

LOSS OF AN ADULT SIBLING

from the book "Sibling Grief: Healing after the Death of a Sister or Brother"
by P. Gill White, Ph.D.

Disenfranchised Grief

When adults lose a sibling, they often feel abandoned by society. The sympathy goes to their parents, but brothers and sisters are supposed to "get over it" quickly so they can comfort the parents or replace the lost sibling. This is one of the reasons why adult sibling loss falls into the category of "disenfranchised grief". Bereaved individuals are encouraged to feel guilty for grieving too long.

When society fails to validate the grief and sadness of siblings, they do not receive the support necessary to heal. There is a tendency for the bereaved to go in to hiding with their feelings. This often results in a low-grade depression with which bereaved siblings struggle for many years. One of the benefits that technology has brought to the grieving population is by providing, through the internet, a way to connect to others in similar circumstances.

Life Changes in an Instant

When adults lose a brother or sister, the following are some of the issues they deal with and must resolve or work through:

Seeking a New Identity

When someone has been a part of your life since birth, your identity is based on having him or her there. They form a part of the field or background from which you live your life, and as such, they are essential. They make up part of the unbroken wholeness that defines who you are. This relates to the concept of birth order.

When the first child is born, he or she develops certain characteristics and talents. Other siblings will most likely choose other characteristics to develop in order to differentiate themselves from each other. The first child may become a star athlete, while the next sibling excels in academics. The siblings support each other by their differences.

In doing so, siblings actually loan each other their strengths, and when one of the siblings dies, that strength is lost, and the survivor's identity with it. It takes time to learn how to live your life again. You have to grow within yourself the parts once carried by your brother or sister. You don't "get" over this as much as "grow through" it.

The Loss of a Future With Your Sibling

Not only have you lost the actual person and your relationship with them, but you have lost the part they would have played in your future. You go on to marry, have children, buy a house, succeed or fail, and each event underlines the terrible reality that your brother or sister is not there. Forever after, all events, no matter how wonderful, have a bittersweet flavor.

Anniversary reactions plague the surviving sibling on birthdays or holidays and other special occasions. Bereaved siblings need not be too hasty in making life changes at these times. They may unwittingly be "acting out" the loss unless they are conscious of the date. If you haven't already done so, read the page on anniversary reactions.

Compulsive Caregiving

What prevents many bereaved siblings from an uncomplicated grief process is their desire to protect someone--perhaps their parents, spouse, or their own children. The focus on being there for someone else helps them put their own grief process on hold. One of the most commonly noted responses to sibling loss is that surviving siblings learn not to fear the grief of others. They have been there--they know what it is like so they can listen to others who are grieving.

This can be carried too far. When bereaved siblings project their own hurt feelings on to others, and then take care of those others, it becomes counter-productive. Compulsive caregivers live on the periphery of their existence, focusing so much energy outside themselves that they become empty, over-stressed, and ultimately clinically depressed. Often, they appear "brittle," speaking in short, quick sentences, while they deny the underlying pain. The un-felt feelings then become a heavy burden that prevents the sufferer from becoming his or her best self.

To help resolve this compulsive caregiving, you need to confront your own sadness and pain, own it, and feel it deeply. John Gray says, "What you feel, you can heal," and this is the only route to growing through grief. You may need to talk about every miniscule detail of the death, and express the associated feelings over and over until you wear out the pain.

Dealing with trauma

A related issue that is particularly troubling in certain kinds of death is that of trauma. Our minds can only process so much information at one time. When the event is of a magnitude to create excess stimulus, it is traumatic. When a brother or sister dies suddenly from an accident, suicide, or homicide, this is definitely too much for us to take in at once. Trauma may also be a factor for those bereaved siblings who helped to nurse their sibling through a disfiguring disease, or witnessed their suffering.

Recovery from trauma involves working through the pain, and articulating thoughts and feelings about the loss to a trusted person. While this long process is going on, you can gain strength by working to increase your self-esteem. Each step that you take towards becoming your "best self" will create a corresponding rise in self-

esteem. You will then be strong enough to handle another 'piece' of your grief. Traumatic grief must be dealt with bit by bit, not all at once.

A note about dealing with the people around you when you are grieving

Anger is a unique emotion. You can be sad or happy for no particular reason, but if you are angry, you need a target. If you use, as a target for your anger, the people who try to be helpful, you may end up driving everyone away. Let's face it; life can be pretty difficult to deal with sometimes. And one of those difficulties for most of us is knowing what to say when others are grieving. Sometimes we goof up and say the wrong thing. Please do not take it personally. Remember that after a major loss, we may see things in black and white for a while. But eventually, we remember that people can say dumb things and still have a good heart.

The Aftermath of Loss: Guilt

Guilt is a feeling that builds with time. It appears that you feel responsible for violating some unwritten rule of society, or failing to meet your own standards of behavior. That is the surface--underneath this lies the fact that we, as humans, do not like to feel powerless or helpless. We could not prevent our sibling's death--we were utterly powerless. So we pretend to ourselves that if we had been there, or if we had taken some particular action, things would have been different. Then we blame ourselves for having failed the deceased sibling.

As time passes, we examine our memories of the relationship with the deceased sibling. We find that we have failed before, not been as kind or generous as we "should" have; we have not lived up to our own code of behavior. So we end up feeling even more guilty. That guilt might be:

- Survival guilt
- Guilt related to the actual death
- Guilt related to our own code of conduct

Survival Guilt

In clinical work, I see this as more of a factor in depression than other forms of guilt. When you think about it, survival guilt is related to our basic belief that life is fair. As kids we said, "Johnnie got an ice cream cone--I want one too!" It seems only fair. When one sibling dies, however, we are confronted by the flip side of this concept. "Johnnie died, so I should die too!" Why didn't you? You search your memory and find many examples of how much better he was than you were.

Sometimes bereaved siblings punish themselves simply for living when their brother or sister is dead. It almost feels like a betrayal of the sibling, if we go on living. Many bereaved siblings don't know about survival guilt, and don't believe they feel it. And yet, they wonder why they seem to attract difficult, painful situations into their lives. This kind of guilt can be explained with simple math. You have 100 pounds of guilt on one side of the scale and you need to get 100 pounds of punishment on the other side to balance the scale. Only when you have done so can you forgive yourself, and enter fully into living. Survival guilt needs to be brought to consciousness in order to prevent it from eroding away your life.

Guilt about the death

This kind of guilt stems from the dislike of feeling helpless. Perhaps there was something you could have done to prevent the sibling's death. You should have called him on the phone so that he wouldn't have been in his car and been hit at that exact time. You shouldn't have recommended the restaurant that he was headed towards when he was shot. You should have reminded her to get a yearly checkup. It goes on and on.

Once you accept that you were, in fact, absolutely helpless, you will feel the pain of the loss at a deeper level. Religious beliefs can assist you when you feel helpless. Bereaved individuals with faith can lean back into the arms of a higher power when they feel helpless. Even if you are not a religious person, you can work towards acceptance of your weaknesses and limitations.

Violating your own code

Sibling relationships are ambivalent by nature. This means that we both love (sometimes) and (sometimes) hate our siblings. Having lived with them for many years, we have fought a lot. Thus there are many reasons to berate ourselves when they die.

Increasing self-acceptance can help us live through this kind of guilt. Perhaps we are not the perfect person we thought--perhaps we were too jealous, or too competitive, or downright mean to our sibling when he or she was living. So we are flawed, like everyone else. Welcome to the human race. Working on your self-acceptance will support you in the grief process.

I hope that, as you read this, you are not thinking that I am trying to talk you out of your guilt. Not at all. In order to get that 100 pounds of punishment, you have to feel the guilt, not avoid it. Experienced grievers suggest a number of ways to help with guilt.

These include:

- Exercise and feel your guilt while exercising. If you don't usually exercise, take a guilt walk.
- Share every part of your guilt with a trusted friend (someone who has lost a sibling) or therapist.
- Do a good deed for someone or donate money and NEVER TELL ANYONE--Keep it secret.
- Turn your pain into art by writing about it, painting it, or building something you dedicate to the deceased sibling.
- Forgive others and ask forgiveness from God for yourself.
- Consciously atone for whatever sin you feel you have committed by doing some related volunteer work.

The key to working through guilt is to make it conscious.

Assert Yourself

One last comment--don't be embarrassed if one of the thoughts that goes through your mind after the loss of a sibling is "Am I next?" When adult siblings begin to die off, it is natural to question your own mortality and wonder how many years you may have left on this planet. Our siblings are our peers so it makes sense that we think in this way at times.

Society may not recognize the severity of sibling loss, but it does have a real, sometimes devastating impact on bereaved sisters and brothers. You yourself may have to educate the people around you and ask for the much needed support.