

Adults Grieving the Death of a Sibling

The adult survivor who lives away from home and is mourning the death of an adult sibling may experience a different grief journey. Attention and words of comfort are usually aimed at the parents, spouse, and children, and not the siblings who may live far away.

The Loss of History

Each family has its own special history and the shared bonds that are a part of that history. When a sibling dies, the bonds are shattered, and the history forever has a void that cannot be filled. As they grow, children develop certain characteristics and talents. Brothers and sisters tend to complement each other by developing a balance of interests in different areas. However, surviving siblings will need to redefine their roles in the absence of this relationship.

The Loss of Future

When a sibling dies, all future special occasions will be forever changed. There will be no more shared birthday celebrations, anniversaries, or holidays. There will be no telephone calls telling of the birth of a new nephew or niece. The sharing of life's unique and special events will never again take place.

When your parents die, it is said you lose your past and when your child dies you lose your future. However, when your sibling dies, you lose a part of your past, your present, and your future. Because of this tremendous loss, it is important that everyone work together to ease the path toward healing.

What Adult Siblings May Expect

Guilt about how the sibling relationship was maintained is common. Each travels a separate path, sometimes communication is lacking and ambivalent feelings about maintaining the relationship surface. No matter how good a relationship may have been, the survivor often believes it should have been better, causing guilt.

Anger over a new role within the family often occurs. A surviving sibling may now be the one expected to care for aging parents, and he or she may have to step into the role of guardian for nieces and nephews.

Surviving siblings may find positive changes within their lives. These may include greater emotional strength, increased independence, and a soul-searching re-examination of religious beliefs.

Even when a sibling has died, a connection still remains. Surviving brothers and sisters think about them; talk about them; remember them at special times such as birthdays, holidays, and death dates; and may create a memorial of some type. This connection with the sibling who died does not have to be given up to move forward in life.

Where do I go from here?

The Compassionate Friends offers support through monthly support group meetings, a message bank service allowing you to talk with a bereaved parent, monthly workshops, a quarterly newsletter, its Compassionate Friends SA Facebook Page, Balloon Release, Walk to Remember, and The Compassionate Friends Worldwide Candle Lighting.

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A Sibling's Grief When a Brother or Sister Dies



The Compassionate Friends
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*Bereaved families
caring for each other*

When a sibling dies, the world changes in a heartbeat. Sometimes when such a loss occurs, others fail to recognize that the surviving sibling faces emotional battles on many fronts while working through the loss. Largely ignored, surviving siblings are often referred to as the “forgotten mourners.”

As a young adult

“I was just an average teenager. I had my friends and school activities. My family was just my family. Then the worst nightmare imaginable happened. My sister died.”
Jennifer, age 17

The emotions you are experiencing may be the same as or completely different than those of other family members.

Please remember:

Your grief is yours, not theirs.

Your grief is different because of the unique relationship you had with your brother or sister.

Your way of grieving is just as important, however you choose to express it, as long as it is not destructive

What you may feel

Before this sad experience, there may have been times when you felt jittery, hyper, or depressed when you were anxious about different situations. Grieving can be very much like that, but may take longer to work through your feelings of loss and hurt.

You may experience the following:

Sleep disturbances; tiredness or restlessness; anger toward yourself, other people, God, even the one who died; fear for your safety and the safety of those you care about; feelings of rejection from parents who are distracted, irritable, or inattentive; trouble paying attention and remembering; mood swings between feeling very good and very bad; guilt about what you did or did not do for your brother or sister, for enjoying yourself, and even for just surviving.

You may feel emotions like those listed above at different times, even long after your brother or sister’s death. It can be frightening to suddenly think about such things. But other young people, just like you, have had a brother or sister die. They struggled through feelings very much like yours. They have survived, and so can you.

“But I feel so strange sometimes. I can’t talk to my folks. I just keep my feelings to myself so I won’t upset them anymore.

They’re so overprotective now. They probably wouldn’t let me out of their sight if they knew how I felt. Mostly I just want to get away with my friends, but they aren’t the same anymore either. Sometimes they pity me. I hate feeling so mixed-up.”
Bill, age 16

It is hard to talk about emotions, especially to parents. If you are concerned about upsetting either your mother or your father and feel your friends won’t understand, seek out a sympathetic listener (relative, teacher, counsellor, minister, or another bereaved brother or sister). It may surprise you how much they can help you through this ordeal.

You are faced with a situation for which you have had little or no preparation. At an age when just growing up can be a struggle, this experience may make you feel like a little kid again. Don’t be ashamed! Even adults need to hug and be hugged and cared for when they are hurting.

Sometimes you might think you have to fill that empty place left in your family. You don’t have to be just like your sister or brother. We are all unique and have good points that are worthwhile.

What is acceptable...

It’s okay to cry and feel depressed. You’ve lost a great deal. If the feelings get too scary or overwhelming, find a caring friend (no matter what age) to talk it out.

It’s okay to want to copy some of your brother’s or sister’s habits and interests, but be yourself, too.

It’s okay to live “in the past” for a while. This is one way to keep alive the memory of your brother or sister. However, you have a life, too—one that should be lived to the fullest.

It’s okay to have fun and enjoy life, to laugh again.

It’s okay to forgive yourself for the fights, arguments, and mean things that you said or did to your brother or sister.

It’s okay to go on living.

And what is not acceptable

But it is NOT okay to ease your pain and hurt by:

Using drugs or alcohol. It will take longer to accept the hurt. These can only hide the pain, not heal it.

- » Acting out your frustration with reckless driving or skipping school/ college/ work or uni.
- » Doing things out of anger to hurt others because you hurt so much yourself.
- » Experimenting with sex just to feel close to someone.

- » Protecting your parents by not letting them know what is bothering you.
- » Being the scapegoat or bad guy so you’ll appear tough.
- » Discontinuing the things that once meant so much to you.

Ways that might help you grieve

You may find that even normal day-to-day activities are tiring; grieving takes a lot of energy. Try to avoid making drastic changes in your life during this difficult time.

Commit yourself to getting through the emotional and physical work of grieving. Other people have found writing in a journal or diary, prayer, poetry, sports, music, and art as positive outlets for their feelings.

Also, share your grief experiences—if you can—with other bereaved siblings. Their stories of how they coped can give you choices to consider and hope for your own future.

You and your family are changed by all the sadness you have experienced. The strain each of you feels is common and usually decreases with time. Each family member has his own timetable for coming to terms with his feelings. Be patient with each other and these very individual needs.

Tragedies as well as successes, faced daily, can strengthen you for tomorrow. Allow the emotional bond you once had with your brother or sister to have a positive effect on your future.



Grieving > Healing > Growing