

Adult Loss of a Sibling

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There is no other loss in adult life that appears to be so neglected as the death of a brother or sister. Rarely has it been the subject of investigation or discussion. Nevertheless, this is a loss to which most of us are repeatedly exposed. While we have only one mother, one father, and one spouse (at least at any given point in time), it is not uncommon to have several siblings. Therefore we are more exposed to sibling deaths than to other losses.

Social Expectations

There is a general social expectation that the death of a brother or sister in adulthood will have little or no disruptive effect on us. Yet few adults have no contact with their siblings. This expectation seems to be based on the presumption that child and spouse loss are the most distressing. Usually, if given the opportunity to think about it, people also can understand an adult's bereavement after a parent's death. In contrast to this, however, there is a failure to appreciate the significance of brothers and sisters in adult life. While the effects of childhood sibling bereavement have been investigated, there has not been the same degree of interest in adult sibling bereavement.

The Sibling Relationship

There are special characteristics unique to the sibling bond. It is a relationship that can be quite profound, either positively or negatively.

Brothers and sisters influence each other's identity in fundamental ways. Just the existence of an older sibling, regardless of the relationship that exists, has a number of implications for the younger siblings in terms of (1) birth order; (2) parental attention, affection, and expectations; and (3) the world the younger siblings are born into. The research on birth order and its influence on self-concept, personality, and all subsequent life experiences is quite striking. It demonstrates clearly the impact of brothers and sisters on our lives, and this is without taking into consideration the precise relationship that exists among them.

When these relationships are taken into account, even more dramatic influences are apparent. As we naturally seek security, attention, and love from our parents, it is only normal that we perceive our brothers and sisters as competitors for these precious parental commodities. Sibling rivalry is not something that requires much explanation, at least not to those of us who have siblings! Along with this, just living together in the intimacy of family life will put us in positions with our siblings where normal feelings of tension and aggression are bound to erupt. Yet siblings are also often sources of affection and security as well as of conflict. For this reason, ambivalence about siblings is not uncommon.

Sibling relationships may be close and intimate, distant and formal, or anything in between. By its very nature, the sibling relationship is ripe for ambivalence. How much will depend on a whole set of variables outside the scope of this book. What is important to remember is that sibling

relationships are often marked by attachment as well as antagonism, caring as well as competition, and loyalty as well as lingering resentment. Certainly one of the primary factors influencing your grief response over the death of your brother or sister is the type of relationship you had with him or her.

Meaning of the Loss

Let's assume that your brother or sister was raised with you, that you had the same parents, and that you were close enough in age that you had normal sibling contact. If your circumstances were different, the following comments will be less applicable to you.

When you lose a brother or sister in adult life, you experience many of the same losses as you would if you had lost that sibling in childhood. However, despite the fact that you are more mature and have access to the resources you require, you have the disadvantage that there is less social recognition of the loss as an important one. Like those who lose parents in adulthood, unless your sibling was very much a part of your family's life, this death may not have the same impact on other members of your immediate family as it does on you. While your sibling may have been a pivotal person in your life, he or she may have been insignificant to others who now are quite important parts of your life. For this reason, your family may not understand your grief or help you with it in the way they could if someone they knew well had died. They may not understand what the loss means to you or why it affects you like it does, since they did not know you when your sibling was more a part of your life.

The death of a brother or sister means that you have lost someone who was a part of your formative past. This person shared common memories with you, along with critical childhood experiences and family history. This person has known you as a child and is a part of the roots to your past. Chances are that he or she experienced you in unique and intimate ways. Some of these might have been quite pleasant, such as sharing family traditions and holidays. Some might have been unpleasant or situations in which you had little control: seeing you in embarrassing situations, participating in family jokes against you, being hurt by your childhood insensitivity, and so forth. This person knows the family scripts for you and the family myths about you.

You may not agree with your sibling's perceptions of all you have been through together. In fact, it is not uncommon if you don't. Most of us remember our childhood in ways that differ somewhat from our siblings. Also, our perceptions may be quite different now because of the people we have become. At times, those who have known us longest are the ones who least recognize our changes since then, precisely because they are operating with old information that is hard to alter. Nevertheless your sibling *was* there, and the unique co-history you two share can be an important bond between you. When death takes your brother or sister, it also takes away one of your connections to the past, someone who knew you in a very special way, totally unlike those who know you now as an adult.

When your brother or sister dies, you lose someone who has been in your life for a very long time. A constant in your life is gone. This itself may make you feel a little insecure, a little

anxious. Although you may not have had frequent contact with your sibling, at least you knew that another member of the family was there. While your sibling may not have been a current real force in your life, he or she probably was a symbolic one, and certainly was one in reality in the past. This person's death can make you feel older. It points out to you that your family is dwindling. If this person was your final connection to your family of origin, you are now the last one left out of those you started out with.

Because your brothers and sisters share your same genetic background, the death of one of them may increase your concerns about your own death. You may see implications about your own death, such as how you will die and at what age. This identification can cause you some stress later on when you reach the age at which an older sibling died.

Your Grief

Depending upon your relationship with your sibling and the manner of death, your grief probably will follow the typical responses to loss outlined elsewhere in this book (see chapters 2 and 3 for more on this). You may also, however, experience additional feelings of guilt. This often stems from the ambivalence of the sibling relationship and from any relief that you feel, understandably, that you are not the one who has died. If there had been increased stress in recent years, this too could cause guilt and regret after the death. Any type of stress may have affected your adult relationship with your brother or sister, either bringing you closer together or driving you farther apart. For example:

- Developmental stress, as when one of you becomes widowed and temporarily becomes a little more dependent
- Psychosocial stress, as when one of you receives a promotion and moves away
- Emotional stress, as when one of you cannot have children and is jealous of the other who can
- Physical stress, as when one of you develops a serious illness bringing pain and debilitation
- Economic stress, such as when one of you loses your job and is in financial jeopardy
- Guilt, as well as sadness, also can develop when you recall that in younger days you had been closer, but that as adults this had changed. This is normal; as adults you had fewer common experiences than when you were younger and shared more of your lives. But the recognition of this difference still can be uncomfortable.

Conversely, you can experience guilt, sadness, and regret because the relationship never was what you ideally would have wanted it to be. Perhaps you never had the closeness that you would have liked. If you feel this type of regret, you will grieve not only for what you had and lost but also for what you never had at all.

This grieving for what you never had can be intensified if you have been raised with unrealistic expectations about family relationships. Television sitcoms from the 1950s to the early 1970s wanted us to believe that siblings and their parents related to each other with uninterrupted warmth and concern that permitted little resentment or frustration. The sitcoms of the later 1970s and 1980s are much more real, some of them irritatingly so. However, they do us less of a disservice. Those of us

who grew up with the earlier ones lack what the youth of today see portrayed on their television sets—the information that there always will be ambivalence in our closest relationships. Far too many of us suffer from the guilt and resentment that can develop in grief from unrealistic expectations. In few situations is this more apparent than following the death of a brother or sister.

Your survival itself can be another source of guilt. There were probably times when you wished that your sibling were not around, would disappear, or would drop dead. These feelings usually come back to haunt us. Also, since we do share the same biological backgrounds, we may wonder why death took our sibling first. Unanswered questions about this also can fuel survival guilt.

The adult who loses a sibling shares many similar issues with parents who lose adult children. While certainly the relationship is different, the concerns of the person left behind and the responses they receive may be very similar. For example, you may find that you do not have much part in decisions pertaining to your sibling's death and the funeral or other rituals. These decisions are usually made by your sibling's spouse and children. When this lack of control is combined with the failure of others to recognize that you are profoundly bereaved, it can be most difficult for you. For example, you may not be included in ceremonies honoring your deceased sibling with whom you have shared your last fifty years, while others in his life, who had known him for far less time, are recognized as legitimate mourners.

Also like bereaved parents of adult children, you may find it hard to accept that your brother or sister has really died if you have become accustomed to his or her living elsewhere. There is no acute absence to signal to you that he or she is permanently gone. Seeing the responsibilities left unfulfilled (especially regarding the children left behind), struggling with discomfort when your former in-law starts dating again, worrying about losing contact with your nieces and nephews, or fearing that your deceased sibling's children will not be brought up in the way he or she would have wanted — these are all issues that you can share with parents whose adult children die. (See chapter 12 for more discussion of these shared issues.)

If your sibling died from a long-term illness, the experience may have brought up old rivalries as attention, time, or financial resources of parents and other family members were directed toward your dying sibling. This and other experiences inherent in the terminal illness may have increased resentment on your part (see chapter 7 for more on this). After the death of your sibling, this resentment can come back to haunt you. You will need to put the normal issues of sibling ambivalence in perspective with the normal issues of losing a loved one after a long-term terminal illness in order to cope most effectively with this aspect of your grief.

Like any other death in the family, the death of your brother or sister will force you and the other surviving family members to reorganize your roles and relationships with one another (see chapter 8 for more on this). You may experience additional loss or stress as a consequence. The death may change your position in the family — you may now be the eldest child and be expected to care for an invalid parent, or you may have become any only child. The death also may give you a new status in the family. For example, you now may get some recognition for your achievements, since you are no longer being compared with your older sibling. As with younger children, your parents'

responses to the death of your sibling will have a profound impact on you, your grief, and many aspects of your subsequent life. Subtly conveyed messages that the "wrong" child has died, impaired parent-child relationships stemming from parental grief, increased or inappropriate roles assigned to you, and abnormal parental grief responses such as expecting you to become like your deceased sibling — all are unhealthy for them and for you as well.

Time changes sibling relationships, as it does all others. As with your parents, you may find that you can sustain a much better relationship with your sibling when you are both independent adults and involved in your own families and lives. Sometimes this happens after your parents die and you are no longer embroiled in the same old sibling conflicts. When death robs you of a sibling to whom you only recently grew closer, it may seem particularly unfair, untimely, and cruel.

As society fails to validate this as an important loss for you, and many of the people who are close to you did not know your sibling or recognize his or her importance to you, you may very well fail to get the social support you need in order to grieve successfully. You may have to demand this support and assert your right to grieve for this loss.

The death of your sibling may receive little social acknowledgment, but the loss can affect you in many ways. This stems from the special roles siblings play in our development and the need to contend with the ambivalence that marks most sibling relationships at some point in their history.



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