



National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization
Palliative Care Resource Series

SIBLING GRIEF

Diane Snyder Cowan, MA, MT-BC, CHPCA
Director, Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center
Hospice of the Western Reserve
Cleveland, OH

Sibling relationships are like no other. There is a commonality that does not often exist in other relationships. When a sibling dies, the loss can be overpowering. Siblings are often thought of as the “forgotten mourners.” Friends, neighbors, and other family members offer comfort and support to Mom and Dad, and often neglect siblings which can disenfranchise their grief.

Sibling relationships are usually the longest lasting relationships in a person’s life. Time spent with siblings in the early years is often greater than time spent with parents. Siblings share a sense of genetics, family, belonging, and culture. Siblings teach each other how to function and communicate with the world.

Siblings share a special bond and a special history. When a sibling dies, this history is shattered and a void is created. The future is altered. Special occasions will never be the same. Birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays are often bittersweet. A sibling cannot shout across the room or pick up the phone and call her sister to tell her the “good news” or the “bad news.” And while siblings do adjust, life is different. It is forever changed.

GRIEF REACTIONS

Based on their developmental age, children will have different grief reactions. Younger children may experience magical thinking. They often feel responsible for their sibling’s death.

- I was so mad that Levon got all the attention that I wished him dead... It’s my fault.
- I want to go to heaven to visit Deidre.
- What time will Deidre be home?

At the other end of the spectrum are adolescents. Teens in the midst of individuation may be moving away from their parental system. This can lead to regression and/or challenging behaviors. Adolescents often want to protect parents from additional pain and, in fact, may not exhibit any grief responses until the family routine is re-established and parents (Mom particularly) are more stable.

While everyone’s grief is unique, common emotions that impact siblings when a brother or sister dies include the following:

Abandonment – When a sibling dies, there are often secondary losses. In addition to the death of their sister or brother, children may feel that they have lost their parents for a period of time or even permanently. While many parents are able to model healthy grief, some parents retreat into their grief or into their work and are unable to parent. They are unable to attend to their surviving child’s grief. This can profoundly change family dynamics.

Increased responsibility – When parents are unable to parent, the surviving sibling often doesn’t just feel a sense of increased responsibility, he/she may actually assume more duties such as managing the household and caring for younger surviving siblings.

Loss of innocence – World views are shattered. The permanence of death is revealed for the first time. There is a marked sense of maturity in children who have experienced the death of a sibling.

Guilt – In addition to survivor guilt, siblings may feel that they could have done more in the care of their brother or sister. If their sibling was seriously ill, they may feel guilty that they are now glad to get their parents to themselves. They may feel guilty about being happy to have their own room. If the death was sudden or due to suicide, they may feel guilt for not having recognized any signs and symptoms even if there weren't any.

Anger and resentment – Many siblings feel anger after the death of their brother or sister. Most of the anger is a direct result of the death and the changes that have occurred in their life at home, at school, and with their friends. Sometimes the difficulty accepting the loss makes it easier to focus on anger. It can be a way to avoid the enormity of the loss. It may be easier to focus on who is responsible in an attempt to have control over a situation that cannot be controlled. Time is needed to work through these angry feelings to prevent anger from becoming toxic.

Fear and anxiety – Siblings often report that they are fearful of death or getting sick. This fear and worry can persist for years. For sibling survivors, the fragility of life is real. Brothers and sisters look at their own lives and wonder if they might be next. Who else might die? Will it be Mom and/or Dad? Who will care for me?

Reluctance (withholding own needs) – Because they do not want to add to their parent's burden, older siblings often withhold their own needs. They allow their grief to go unnoticed. It's almost as if they disenfranchise their own grief.

Somatic symptoms including symptoms that mimic those of the deceased sibling – Headaches, stomach aches, changes in eating and sleeping are usually signs of grief in younger siblings and also still need to be checked out.

POSITIVE CHANGES AND GROWTH

Despite these intense grief reactions, positive changes may also occur after the death of a sibling. Older surviving siblings can begin a period of deep self-reflection and begin to make significant life changes. For siblings of all ages, maintaining a connection with the deceased sibling often brings comfort. Siblings will often talk to their deceased brother or sister. They can sense their presence as well as their absence. They often perform rituals. A four-year-old wanted to step on the backyard deck and access a ladder to the sky so she could converse with her brother. An eight-year-old created "heaven" under a cluster of trees where she held a tea party with her deceased sister. Parents often watch these exchanges with tenderness and envy.

Other examples of growth after the death of a sibling include:

Increased sensitivity and awareness – Brothers and sisters who have had a sibling die are often more aware of the suffering of others. They are seemingly more mature, empathic, and insightful about what is important in their lives.

Inspiration and determination – The death of a sibling can be the catalyst for pursuit of a specific career. Whomever the surviving child was supported by during this time, whether it be a doctor, a social worker, a lawyer, a paramedic, etc. can often lay the groundwork for a future career path

Resilience – Children are often considered resilient. They have an inner ability to adapt and overcome adversity as well as to rebuild their lives after a tragedy. Resilience improves with age as siblings gain critical thinking and self-management skills. Supportive relationships are crucial and if the family is in turmoil others are needed to provide encouragement. Culture, tradition, and mourning rituals may support the development of resilience.

HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS AND COUNSELORS

Use honesty and simplicity when describing what happened. Children may become confused by inaccurate terms used to describe dying, such as, “your sister is sleeping” or “we lost your brother today.” Use words such as “dead” and “died.” Older children may want detailed descriptions of the death event.

Be available to listen when they are ready to talk. Sometimes children are not ready to talk when we are ready to listen. In that case, tell them you will be available when they are ready. When listening, give your undivided attention (no calls or other interruptions).

Describe the feelings of grief they might expect to have – sad, angry, guilty, scared, worried, relieved, etc. Give examples of how you have dealt with some of these feelings. Address fears by telling them what you are doing to keep them safe and healthy. If their sibling died of illness, be sure to emphasize the fact that most people recover from illnesses.

Demonstrate and discuss appropriate ways to express feelings. Share your sadness and tears with your children. Children may avoid activities or conversations in order to prevent their family members from crying or feeling sad. Reassure them that it’s okay if you cry after they say or do something and that they are not responsible for your tears. Be sure they know that crying can help them feel better.

Encourage involvement in memorializing activities. If possible, include siblings in planning the funeral or memorial services. Be sure to explain what will happen during the different parts of the service. Involve children in remembering activities: collecting photos, retelling their stories, or creating a memory box with mementos of your loved one. In addition, make plans to remember the sibling on special occasions and holidays.

Contact the school after the death. Direct school staff about what should be shared and your comfort level with the school's grief support. Prepare the child for a return to school by making a plan with the child and school to establish a safe place for the child to be alone at school if/when needed. Identify a safe person the child may talk with at school. Modify academic expectations as needed.

Sibling relationships are like no other. There may be attachments or estrangements between brothers and sisters. There may be deep love or simple civility. Regardless of the bond, siblings are the ties to family. Siblings know the best and the worst of each other. They were the protectors and the antagonists. They know the history and hopes for the future. They cannot be replaced but can be held lovingly in the heart and mind.

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