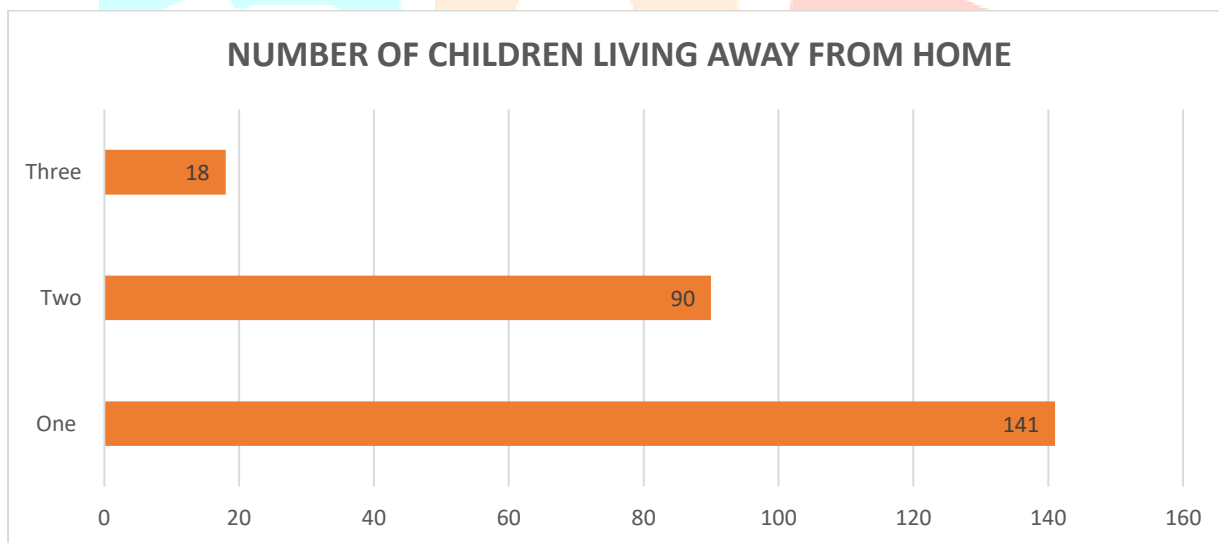
Chart 4 displays the marital status of the empty nest parents who participated in the current study. The chart reveals that the majority, 78.31%, were married. The remaining 21.6% were either divorced, separated, or widowed.

**Chart 5 - TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN OF PARENTS**

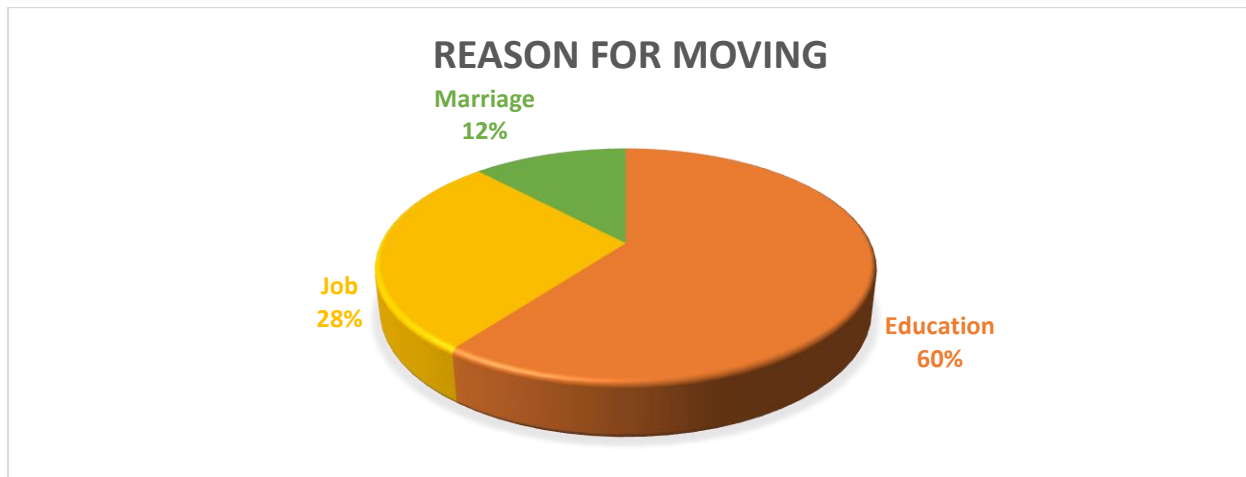


The number of children belonging to the participants is illustrated in Chart 5. The chart indicates that the highest percentage of parents, 65%, had one child. Furthermore, 16.87% of the parents had two children, and 16.66% had three children.

**Chart 6 - NUMBER OF CHILDREN LIVING AWAY FROM HOME**



The number of children who no longer lived with their parents is presented in Chart 6. The chart shows that 56.63% of the parents had one child living in a different city, town, or country. Additionally, 36.14% of the parents had two children who were not living with parents.

**Chart 7 - REASON FOR MOVING**

The reasons why children moved away from home are demonstrated in Chart 7. According to the chart, 60% of the children moved away to pursue higher education or better educational opportunities. About 28% of the children moved to different locations due to their job. Moreover, 12% of the young adults got married and moved away to different places.

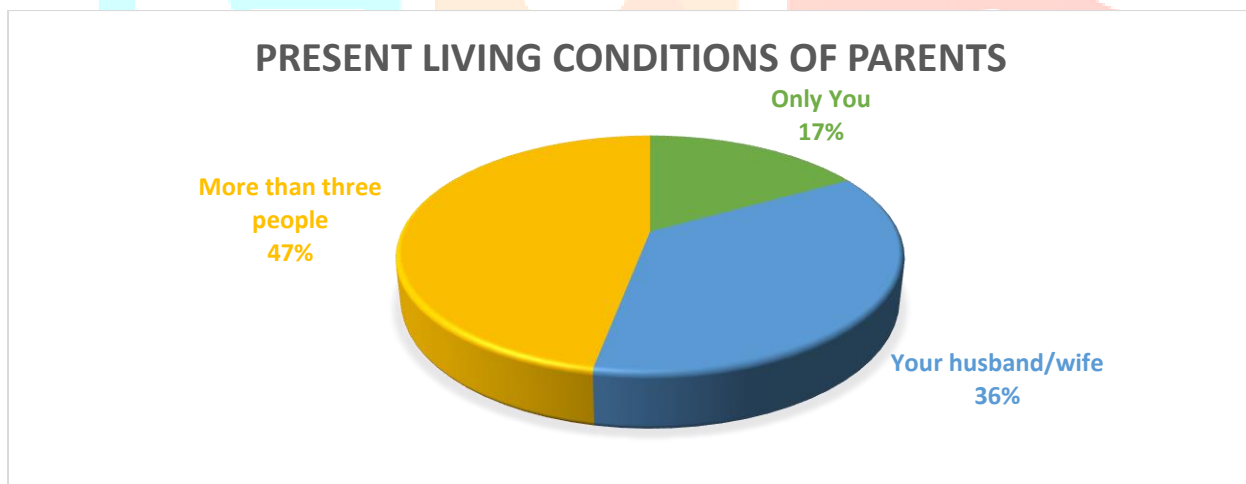
**Chart 8 - PRESENT LIVING CONDITIONS OF PARENTS**

Chart 8 illustrates the current living arrangements of parents after their children have left home. The chart shows that 17% of the parents were living alone, while 36% were living with their spouse. Additionally, 47% of the parents were living in a joint family system with three or more people.

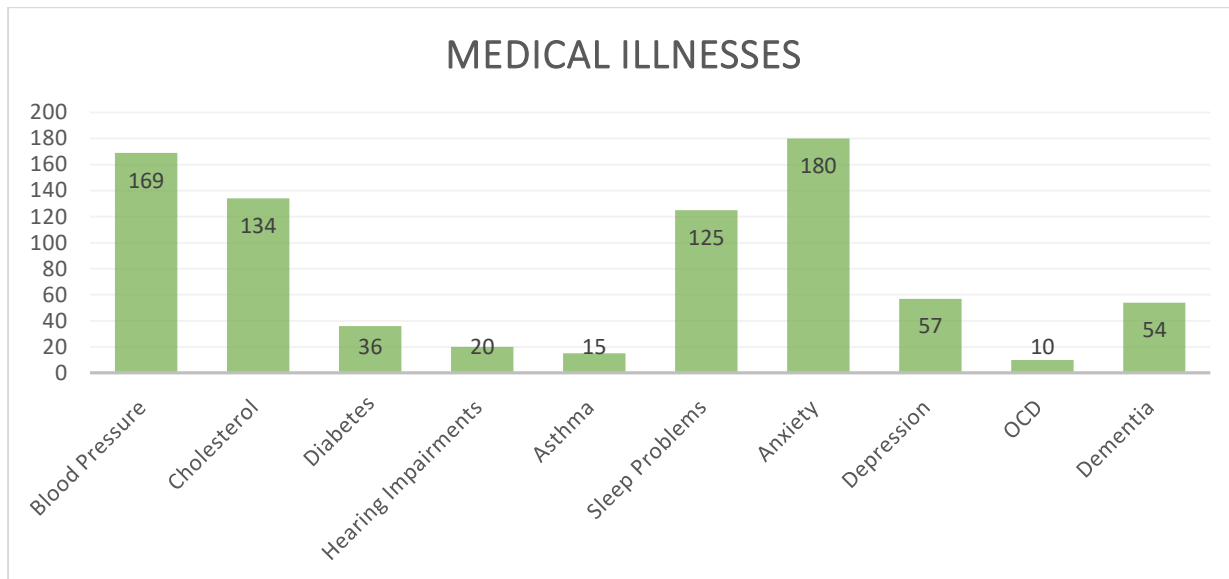
**Chart 9 - COMMON MEDICAL ILLNESSES/CONDITIONS OF PARENTS**

Chart 9 displays some of the common medical conditions experienced by middle-aged parents. The chart reveals that 72% of the parents suffered from anxiety, while 67% had hypertension. In addition, 50% of the parents had sleep-related issues, 53% had high cholesterol levels, and 21% showed early signs of dementia.

### Descriptive Statistics and T test and correlation

**TABLE 2**

*Mean and SD for Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction (gender-wise)*

VARIABLES		N	MEAN	SD
Empty Nest Syndrome	Male	120	86.00	8.23
	Female	129	89.69	5.88
Life Satisfaction	Male	120	25.95	4.01
	Female	129	25.74	5.02

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation values of Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction of 249 participants (Males = 120 and Females = 129).

**TABLE 3**

*Mean, SD and t-value for Empty Nest Syndrome (gender-wise)*

	N	MEAN	SD	t	df	p-value
<b>Male</b>	120	86.00	8.23	4.09	247	<.001
<b>Female</b>	129	89.70	5.88			

Table 3 shows the t value for Empty Nest Syndrome in middle aged adults. From the table it can be interpreted that there is significant difference between both the genders, males (M=86.00, SD=8.23) and female (M= 89.70, SD= 5.88) on the level of Empty Nest Syndrome  $t(247) = 4.09$ ,  $p = <.001$  as the values are found to be significant at both 0.05 and 0.01 levels. Therefore, hypothesis 1 stating that there will be no significant gender

differences in empty nest syndrome among middle aged adults is rejected. Most researches on empty nest syndrome are women/mother centric. However, fathers tend to find it difficult to deal and cope with when children move on and live independently (DeVries,H. 2023).

**TABLE 4**

*Mean, SD and t-value for Life Satisfaction (gender-wise)*

	N	MEAN	SD	t	df	P-value
<b>Male</b>	120	25.95	4.01	-0.35	247	.002
<b>Female</b>	129	25.74	5.02			

Table 4 shows that the t value for Life Satisfaction is middle aged adults. From the table it can be interpreted that there is no significant difference between both the genders, males (M=25.95, SD= 4.01) and female (M= 25.74, SD= 5.02) on the level of Life Satisfaction  $t(247) = -0.35$ , p value = 0.05 as the values are found to be not significant at both 005 and 001 levels. Therefore, hypothesis 2 stating that there will be no significant gender differences in life satisfaction among middle aged adults is accepted.

**TABLE 5**

*Correlation between empty nest syndrome and life satisfaction of middle-aged parents.*

VARIABLE	N	1	2
1. Empty Nest Syndrome	249	-	-0.23**
2. Life Satisfaction	249	-0.23**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Table 5 displays the correlation coefficient between Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction among middle aged parents. Based on the information provided in the table, it can be inferred that there is a negative correlation between Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction, with a correlation coefficient of  $r(249) = -0.230$  and a statistically significant p-value of  $<.01$  at a 0.01 level. Therefore, hypothesis 2 stating that there will be no significant gender differences in life satisfaction among middle aged adults is accepted. Most researches on empty nest syndrome are women/mother centric.

The statistical methods used to analyse the data were mean, standard deviation, t test, correlation. The results revealed that a vast majority (86.75%) parents feel very happy when their children are around them with 95% fathers and 99% mothers experiencing these feelings. Approximately 63% middle aged parents expressed that their children have been away from home for a long time. More than half of the surveyed mothers preferred to see their children every week, whereas 42.5% fathers felt that meeting their children once a year was enough. Sanyal (2019) found in her study that parents whose children have moved away report health related issues and poor wellbeing. Social support and professional help from psychologists are the most widely used and helpful strategy for empty nest adults (Kumar, S. 2015). A good number of fathers i.e. 47.5% described that they find



pleasure in spending quality time with their grandchildren, and more than half parents who participated in the study highlighted that they had no issues in living in old age homes. Approximately 68% revealed that they preferred attending group activities and being part of support groups in order to prevent themselves from being alone and lonely. Approximately 23% fathers demonstrated that they did not prefer to stay with their adult stubborn children, while a similar percentage of fathers felt sick and ill when they were not able to meet their children. Additionally, 27.7% parents showed disappointment and regretted that their children were living away from them, however, 70% were initially sad and depressed but with time were happy to see their children settled in their lives. 72 males and females expressed their happiness with 11 aspects of their lives. Empty-nesters were also more optimistic about contact with children than childless people. There were no variations in life happiness between the two groups in areas other than children, nor were there substantial gender disparities in life satisfaction. Despite this, a majority of fathers (75%) and mothers (62.7%) reported feeling younger after their children left home. However, a significant portion of fathers (42.5%) reported eating more to feel better, and more than half of fathers and mothers found it difficult to make friends. All mothers found it difficult to concentrate on home-related work, while a significant percentage of parents reported feeling anxious or depressed. A small percentage of parents (9.6%) reported considering adopting a child because their own children were not around. Over 60% of parents reported reading more books and going out more often to deal with boredom and emotional instability. The majority of parents surveyed (67.4%) felt that their lives were close to their ideal in most ways, with over 80% indicating that they were satisfied with their lives and felt that they had everything they needed. Empty nesters reported of lower/poor life satisfaction and were prone to become victims of mental health issues (Guo,Q.2008).

Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction are often inversely related. Studies have shown that parents experiencing Empty Nest Syndrome report lower levels of life satisfaction compared to those who do not experience it. However, the extent of the impact on life satisfaction may vary from person to person and may depend on many factors, such as parent's relationship with their children, their support system, their overall mental health etc.

### **Limitations and future implications**

- The sample size could be a limitation in the study.
- The data was primarily collected from parents residing and working in Delhi NCR. Other Indian states and UTs weren't given equal consideration.
- The study was conducted over a limited time period only.
- There is a limited research on Empty Nest Syndrome in the Indian context, which may affect the validity of the findings.

The present research can contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of empty nest syndrome among middle aged adults and the factors that contribute to life satisfaction. The findings of the study can be used to develop interventions to help middle aged adults manage their feelings of isolation caused because of empty nest and improve their life satisfaction. Understanding the experience of empty nest syndrome can also help families navigate this significant life transition better. This can lead to improved family relationships and better communication between parents and their adult children. Policy makers can use the findings of this research to develop programs that support the mental health and wellbeing of middle aged adults experiencing empty nest syndrome.

## Conclusion

The aim of the research was to assess empty nest syndrome in relation to life satisfaction among middle aged adults. A total of 249 participants took part in the study. 120 were males and 129 were females. Empty Nest Syndrome and Life Satisfaction were used. The research paper aimed to test three hypotheses. The findings suggested that there was significant gender difference in empty nest syndrome among middle aged adults. No significant gender differences in life satisfaction of middle aged adults was found. Empty nest syndrome and Life satisfaction were found to be negatively correlated.

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