

# The Impact of Self-Acceptance and Emotional Regulation on the Experience of Empty Nest Syndrome in the Older Adult

Alfida Salsabila<sup>1</sup>, Muhamad Uyun<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Islamic Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alfida Salsabila, Pangeran Ratu Street, No. 475, Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia 30267. Email: 2020901087@radenfatah.ac.id

## Abstract

One of the crisis phases in families entering the middle age phase is the feeling of losing their role in raising children and feeling empty because the children no longer live in the same house. This term is known as empty nest syndrome. Self-acceptance and emotional regulation play an essential role in the impact of empty nest syndrome experienced by older adults. This research aims to prove the further impact of self-acceptance and emotional regulation on the experience of empty nest syndrome in older adults. The author adapted the scales of self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome. The research respondents were 30 older people at the Siti Anna Bangka Belitung Retirement Home. The sampling technique uses purposive sampling. The results of multiple linear regression analysis show that self-acceptance and emotional regulation are related to empty nest syndrome, and simultaneously, self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome are significantly associated with each other.

## Abstrak

Salah satu fase krisis dalam keluarga yang memasuki fase usia paruh baya adalah perasaan kehilangan peran dalam mengasuh anak dan perasaan hampa karena anak sudah tidak lagi tinggal serumah. Istilah ini dikenal dengan *empty nest syndrome*. Penerimaan diri dan regulasi emosi berperan penting terhadap dampak *empty nest syndrome* yang dialami lansia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membuktikan dampak lebih lanjut penerimaan diri dan regulasi emosi terhadap pengalaman *empty nest syndrome* pada lansia. Skala penerimaan diri, skala regulasi emosi, dan skala *empty nest syndrome* diadaptasi oleh penulis. Responden penelitian adalah lansia yang berada di Panti Lansia Siti Anna Bangka Belitung sebanyak 30 orang. Teknik pengambilan sampel menggunakan *purposive sampling*. Dari hasil analisis regresi linier berganda diketahui bahwa penerimaan diri dan regulasi emosi berhubungan dengan *empty nest syndrome*, dan secara simultan, penerimaan diri, regulasi emosi, dan *empty nest syndrome* berhubungan secara signifikan satu sama lain.



## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, it is known that the number of older adults worldwide is greater than that of toddlers. According to data from Statistics Indonesia (Indonesian: *Badan Pusat Statistik*; 2020), Indonesia is recorded as having a more aging adult population of 9.92% (26.82 million). The number of older adults continues to increase, bringing complex consequences in Indonesia, so facilities must meet the needs of older adults (Pospos et al., 2022).

One of the challenging stages that a family may experience is reaching middle age. During this time, individuals may feel a sense of loss as their role in raising children diminishes, and they may also feel emptiness due to their children no longer living in the same household. This is known as empty nest syndrome. Ghafur and Hidayah (2014) revealed that empty nest syndrome is a feeling of loneliness and sadness experienced by parents, which gives rise to feelings of emptiness, as evidenced by difficulties in dealing with the changes that occur when their children leave home because they are married. When children marry, they become increasingly preoccupied with their own families, and situations like this prove to parents, particularly mothers, that they love and care for their children more than they love their parents (Hurlock, 1980). Mbaeze and Ukwandu (2011) stated that the empty nest syndrome has several general symptoms. These will appear in becoming a parent, namely feelings of loss, sadness, and a deep emptiness in an individual's life.

Empty nest syndrome is an unpleasant feeling or negative emotion, such as sadness and annoyance, that parents experience when their children leave home (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019). This syndrome tends to be experienced by older adults whose children are starting to grow up and will live independently. The likelihood of older adults living alone will probably increase, which will have an impact on their physical and psychological health. For this reason, older adults will always be important to society (Panthong & Wongkanthiya, 2023).

As a result of this condition, older people (especially older adults with conditions of regression or decline) will experience loneliness and need other people to interact socially with them. In these circumstances, many older adults opt to live in social institutions or become involved in activities outside the house, such as attending religious practices, *majlis taklim*, and participating in peer communities. Being in a social institution makes them feel more connected to other people and gives them the impression that someone is paying attention to them.

Empty nest syndrome is related to various variables, one is self-acceptance, which includes the willingness to accept oneself, including physical, psychological, and social conditions and personal achievements, both strengths and weaknesses. An older adult with good self-acceptance can express his emotions correctly, which is useful in dealing with various situations in everyday life. Furthermore, older adults with good self-acceptance during aging can accommodate the changes that come with aging. Therefore, self-acceptance is needed to face the changes in older adults (Triningtyas & Muhayati, 2018).

Self-acceptance is an important aspect of mental health, and it is distinguished by self-evaluation, awareness of strengths and limitations, caring, and stress tolerance abilities (Sanghvi et al., 2023). An individual's consciousness connects the desire to live with real circumstances. Individuals with self-acceptance believe that particular characteristics they possess are essential to themselves, which they subsequently perceive as a blessing. Individuals consider everything they feel pleasant until they want to continue enjoying life.

Based on the theory put forward by Sheerer (in Cronbach, 1963) regarding eight aspects of individual self-acceptance: (1) having self-confidence in one's abilities in living life; (2) considering oneself valuable as a human being who is equal to other individuals; (3) being aware and not feeling ashamed of oneself; (4) placing oneself as a human being so that other individuals can accept themselves; (5) being responsible for all their actions; (6) accepting praise or criticism of oneself objectively; (7) believing in principles or standards of life without being enslaved by other people's opinions; and (8) not denying or feeling guilty about the emotions that exist within oneself.

Good emotional regulation can provide peace of mind to older adults who experience empty nest syndrome. Emotional regulation means a person's ability to inhibit impulsive behavior and behave

according to the desired goals when feeling negative emotions (Hapsari & Puspitasari, 2022). The process can be separated into three phases: identification, selection, and implementation. Emotion regulation goals identify a person guided by what motivates them to engage in emotional regulation (Springstein & English, 2023). Emotional regulation can be interpreted as a person's ability to assess, overcome, manage, and express existing emotions to reach a point of emotional balance. It can also be defined as how individuals influence their emotions and how they experience and express them (Alhawatmeh et al., 2022).

Individuals with good emotional regulation are able to create strategies for responding appropriately to emotions. Several factors, including social support, religiosity, culture, and cognition influence this emotional regulation. Gross (2014) explains that emotional regulation includes four aspects: emotional regulation strategies (strategies), engaging in goal-directed behavior (goals), controlling emotional responses (impulses), and accepting emotional responses (acceptance).

The ability to accept oneself as people possess it varies at different levels. Research conducted by Pohan et al. (2021) states four factors influencing older adults' self-acceptance: spirituality, social support, religiosity, and positive thinking. An attitude of self-acceptance is formed through honest self-evaluation or what is. In these conditions, individuals are aware of the limitations and failures they experience so that individuals have feelings of love to be able to accept and embrace themselves.

Based on the explanation above, some people go through an empty nest phase in old age, which causes sadness due to the abandonment of their children. If they cannot accept it, the changes that occur can lead to excessive negative emotions, an identity crisis, stress, or even depression, which is often called empty nest syndrome. This phase requires self-acceptance and emotional regulation, which is good because it is self-acceptance and regulation of one's emotions. Older adults can adapt to the changes that occur to them. In addition, an older adult can express their feelings appropriately, which helps them deal with various situations in everyday life. Therefore, research was conducted entitled *The Impact of Self-Acceptance and Emotional Regulation on the Experience of Empty Nest Syndrome in the Older Adult*.

## **METHODS**

This research uses quantitative methods with multiple linear regression analysis to see whether there is a relationship between the independent and dependent variables, both individually and simultaneously. The respondents in this research were 30 older adults who were selected using a purposive sampling technique, namely a sampling technique in which respondents were selected as sample members based on the researcher's considerations or criteria (Uyun & Yoseanto, 2022). This research used SPSS 25 software to conduct descriptive analysis tests and assumption tests, including normality and linearity tests. The sample criteria for this research were (1) older adults aged 50–70 and (2) having children who attend school and are married. This research involved 30 older adults at Siti Anna Bangka Belitung Retirement Home.

The author adapted three scales: the self-acceptance scale, the emotional regulation scale, and the empty nest syndrome scale. The validity value of the self-acceptance scale, calculated using corrected item-total correlation, ranges from .375 to .635. The reliability value is .879 with the aspects of feeling equal, confident in one's abilities, responsible, outward-oriented, opinionated, aware of limitations, and accepting human nature. This scale consists of 25 items using a Likert research scale with four answer choices: very suitable (four scores), suitable (three scores), not suitable (two scores), and very not suitable (one score) for favorable statements and vice versa for unfavorable statements.

The validity value of the emotion regulation scale, calculated using corrected item-total correlation, ranges from .404 to .767. The reliability value is .870 for emotional regulation strategies (strate-

gies), engaging in goal-directed behavior (goals), controlling emotional responses (impulses), and accepting emotional responses (acceptance). This scale consists of 18 items using a Likert research scale with four answer choices: very suitable (four scores), suitable (three scores), not suitable (two scores), and very not suitable (one score) for favorable statements and vice versa for unfavorable statements.

The validity value of the empty nest syndrome scale, calculated using corrected item-total correlation, ranges from .326 to .668. The reliability value is .838 with aspects of empty nest syndrome: loneliness, anxiety, depression, sadness, loss, and identity crisis. This scale consists of 20 items using a Likert research scale with four answer choices: very suitable (four scores), suitable (three scores), not suitable (two scores), and very not suitable (one score) for favorable statements and vice versa for unfavorable statements.

## RESULTS

This research was conducted offline, with respondents filling out scales supplied on the paper medium. Purposive sampling, or selecting respondents as sample members based on the researcher's considerations or criteria, was used to collect respondents. The scales were distributed and given directly to research respondents, with the researcher assisting them in reading each statement individually. The paper-based research scale begins with an introduction from the researcher, the respondent's identity, and the research objectives. The researcher then guided the respondents to the filling instructions. Older adults at Siti Anna Bangka Belitung Retirement Home who were willing to become respondents can continue filling out the scale.

Table 1.  
Normality Test

Variables	df	Shapiro-Wilk	Description
Self-Acceptance	30	.51	Normal
Emotional Regulation		.273	Normal
Empty Nest Syndrome		.67	Normal

Based on Table 1, the normality tests were conducted through the Shapiro-Wilk test with 30 respondents for the three variables. It was found that the self-acceptance variable had a significance value of .51 based on this data ( $p = .51 > .05$ ), so it can be interpreted that the self-acceptance variable has a normal distribution. The emotional regulation variable has a significance value of .273 ( $p = .273 > .05$ ), so it can be interpreted that the emotional regulation variable has a normal distribution. The empty nest syndrome variable has a significance value of .67 ( $p = .67 > .05$ ), so it can be interpreted that the empty nest syndrome variable has a normal distribution. So, the variables of self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome are normally distributed.

Table 2.  
Linearity

Variables	Deviation from Linearity		Description
	F	Sig.	
Self-Acceptance ↔ Empty Nest Syndrome	2.351	.76	Linear
Emotional Regulation ↔ Empty Nest Syndrome	1.918	.123	Linear

It can be concluded that the relationship between self-acceptance variables and empty nest syndrome has a linear relationship ( $.76 > .05$ ), and the emotional regulation variable with empty nest syndrome has a linear relationship, too ( $.123 > .05$ ). Thus, the linearity assumption test is met.

Table 3.  
Linear Regression

Variables	T-count	T-table	Sig.
Self-Acceptance (X1)	3.983	2.052	.000
Emotional Regulation (X2)	2.339	2.052	.027

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that self-acceptance has a value of .000, less than .05, and the T-count value (3.983) is greater than the T-table value (2.052). Then, it can be interpreted that there is a relationship between self-acceptance and empty nest syndrome. For emotional regulation, the value is .027, which is also less than .05, and the T-count value (2.339) is also greater than the T-table (2.052), which can be interpreted that there is a relationship between emotional regulation and empty nest syndrome. As mentioned above, both variables play a role, meaning that empty nest syndrome, self-acceptance, and emotional regulation are interconnected.

Table 4.  
Linear Regression

Variables	F-count	F-table	Sig.
Self-Acceptance (X1)	22.232	3.34	.000
Emotional Regulation (X2)			
Empty Nest Syndrome (Y)			

It is known that the value is .000, which is less than .05, and the F-count (22.232) is more than the F-table (3.34), so it can be concluded that there is an influence between self-acceptance and emotional regulation simultaneously on empty nest syndrome.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this research, there is a correlation between self-acceptance and empty nest syndrome and between emotional regulation and empty nest syndrome. These three variables—self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome—are interconnected simultaneously. This research found a link between self-acceptance and empty nest syndrome, implying that retirement home residents who accept themselves tend to have lower levels of empty nest syndrome.

This result aligns with research conducted by Putri (2022), which revealed that older adults who experience empty nest syndrome tend to have good self-acceptance, such as not comparing themselves with other older adults and being aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses. They also have confidence in their abilities and can carry out their daily activities as usual and work to meet their daily needs. They can also socialize with other people and live independently without depending on their children. They also realize that their physical strength is no longer as strong as when they were young. Thus, they are concerned and fearful for their safety alone at home. This means they do not experience low levels of self-acceptance. Some causes of low levels of self-acceptance in old age include self-understanding, parental role models in childhood, social attitudes, and the environment. On the other hand, factors that cause loneliness include living in a new environment, the end of a relationship, the quality of social relationships, and the situation (Wunga, 2020).

Furthermore, research shows a link between emotional regulation and empty nest syndrome. This means that emotional regulation tends to have a positive impact and can reduce empty nest syndrome in older adults. In their research, Anisa et al. (2023) revealed emotional differences between older adults who live at home and older adults who live in retirement homes. Older adults who live in retirement homes tend to interact less with family and people around them to avoid conflict, are less able

to channel their feelings to other people, and prefer to keep everything to themselves. Meanwhile, older adults who live at home admit they are grateful for their lives and can build good communication with their neighbors.

This research also found that self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome are simultaneously related. Many causes contribute to empty nest syndrome, including adult children's abandonment, children starting other families, low marriage satisfaction, and the loss of parents' primary role in raising children. The loss of the primary role of parents has a detrimental impact on an individual's empty nest syndrome (Mansoor & Hasan, 2019). A study found that every parent knows their daughter will have to leave her parents' home one day after marriage. Thus, parents accept this truth with open hearts. Similarly, parents recognize that their sons must leave home to pursue their careers.

The findings of this research indicate that residents of retirement homes have a higher level of self-acceptance and experience milder empty nest syndrome, as well as emotional regulation, which can have a positive or negative impact on empty nest syndrome depending on self-acceptance management. Therefore, a positive association exists between self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and empty nest syndrome in older adults, both simultaneously and individually.

Siti Anna Bangka Belitung Retirement Home residents with good emotional regulation skills tend to experience lower levels of empty nest syndrome. Residents of retirement homes with effective emotional regulation can reduce the negative impact of feelings of emptiness and alienation due to changes in circumstances when children are independent. This means that if someone is unable to accept the changes that are taking place, they may experience excessive negative feelings, an identity crisis, stress, or depression. Thus, self-acceptance is essential for older adults to adjust to the changes in their lives. This is consistent with the findings of Hilmanisa et al. (2022), who found that older adults experiencing the empty nest phase accept their current circumstances, receive social support from other older adults, and fill their free time with positive and beneficial activities to reduce feelings of loneliness. In conclusion, there is a link between self-acceptance and internal emotional regulation in empty nest syndrome. Retirement home residents who have a balanced level of self-acceptance and emotional regulation are less likely to suffer from empty nest syndrome than those who have a poor balance of both.

## CONCLUSION

Self-acceptance and emotional regulation contribute to the experience of empty nest syndrome. Self-acceptance is the basis for older adults in continuing their life transition, where they must accept life without children at home. At the same time, emotional regulation helps seniors face the changes that occur with a healthy emotional balance. The consequences will be greater mental well-being and the ability to adjust better to empty nest syndrome or difficulties in dealing with feelings of loss, loneliness, and being able to generate excessive negative emotions. These results suggest that retirement home residents with a good balance between self-acceptance and emotional regulation tend to experience lower levels of empty nest syndrome than residents with a poor balance.

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