

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of Psychosocial Interventions for Empty Nest Syndrome: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Empty nest syndrome is a psychological condition that affects parents when their children leave home and it leads to feelings of loneliness and depression. Although several psychological therapies have been created to lessen these consequences, their effect remains unknown.

**Objective:** The objective of this systematic review is to assess and compare the efficacy of various psychosocial therapies in reducing empty nest symptoms in the elderly.

**Methods:** A comprehensive literature search was conducted for research articles, using the terms "empty nest syndrome," "empty nesters", "elderly", "older adults", "psychosocial interventions," "therapies", "cognitive-behavioral therapy," "group therapy" and "social support". Database includes PubMed, Psyc INFO, Web of Science, and CINAHL databases.

**Results:** Seven empirical studies were discovered to be relevant to our research. The effect of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Group Psychological Intervention, Path-Oriented Psychological Self-Help Interventions, Self-Mutual-Group Model (SMG Model), and Group Based Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) on empty nest syndrome is evaluated. It has been discovered that these interventions have a positive impact on the mental health, quality of life, social interactions, and well-being of elderly empty nesters.

**Conclusion:** As this review indicates, empowering empty nest syndrome in older people with psychosocial therapies may significantly alleviate symptoms and enhance their overall well-being. Empty nesters' quality of life and mental health can be improved by implementing various empowering methods, which will help minimize the negative impacts of empty nest syndrome.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

A phase of transition that parents go through when their children move out is known as the "empty-nest syndrome." The empty nest syndrome is characterized by feelings of sadness, loss, fear, or difficulties redefining roles, which can lead to undesirable outcomes such as depression, alcoholism, identity crisis, and marital conflict.<sup>1</sup> The aged population may experience severe psychological discomfort due to this change, which will affect their quality of life. However, research studies are highlighting that empty nest syndrome has a positive impact too. Parents can consider it as a chance to reconnect and take up their hobbies.<sup>2</sup>

Mothers are more likely to experience empty nest syndrome, which can cause symptoms including worry, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Empty nest syndrome is becoming more common as a result of things like longer life expectancies and postponed childbearing. According to the research, 43% of empty nesters had depression. Depression was more common in urban empty nesters (38%), compared to 36% in rural ones. Various characteristics that are associated with depression in urban empty nesters, including age, gender, income, marital status, chronic illness, relationship with children, and social support.<sup>3</sup> Due to the prolonged lack of rapport and emotional support from children, empty nesters are more prone to suffer from health and psychological issues like depression, low quality of life, high risk

of death, and functional impairment.<sup>4</sup> If they do not get appropriate treatment, depression can cause sleep problems, suicidal thoughts, and high-risk behaviour.<sup>5</sup> According to further studies, those who are empty nesters are more likely to feel lonely and anxious, which raises their risk of mental health issues.<sup>6</sup> Empty nesters are more prone to experience psychological disorders than physical health issues, which can be caused by a variety of stressors such as the absence of children, a loss of interests, and a lack of social support. Research shows that proper social support enhances the psychological well-being of empty nesters.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, it is essential to identify effective psychosocial interventions for improving the psychological well-being of empty nesters. Such strategies can significantly enhance the quality of life, improve mental health outcomes, and minimize the demand on healthcare systems. Even if there are many different therapies available, a thorough comparison is still required for effective therapeutic practice.

### 1.2. Review Aims

This systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive summary of the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions for empty nest syndrome. The objectives of this review are to: (1) evaluate the effectiveness of different psychosocial interventions for empty nest syndrome in the elderly, (2) identify potential intervention methods, and (3) assess the impact of psychosocial interventions on various aspects of empty nest syndrome.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Search Strategy

PRISMA guidelines were followed in conducting this review. A comprehensive electronic database search was done as part of a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of psychosocial therapies for empty nest syndrome, including PubMed, Psyc INFO, Web of Science, and CINAHL database. The search used terms like "empty nest syndrome," "empty nesters," "elderly," "older adults," "psychosocial interventions," "therapies," "cognitive-behavioral therapy," "group therapy," and "social support," along with variations of these terms. Scientific papers from the year 2000 to 2023 were included in this review. Duplicate articles were removed in the first phase, and after the initial assessment of the literature, reviewers scrutinized abstracts and titles to identify those that met inclusion criteria.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The studies which were included in this systematic review met the following requirements: (1) studies examined the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions for empty nest syndrome; (2) studies employed quasi-experimental, randomized controlled trials or experimental studies; (3) articles published as original research articles in peer-reviewed journals; and (4) publications were published in English. The following types of papers were rejected: (1) studies with co-occurring mental problems in participants; (2) commentaries, editorials, qualitative research studies, review articles, case reports or case series, theses or dissertations; and (3) non-availability of full-text studies.

### 2.3. Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data from the included studies were collected systematically using a data extraction tool. The extracted data includes study characteristics, authors, study design, year, place of the study, participant demographics, intervention used, outcome measures, and findings.

The Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool was used to evaluate the quality of the included studies. It has been determined that quasi-experimental design and experimental studies have a high risk of bias due to a lack of blinding and potential selection bias. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that all studies show significant risks of bias particularly related to blinding and allocation concealment.

## 2. Results

### 3.1. Search Results and Study Selection

The search technique generated 357 studies with PubMed: 120, PsycINFO: 97, Web of Science: 75, and CINAHL: 65). There identified 220 duplicated papers and it were eliminated. After this, 137 papers remained for screening. During the screening phase, the titles and abstracts of the selected studies were examined. Consequently, 79 papers were eliminated because they were unsuitable for the present study. 58 studies were selected

for the eligibility phase. However, 51 of the chosen papers were rejected because the requirements for selection were not satisfied. Finally, seven empirical studies relevant to our investigation (Table 1) were identified. The PRISMA flow diagram (Fig. 1) contains additional details on the study selection process.

### 3.2. Summary of Included Studies

This review investigated the effectiveness of psychological therapies in increasing the well-being of empty nesters. The studies evaluated various psychosocial interventions for empty nest syndrome, including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Group Psychological Intervention, Path-Oriented Psychological Self-Help Interventions, Self-Mutual-Group Model (SMG Model), and Group Based Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT). According to the results of seven research studies, the interventions have a good effect on various aspects of mental and social health. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics and findings of these studies.

#### 3.2.1. Reduction in Anxiety and Depression by Group Psychological Interventions

The effectiveness of group-based psychological interventions in reducing anxiety and depression, and enhancing social support among empty nesters is highlighted by Yang Pei-y (2013). This shows that social relationships and emotional well-being can be fostered in group settings by offering a secure environment for experience sharing.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.2.2. Improvements in Mental Health Outcomes by 'Path-oriented Psychological Self-help Intervention'

Li-Na Wang et al. (2019) focus on a self-help approach led by nurses. This approach might render therapies easier and more affordable by enabling empty nesters to discover coping strategies and take responsibility for their mental health.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.2.3. Enhanced Social Support, Health Promotion and quality life by Self- Mutual- Group Model Interventions

The Self-Mutual-Group model, a holistic method emphasizing self-management, mutual support within a group environment, promoting healthy behaviours, and enhancing the quality of life is the primary concern of Chichen Zhang, Xiao Zheng et al. (2019), Chichen Zhang Huining Zhao et al (2019), and Chichen Zhang, Yaqing Xue, et al. (2021). This model seems to be beneficial for empty nesters by improving their quality of life, health-related behaviours, social support, and maybe certain aspects of their mental health.<sup>10-12</sup>

#### 3.3.3. Increased Psychological Resilience by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

According to Mitra Kabiri et al. (2022), cognitive behaviour therapy can help empty nesters become more psychologically resilient. Cognitive behaviour therapy prepares people with the ability to identify and overcome harmful thought patterns that lead to emotional discomfort. This research supports cognitive behaviour therapy as a further beneficial method for enhancing mental health in the empty nesters.<sup>13</sup>

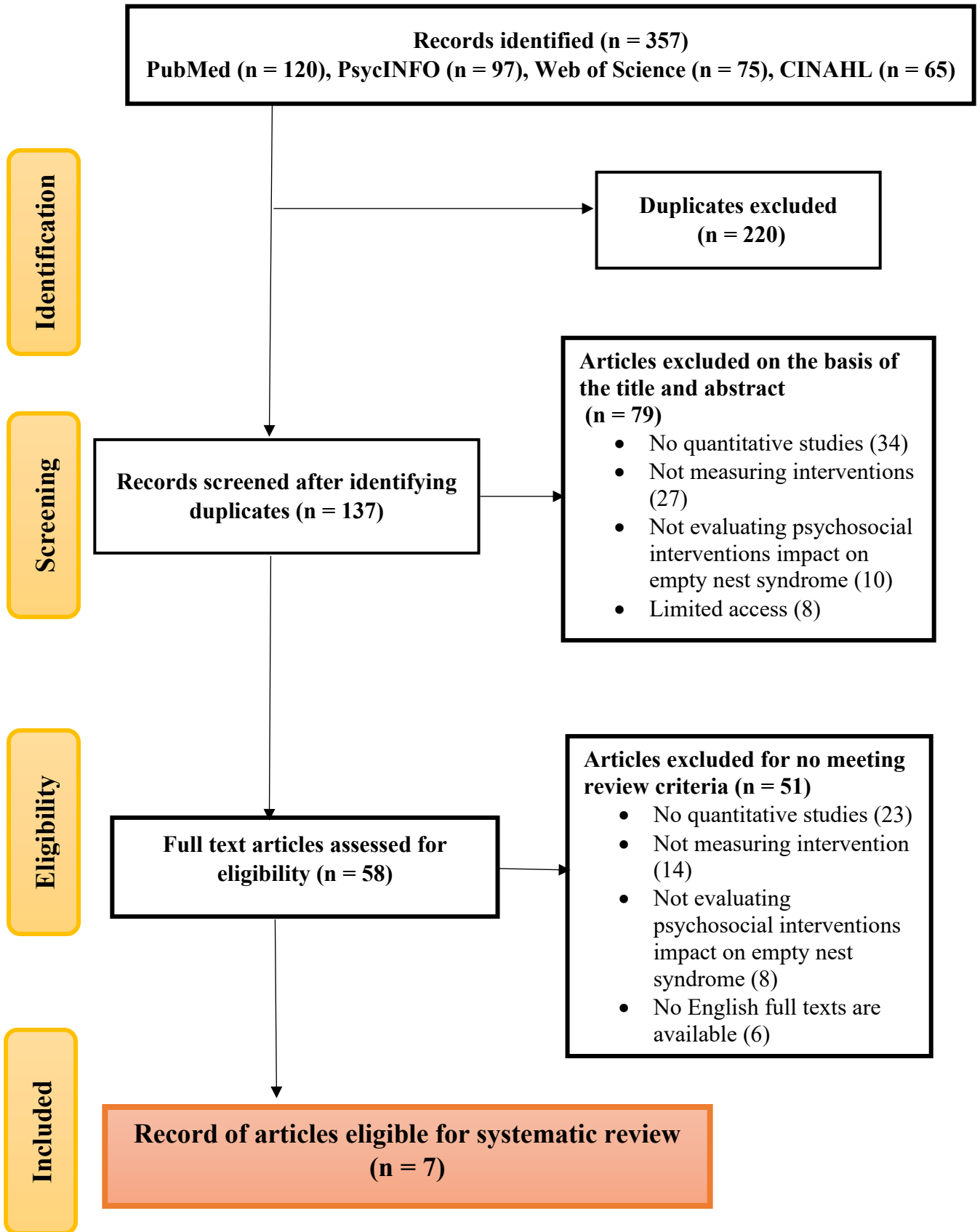
#### 3.3.4. Cognitive Flexibility and Emotional Self-Regulation by Group-based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

The benefits of Acceptance Commitment therapy on cognitive flexibility and emotional self-regulation in older adults with Empty Nest Syndrome were noted by Abdolbaset Mahmoudpour et al. in 2023. It is recommended as a substitute for cognitive behaviour therapy.<sup>14</sup>

Table 1: Summary of the characteristics and findings of these studies.

SL No	Author	Year & Nation	Type of Study	Number of Samples	Type of Intervention Used	Findings of the Study
1	Yang Pei-y	2013, China	Experimental Study	81	Group psychological intervention	Decreased level of anxiety and depression of empty nesters and improved their emotional well-being.
2	Li-Na Wang, Hong Tao, Mi Wang, Hong-Wei Yu, Hong Su, Bei Wu	2019, China	Quasi-Experimental Design	76	Path-oriented psychological self-help interventions	It has significant influence on the improvement of mental health outcomes.
3	Chichen Zhang, Huining Zhao, Ruifang Zhu, Jiao Lu, Lihong Hou, Xiaozhao Yousef Yang, Mei Yin, Tingzhong Yang	2019, China	Randomized Controlled Trial	350	Self-Mutual-Group model	It improved social support among the empty-nest elderly.
4	Chichen Zhang, Xiao Zheng, Ruifang Zhu, Lihong Hou, Xiaozhao Yousef Yang, Jiao Lu, Feng Jiang, Tingzhong Yang	2019, China	Randomized Controlled Trial	350	Self-Mutual-Group model	It improved health-promoting lifestyles among the empty nesters.
5	Chichen Zhang, Yaqing Xue, Yuan Cai, Jiao Lu, Xiao Zheng, Wenpei Yuan, Yi Qian	2021, China	Randomized Controlled Trial	396	Self-Mutual-Group model	It has a significant improvements in the quality of life of the empty nesters.
6	Mitra Kabiri, Kourosh Namdari, Ahmad Abedi	2022, Iran	Single-case Experimental Design	3	Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT)	CBT significantly increased psychological resilience in the elderly with empty nest syndrome.
7	Abdolbaset Mahmoudpour, Kimia Ferdousi Kejani, Mina Karami, Maryam Toosi, Soliman Ahmadboukani	2023, Iran	Quasi-Experimental Design	30	Group based - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)	ACT benefited cognitive flexibility and emotional self-regulation in elderly with empty nest syndrome.

**Fig 1: PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM**



## DISCUSSION

The current research offers strong evidence of the effectiveness of psychological therapies in overcoming the social and emotional issues that empty nesters encounter. There is potential for enhancing the well-being of empty nesters through group psychological intervention, path-oriented psychological self-help interventions, self-mutual-group model, and cognitive behavior therapy.

The mental health of the elderly has improved with group interventions, according to encouraging results.<sup>15</sup> Group interventions based on logotherapy are found to be especially beneficial for older persons who are experiencing psychological discomfort or low self-esteem.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that group reminiscence therapy enhances the social well-being of retired elderly, highlighting the significance of social relationships for mental health.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, research on community-based counseling therapies has shown improvements in depression and psychological well-being in the elderly, highlighting the advantages of meaningful activities for general well-being.<sup>18</sup> It is consistent with the evidence that group hope therapy considerably improves the quality of life for senior patients, indicating that hope-focused interventions can improve their well-being.<sup>19</sup> Saito Tami et al (2012) supported that social isolation prevention program has a positive influence on loneliness, depression, and the subjective well-being of elderly people.<sup>20</sup>

The findings of the present systematic review correlate with previous studies indicating the potential benefits of psychological self-help programmes in enhancing the psychological well-being of older adults.<sup>21,22</sup> Kim Eunyoung et al 2023 recommended the psychotherapy narration model for aiding the elderly population's mental well-being. This model includes person-centered therapy, positive psychology, and cognitive behavioral therapy.<sup>23</sup> According to Efendi Ferry et al. (2020), trauma-focused cognitive therapy can enhance the quality of life for elderly trauma victims and lower their depression levels. They can recover mental trauma with the help of systematic therapies and long-term training.<sup>24</sup> Another study results confirmed that psychological therapies, such as behavioural therapy, cognitive-behaviour therapy, and reminiscence therapy, are beneficial to older adults living in long-term care facilities by lowering their depressive symptoms, enhancing their quality of life, and improving their psychological well-being. It highlights the possible advantages of psychological therapies for the mental health of the elderly.<sup>25</sup>

These findings have significant clinical implications for healthcare providers who work with empty nest elderly. Interventions can be customized to meet the needs of each individual. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps improve emotional control and general well-being, and it is advised for individuals who are predominantly experiencing depression and anxiety. Encouraging social interaction and reducing loneliness can be achieved through social support programs and group therapy. When taken as a whole, these psychosocial interventions highlight the need for self-help and structured support in promoting mental health among empty nesters.

### 4.1. Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this review includes a comprehensive literature search across different databases. So it can include different types of psychosocial therapies, which provide a diverse perspective. However, there are several limitations, such as variation in intervention methods and high heterogeneity, and outcome indicators were not uniform. Hence the outcome of each intervention could not be compared. In addition, the quality of the included studies was varied, and the number of studies was small, also some therapies had insufficient long-term follow-up data.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this systematic review highlights the potential benefits of psychosocial therapies in reducing empty nest syndrome among the elderly. Despite significant limitations such

as research quality and heterogeneity, some therapies appear effective. Future research recommendations include conducting longitudinal studies to assess long-term benefits and sustainability. It is suggested to assess cost-effectiveness to inform healthcare policy and investigate the underlying mechanisms of these interventions. Moreover, develop standardized outcome measures for better cross-study comparisons. This attempt will help for a better understanding of empty nest syndrome and improve the intervention strategies.

**Declarations of competing interest:** All authors report no conflicts of interest.

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