

# Emigration leaves torn hearts behind

'Death' of relationships has far-reaching effects

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**T**HERE'S being "dead and gone" and there's being "gone but not dead". Either way they're both about loss and that's exactly how some people describe their experience of being left behind when emigration claims their friends and family.

Professor Maria Marchetti-Mercer, head of psychology at the University of Pretoria, has been researching the emotional impact of emigration on South African families and the impact of this fragmentation and disruption in relationships on the country's social fabric.

"Emigration is the death of relationships as we know them, yet the emotional trauma of emigration is not fully considered. The emphasis is on the nuclear family leaving and not who is left behind.

"And often the family leaving have no emotional energy left after dealing with the logistics and practical necessities of emigration.

"They withdraw emotionally and have to become quite selfish to survive the process. As a result they aren't able to deal with the feelings of grief and mourning that their friends and family members may experience," says Marchetti-Mercer, herself once a migrant, having arrived in South Africa from Italy at the age of 11.

Marchetti-Mercer's research also shows that friends and family have anguished ambivalence about the move.

Common remarks she heard from those who took part in her qualitative research over the last two years included: "You can't be sad, because you're supposed to be happy for them and their new futures"; "I can't bear going to another farewell party – it's like going to a funeral"; and "They say they're doing it in the best interest of the children – does that mean that because I'm choosing to stay in South Africa that I'm a bad parent?"

Marchetti-Mercer was a recent speaker in the Wits Origins



**MOVING:** Professor Maria Marchetti-Mercer of the University of Pretoria has studied the emotional side of emigration. PICTURE: BELIEVE NYAKUDJARA

Centre's public lecture series. She describes emigration as the hole left behind once a tree is uprooted.

It's estimated that more than a million South Africans have emigrated since 1994.

The number could be higher because people no longer declare emigrating when they pass through border control.

Emigration takes on many

— 66 —  
**Does staying in SA mean that I'm a bad parent?**

forms, and reasons for leaving vary.

There are those who leave the door open for returning; some say they're only going to "look and see"; and there are those who leave with the intention of a complete severance from the country.

But the emotional toil is the same, Marchetti-Mercer says, and there are common myths that people buy into, perhaps to lessen the blow of separation. Some of these include thinking that they will come back if things don't work out; that in a globalised

world international travel is easy; and that modern technology helps people to stay in touch.

"If a family return, they may find that their friends and family members have moved on with their lives and they have to re-negotiate their relationships.

"International travel is expensive and tiring, especially for older parents who are often the ones left behind, and technology is often an illusion of intimacy," she says.

As a family therapist, Marchetti-Mercer advises families and close friends to pay attention to the emotional cost of emigration and to develop individualised coping mechanisms.

"Some people need a ritual to mark the end of the relationship; others need to be able to mourn and express their feelings of abandonment and loss openly. Setting up local support groups with others going through the same experience can also help," she says.

Marchetti-Mercer's research, which was funded by the National Research Foundation, will be published as a book.

She says the research insights can help people tackle emigration with more emotional flexibility and to maybe emerge with not a broken heart, but a heart supple enough to reside in two places.