Navigating the empty nest: A qualitative exploration of coping strategies among Muslim mothers

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: A major life transition for ageing mothers is the period when adult children leave the parental home; or also known as the empty nest stage. This stage is often marked by significant psychological, social, and family adjustments. On one hand, it can provide increased personal freedom but on the other hand, it has also been associated with heightened risks of loneliness, depressive symptoms, and reduced sense of purpose. In Malaysia, where the ageing population is expanding rapidly, understanding these dynamics has important implications for mental health and family wellbeing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Muslim mothers in Kedah, focusing on their coping strategies during the empty nest stage. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative methodology was utilized to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Four Muslim mothers ages between 58 to 71 years old were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that all participants had direct personal experience of the empty nest stage. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews exploring the coping strategies utilized by mothers in navigating the empty nest. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The Family Life Cycle Framework and Role Theory were two theories used to better understand the aspects and dimensions of the mothers' experiences. **Results:** Three major themes that emerged from this study are: (1) engagement in daily activities and hobbies, (2) spiritual practices, and (3) maintaining social connections. Participants' continued engagement in daily activities and hobbies offered the participants continuity and structure which helps them redefine roles and have a sense of purpose. Besides that, spiritual and religious practices such as praying, Quranic recitations provide a sense of peace and foster emotional resilience. This theme emerged as a critical coping strategy for the participants. Another strategy is maintaining social connections through extended family, community groups, and peer interactions. All this reduced loneliness and enhanced their wellbeing. This underscores the importance of meaningful interactions in later life. As a whole, the results show an interplay between cultural identity, spirituality, and social networks in shaping mothers' adaptation during this stage of life transition. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of spiritual and cultural aspects in addressing mental health and wellbeing of ageing women during the empty nest stage. The findings suggest that interventions should emphasize role redefinition, promote faith-based coping strategies, and strengthen social connections. These insights can inform health care providers, mental health practitioners, and those in the helping professions in developing a culturally sensitive and holistic approach in supporting aging women in the empty nest stage in Malaysia. The study contributes to the discourse on ageing and wellbeing, highlighting the need for a more integrative care models that consider not only the physical, but also the psychosocial and spiritual needs of women.

Keywords: Ageing, empty nest, wellbeing, Muslim, coping