

RESEARCH ON TWIN LOSS

by Nancy Segal

Circumstances Surrounding Twin Loss

The special circumstances surrounding the loss of a twin have been overlooked by many bereavement researchers. However, several published studies have demonstrated that the loss of a twin appears to be the most devastating type of loss for the surviving twin partner (see Segal 2000). Most twin loss studies involve adults, although one recent study questioned adults who had lost twin siblings in infancy and young childhood (Woodward, 1997). Loss of a twin at a very young age was profound and enduring. It is also well documented that when loss of a loved one occurs suddenly, the grief process is usually further compounded (Sanders, 1993). This is because there has been no time to prepare for the loss. This is illustrated by the tragic experiences of twins whose co-twins perished in the World Trade Tower attack—one such story is detailed in Segal (2005). Some twin parent groups also maintain support services for bereaved twins and their families.

Research at the [Twin Studies Center](#) at California State University, Fullerton includes a study of twin loss in both childhood and adulthood. Several research papers are available from the adult twin loss study, but both projects are still ongoing. Sanders, C.M. (1993). Risk factors in bereavement outcome. In (ed. M.S. Stroebe, W. Stroebe, and Hansson, R.O. (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement: Theory, research, and intervention* (pp. 255-267). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further Research

The twin bond (especially the bond between identical twins) has been described as the closest and most enduring of human social relationships. The loss of a twin has been described as one of the most tragic and devastating events in the lives of the surviving co-twins.

Unfortunately, little systematic study of the psychological and physical effects of twin loss, or its possible differential significance in the lives of identical and fraternal twins of various ages, has been undertaken. The majority of information that is currently available has been provided by a few case histories. Support groups to meet the needs of individuals who have experienced sibling loss are becoming more common, yet they may not adequately fulfill the special needs of twins.

Twin Loss Study

The Minnesota Center for Twin and Adoption Research is currently carrying out a study of twin loss initiated in response to requests for information and assistance by twins who had lost their twin siblings, and parents who had lost twin children.

In order to understand this event as completely as possible, a questionnaire covering a broad range of issues on this subject is now ready for distribution to twins who have experienced the loss of their co-twins.

It includes items concerning the quality of the twin relationship when the twin was alive; causes and circumstances of the twin's death; immediate and current reactions to the death of the twin; reactions of other relatives and acquaintances to the death; and the ability to cope with various life demands following the death of the twin, such as the needs of children and spouse, school activities, and work responsibilities. Experiences in counseling or therapy groups also are explored, and participants are also asked to suggest additional questions that might be included in later versions of the twin loss questionnaire.

Available Information

Some current findings, gathered from research reports, case histories, and interviews with twins are summarized below.

A study of affectional adjustment in high school twins was conducted in 1954, by Dr. Ernest Mowrer, at Northwestern University in Chicago. Twins were asked which family member would be missed most in the event of a death. Mothers were selected most often, followed by the twin and the father. When the twins were organized according to twin type, it was found that identical twins named their twin most often (49%), as compared with fraternal same-sex twins (25%) and opposite-sex twins (13%). This same pattern of results emerged in response to the question: Who in the family best understands you?

Case histories are especially informative in respect to the deep sense of loss and continuing difficulties that confront many individuals who have lost their twins. These themes are clearly conveyed in "Facing Up to a Twin's Death is a 10-year Trial," (People Magazine, May 30, 1983), the story of identical twin television actors, Dirk and Dack Rambo, from California.

In 1972, at 24 years old, Dirk was killed in an automobile accident. Dack went on to experience a series of devastating circumstances: nightmares, refusal to discuss the event, inability to maintain consistent employment, withdrawal from social relationships, and a sense of self-destructiveness. Eventually, participation in psychological therapy enabled him to function successfully in both his private and professional lives.

"The Death of a Twin: Mourning and Anniversary Reactions. Fragments of 10 Years of Self-Analysis" (International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 1975) described the wonderfully close bond shared by identical twin physicians, George and Frank Engel. A striking feature of George's experience is a preoccupation with dates: date of his twin's death; date of his father's death; and dates of key events shared by the two brothers.

A recent comprehensive review of bereavement in childhood and adolescence, by Janice Krupnick, M.S.W., shows that acknowledgement of birthdays, holidays and anniversaries of death are a typical part of the grieving process.

In closing his paper, Dr. George Engel reveals that his motivation to write the article was prompted by a strong need to reactivate his lost twinship: "I can again enjoy being a twin and telling twin stories."

This touching statement is a recurrent theme in many of the interviews and correspondence I have conducted with twins. It is important for researchers and clinicians to appreciate that twinship is critical even to individuals who have never known their twins, such as twins whose co-twin may have been stillborn, or who died early in infancy. For example, one such individual noted that he continues to introduce himself as a twin when meeting people for the first time.

Life Span of Twins and Their Families

The importance of genetic factors for determining the life span of individuals is of considerable scientific interest. Smaller differences in age at death between identical twins than fraternal twins have been reported from research conducted in 1960 by Dr. Lissy Jarvik and her associates at Columbia University.

This result is consistent with a genetic explanation of life span, because identical twins share all of their genes in common, while fraternal twins share only half of their genes in common, on the average, by descent. Dr. Jarvik, and others, also note the relatively shorter life span of male twins (both identical and fraternal) than female twins.

Segal, N.L. (2000). *Entwined lives: Twins and what they tell us about human behavior*. N.Y.: Plume.
Segal, N.L. (2005). *Indivisible by two: Lives of extraordinary twins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Woodward J. (1997). *The lone twin*. London: Free Association Books.