

Surviving the Loss of a Sibling



One of the most misunderstood and neglected areas of bereavement is sibling grief. Society tends to overlook sibling grief and concentrate more on the grief of a parent or child. Personnel policies at work may offer more funeral leave for a parent than a sibling. Many books, brochures or articles are available about grief but most of the literature fails to touch on the unique grief adults feel when one of their siblings dies. Indeed, most of the literature dealing with sibling death is designed for children.

As with any grief, sibling grief is unique – it is influenced by the emotional bond and attachment level you had with your sibling. For younger siblings, there was never a time in their life when their older sibling did not exist. Older siblings may not remember the time before their younger sibling became a part of their life. For many, siblings are the first people with whom we socialize on an equal basis. We grow around each other, not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally. We learn to test, harmonize, play, joke, fight and jockey for family positions with our sibling. We have our share of good times, but we also have bad experiences with them. They are familiar yet unique. They are exasperating and entertaining. Sometimes we consider them friends and sometimes we do not. They are an important part of our lives because we have known them for a long time.

A sibling relationship carries with it a bond that is difficult to sever. You can choose to drop a friend, divorce a spouse, or fire an employee, and that relationship will end. You cannot, however, fire a brother or divorce a sister. You may not have been very close; you may not have spoken for years; you may not even like him or her; but there was still a bond between you.

Changes in the Family System

When a sibling dies, roles within the family system change. Each family member – mother, father, brother, sister -- plays a unique role within their family system. You may have been considered the rebellious child or the family prankster, or you may have been the responsible child or the one who got blamed for everything. These roles often change as we become adults, but most adults hold on to some relational habits from their childhood. However, when your sibling died, you lost not only a unique loved one but also that person's role within the family system. If your sibling organized the

family parties, someone else must now take that role. If your sibling was the peacemaker during family quarrels, someone else must now take on that responsibility. You may feel your sibling's loss deeply as you become aware of the special part he or she played within your family. It is normal that you and other siblings will try to "fill in" some of these roles. Some changes may take place quite naturally and easily, while others may feel awkward and cause conflict within the family.

Part of your role within your family may be related to birth order. If your oldest sibling died, you may have lost a caregiver or someone to whom you've always looked up. If the "baby" of the family died, you may have lost the one you protected the most. If the age difference was great enough between you and the brother or sister who died, you may feel almost as though you have lost a parent or child.

When a brother or sister dies, there is a change in the birth order. If the oldest sibling died, the second oldest is now the oldest. If there was just the two of you, you are now an "only child." If your sibling was your twin or part of a multiple birth, you probably feel that part of yourself died, too. You may even feel that the "wrong one" died. Another sibling may remind you of your dead brother or sister, either physically or in some other way. If your sibling had children, these children may remind you in a painful way of your loss. In spite of society's lack of knowledge of the depth of your grief, you are painfully aware of the hole left by your sibling's death.

Many bereaved siblings find it difficult to answer social questions pertaining to their life. When someone casually asks, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" or, "How many are there in your family?" you may feel unable to respond. There is no "right" way to answer these questions. You may answer differently from time to time depending on how you feel and the setting in which you find yourself. Some feel very strongly that if they don't mention a dead loved one they are denying their existence or their importance to the family. Other feel, at times, they don't want to explain their sibling's death, so they respond differently.

Relationships with Parents

Many bereaved siblings discover that the relationship with their parents changed when their sibling died. Regardless of your age, you and your siblings will always be your parents' children. Under the stress of coping with the death of their child, your parents may now react to you as though you were still a small child. It is important to understand that your parents are struggling with the "unnaturalness" of losing a child before their own death. Most people understand that someday they will have to bury their parents, but no one expects to have to bury a child. It is startling, especially if you have been enjoying an adult relationship with your parents, to suddenly be treated as an eight-year-old. You may find your parents trying to comfort you at the expense of themselves or attempting to protect you from the reality of the death. They are probably trying very hard to keep you from witnessing the depths of their own grief, which makes it difficult to share feelings with one another. You may struggle to make

sense of the fact that each parent is grieving differently from you. If you sense a barrier is forming within your family system, talk with your parents and give them some solid ways they can be supportive of you. In turn, invite them to tell you what you can do to comfort them. In times of crisis, it is very easy to fall into old parent/child habits, but it doesn't have to be that way. They will need to give a little, but so will you.

Similarly, you may find yourself falling into old patterns of behavior in an effort to protect your parents. You may feel they hurt enough without having to watch you grieve. You may go to incredible lengths to hide your pain from them. It may seem right for you to make decisions for your parents or take on parental responsibilities in an effort to care for them and make their lives a little easier. Occasionally, people are so paralyzed by their initial grief that they cannot make good decisions or care for themselves. In those cases you may end up "parenting your parents." Usually, though, adult children and parents care for one another because it gives them something to do with their grief. Ask if your parents feel you are over-protecting or smothering them. Respect their response and adapt as best you can.

In addition to losing your sibling, you may feel that you've lost your parents as well. Your parents may always have been there for you in times of crisis. Even if you aren't close to your parents, it can be painful to suddenly become aware of their vulnerability. You may never have seen your parents vulnerable or thought of them as unique individuals, independent of their roles as your mother and father. This may be the first time you've turned to your parents for support and they can't solve the problem or make it better for you. You may need to grieve the loss of your parents whom you viewed as always strong, always in control and never vulnerable. For some, the loss of parental figures is nearly as significant as the death of the sibling. In time you may be able to develop a new relationship with your parents. Talk with them about what you observe, and ask them to share with you how they see you differently. Let them know you want to use these new understandings to build a new, more mature relationship with them.

Other Losses

Like watching a rock tossed into the lake, you may feel as though your grief expands to every area of your life. If your sibling was married, your family may lose contact with his or her spouse and children, if there were any. It's easy to assume that your brother- or sister-in-law will stay close, but sometimes they do not. They may fear that their presence is too painful for your family, or that they are no longer considered part of the family. If you want to stay close with them, be direct about your desires and take the responsibility for staying in touch. Many widows or widowers remarry, which can be extremely painful to the family of the dead husband or wife. Remember, if you can, that no one will replace your sibling and that remarrying is not an act of disloyalty. A new spouse will probably be very unsure about his or her relationship with your family and will welcome some clarification from you. If your sibling had children, they are precious reminders of your sibling's life. Discovering traits and physical features in

nieces and nephews that are similar to those of our sibling is both joyous and painful. Similarly, special moments in their lives – graduations, marriages, the births of their children – are bittersweet, as they will always highlight your sibling's absence. Children will want to learn about that parent from those who knew him or her. Maintaining a relationship with nieces and nephews is one way bereaved siblings have honored the memory of their brother or sister.

If you are married, your own spouse may feel like one of the forgotten victims. Your spouse may have had a special relationship with your sibling yet doesn't have the same official ties with your family. Your spouse may have the stress of being supportive of you and your family while at the same time coming to grips with her or his own unique loss. Additionally, just as you have lost the parents you knew prior to your sibling's death, your spouse has lost the person you were as well. Your spouse's grief may be different but it should be recognized and accepted.

Friendships often change after a family member's death. Even those who did not know your sibling may drift away. They may not know what to say or do; they may feel uncomfortable with your grief; or they simply may not want to deal with the changes that have occurred in your life. If they also were friends of your dead sibling, they, too, will be grieving. You may find yourself growing closer to those who knew your sister or brother, or you may find yourself moving away.

It has been said that when your parents die, you lose your past; when your spouse dies, you lose your present; and when your child dies, you lose your future. However, when your sibling dies, you lose your past, your present and your future. After all, the relationship between siblings is potentially the longest of their lives.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as total acceptance or closure to bereavement. You may already be painfully aware that you are a different person from who you were before your sibling died. The death of an adult sibling at any age is a major loss. The acknowledgement and support of this important loss by family members, friends, co-workers, and even by the surviving siblings themselves, can ease the path toward healing. Your family also has changed. You may have learned new things about yourself, even found some unexpected strengths and sensitivities, but you would give them all up to have your sibling back. Your future has been altered because it no longer contains one of the persons with whom you expected to grow old. It's important to remember that grief is entirely appropriate when a love is lost. Over time and with a lot of work, however, hopefully you will regain a greater awareness of laughter, happy times, and celebrations of what your sibling's life meant to you.

From: <http://www.madd.org/VICTIMS/we-hurt-too.shtml>, by Stephanie Frogge, MTS, CTS and Carolyn Cantrell, MSSW

If you need additional information regarding sibling loss and grief, or just need to talk to someone, please call us anytime, at Abbey Hospice, 770-464-5858.