

Sibling Grief

When a brother or sister dies, the sudden reality of the death may be too much for families to accept. Siblings who are left with this pain may experience extreme loneliness because they believe that no one understands what they're going through. They may feel they cannot share their feelings with other members of the family because they want to protect them from additional pain. Due to the shock and confusion that murder brings, there will be no comprehension of why their brother or sister was so quickly taken from them.

Why Sibling Grief is Different

Siblings have their own method of grieving. Their parents lost a child, they have lost a sibling and the relationship is completely different. Many times siblings will experience a loss of identity as their self-image is inter-related with the person lost. Siblings may experience varied emotions including anger, guilt, grief and abandonment. They may attempt to deal with these powerful feelings through denial or suppression. Sometimes the siblings experience may be further complicated by the failure of others to recognize their loss. They may be coping not only with the loss of a sibling but also with the loss of functional parents.

People forget the importance of siblings in our lives.

- It's the longest relationship we'll have in our lives. We are typically only a few years apart when one is born and we become aware of each other. We usually know them longer than our parents, spouses, and children.
- We witness more life events and life changes with our siblings than anyone else.
- We share a sense of genetics, sense of family, belonging, and culture.
- They teach us how to function in society and communicate with others.
- The time spent together in our early years is greater than with our parents.

Actual Comments from Siblings

- Denial - "Because murder is too hard to accept, I denied it happened. I did it for my own protection. I pretended it happened to someone else."
- Anger - "Verbally I would lash out at everyone. I couldn't express any other feeling. My sister was gone and as far as I was concerned, it was the world's fault."
- Guilt - "My guilt led me to ask questions like 'Why am I still here?,' 'Why wasn't it me?,' and 'What did I do wrong for this to happen to my sister?'"
- Fear - "When my brother was murdered, I thought who is next in our family? All of a sudden our family is a target and we can't hide and protect ourselves from further harm."
- Physical Distress - "I couldn't relax. My body suffered from stress with headaches, neck aches and having a few hours of sleep including nightmares didn't help."
- Loss of Innocence - "I'm no longer a child it seems. Murder made me grow-up too fast and I lost a big part of my childhood that I can never get back."
- Protective - "When my sister was murdered, I was taking the role of my parents. I came to their side to comfort them. It took a while for me to think of my own grief."
- Loneliness - "I had a friend of ten years tell me she couldn't handle being my friend anymore. She told me she didn't want to continue our relationship because she thought that murder would spread to her and her family."

- Depression - "I didn't want to get up from bed. If I did, I would dread going outside. I didn't want to see anyone. I felt that I couldn't trust anyone anymore, so I didn't want to make eye contact."

Sibling survivors are often called the forgotten mourners. When a sibling dies, those siblings left behind, no matter their ages, are considered secondary mourners to the parents and/or if the sibling who died had a spouse and children. For those siblings still living at home, they will “lose” their parents for some time as the parents grieve the death of the deceased child. Parents can become so engrossed in their grief that they forget their living children still need reassurance they are loved and wanted. Because of the murder, the surviving siblings’ roles in the family are altered. They might feel the need to parent their parents or protect them from anything else bad happening. The opposite could also happen where the parents try to shield the living children, afraid of losing them, too.

While everyone will experience the loss of a loved one at some time in his or her life, and no loss is easy, losing a brother or sister is especially difficult because of the bond formed between siblings.

Siblings are commonly referred to as the “forgotten” griever. When someone passes, whether from disease, natural causes or accidental death, counselors and family members rush in to help. They are concerned about the children, the surviving wife or husband, the parents, the physical realities of the loss - the house, the funeral, the insurance. But sometimes the siblings are the last to be considered, especially as adults.

Bereaved siblings should be allowed the time to process their grief as normally as possible, by accepting the loss as real, and by developing coping and remembrance strategies for moving forward. Of course, reactions are highly individualized, and contemporary research on grieving indicates that everyone processes grief in his or her own way and time frame.

The nature of the sibling relationship determines the intensity of emotions and ability to move through the normal stages of grief. The sibling relationship can often be the longest relationship individuals will have in their lifespan, and that kind of bond typically takes longer to heal. In many cases, survivors feel that they have lost a part of themselves, and people do not simply move on from such a personal and permanent loss. When the siblings are twins, the bond can be even stronger. Much like a married couple that has been together for 40 years, their lives are sometimes inexplicably intertwined.

Symptoms of grief

Typically, younger individuals lack the cognitive ability to be able to associate their emotions with the death of a brother or sister. Their emotions simply come out in the form of anger, withdrawal, or difficult-to-diagnose physical symptoms. As defined by the Children’s Grief Education Association, young people typically experience the following symptoms of grief:

- Denial
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares
- Sense of presence of the deceased
- Thoughts about the deceased

If any of these symptoms go on for extended periods of time, if the surviving child appears to be obsessed with the lost sibling, or seems to believe the sibling is still alive, then grief therapy should be sought out. It is important that parents and counselors are honest with the surviving sibling, that the counseling is age-appropriate, and that there is a supportive system of sharing and open communication that allows the child to grieve.

Proximity in age between siblings is another important consideration in sibling grief. If siblings are close together in age, a death often raises questions of the survivor's own mortality. It might cause prolonged periods of denial and shock, as the surviving sibling may not have expected the loss.

Intensified guilt is another likely emotion in children concerning a sibling's death. Children in particular are likely to feel guilty because they don't understand or comprehend the reasons for death. They might have said or thought something about "wishing they were dead," and then experience extreme guilt and misunderstanding over the loss.

In general, children go through the same stages of grief, and have the same range of emotions, as adults. In fact, children's emotions are often more obvious than an adult's, as they do not have mature coping strategies or an emotional framework for their grief. Whether the situation involves an adult surviving sibling, an adolescent or a child, grief must be dealt with openly or the pain will never fully go away.

Pointers for Parents

Helpful

- Accept your child's feelings. Allow them to grieve in their own way and encourage the expression of feelings.
- Work on your own grief. Express sadness, anger and frustration. Parents and children may be drawn together by sharing each other's grief.
- Spend time regularly with each child. This will offer assurance that they are loved. Show them that they are as important as the lost sibling.
- Find healthy ways to remember your loved one. There are ways to cherish their memory. Some suggestions would be writing down memories in a journal, organizing photos in a special album or framing special artwork or writings.
- Each child needs individual acceptance. Try to nurture their own identity.
- Get help. Getting outside help may make it easier for them to communicate.

Not Helpful

- Don't judge. Don't tell them not to cry or suggest they be strong. Their loss needs to be recognized.
- Don't keep feelings to yourself. Withholding your emotions from the rest of the family may inhibit others.
- Don't avoid them. This will make them feel rejected and abandoned. Don't make them feel that they have become a burden.
- Don't take-down family pictures. This may be interpreted by the sibling as a loss of family and may be devastating.
- Don't compare the lost child to the living child. It could cause them to think they can't measure up.
- Don't limit their space. This may happen if you feel a great need to be over-protective.