

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Applying the Relational Turbulence Model to the Empty-Nest Transition: Sources of Relationship Change, Relational Uncertainty, and Interference From Partners

Nagy, M. E., & Theiss, J. A. (2013). Applying the relational turbulence model to the empty-nest transition: Sources of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners. *Journal of Family Communications*, 13(4), 280-300. doi:10.1080/15267432.2013.823430

**SUMMARY:** Parents' transition from children living in the home to an empty nest often involves many changes in the couples' marriage. This study interviewed 50 couples whose last (or only) child had left home during the past 18 months about the changes in their marriage. Themes related to both uncertainty and turbulence of marital changes and positive marital relationship changes were identified.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Responses of couples transitioning to an empty-nest suggest both relational improvement and relational hardship during transition.
- Participants reported uncertainty over new relational roles, dependency on their partner, their ability to restore intimacy, and their own mortality.
- Couples reported several positive changes in the transition to an empty-nest, including more couple time, freedom, communication, and privacy, as well as a sense of a new beginning.
- Wives, more than husbands, reported feeling guilty for not being present more often for their spouse.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Attend trainings about the transition to an empty-nest and how this might impact military couples
- Facilitate support groups for military couples transitioning to an empty-nest to allow couples to support one another and offer ideas

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops for empty-nest military couples about common reactions to children leaving the home and useful coping skills for this transition
- Educate military empty-nest couples on how to communicate feelings of guilt or hurt

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs aimed at military parents navigating the transition to an empty nest
- Promote the development of structured leisure activities for military families experiencing the empty nest transitions

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## METHODS

- Couples whose last (or only) child had moved out of their home within the previous 18 months were recruited via referral from undergraduate students.
- Participants answered open-ended survey questions about the changes to their relationship, the degree of uncertainty with the transition, and the extent to which their partner interfered in goals and activities.
- Themes within the couples' interview statements were analyzed.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 50 husband and wife couples with a mean age of 54.83 years (SD = 6.61) who had become empty-nesters within the past 18 months.
- Participants identified as 74% White, 9% Black, 7% Native American, 6% Asian-American, 1% Latino, and 3% another race.
- Couples had been married for an average of 27.5 years and had approximately two children.

## LIMITATIONS

- Couples were not randomly selected, so those that were included may differ from couples with new empty-nests who were not included, including in relationship transition satisfaction.
- The data were cross-sectional, and experiences of an empty nest may vary across time.
- The sample only included couples recruited via undergraduate referrals from a single university; therefore, results may not be generalizable to all newly empty-nest couples.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal study to examine how the transition to an empty nest varies for couples over time
- Investigate couples receiving counseling to understand difficulties some couples face during this transition
- Compare experiences of couples with new empty nests between those who are working and retired

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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