

For You, the Bereaved Sibling

First things first – you are not alone. Many join you in the community of bereaved siblings, and the more we are able to lean on one another, the more we can continue on. We are so glad you have sought out support and connection, even as we are heartbroken at the reason why.

Be kind to yourself as you navigate this challenging journey. Try not to impose time limits on yourself, for grief does not follow a schedule, nor does it proceed according to a set of stages or a standard plan. Set self-judgment aside and grant yourself the right to feel strongly, to mourn, to celebrate your sibling, to struggle, to search for the ideas and choices that get you through each day.

Sibling Loss is Significant Loss

Bereaved siblings have a significant need for support. This need can go unmet despite good intentions. For reasons not entirely understood, many people believe the loss of a sibling is less intense than the loss of a child, a parent, or a spouse. This belief can lead to bereaved siblings receiving less attention than bereaved parents, children, or spouses/partners.

Individuals may have more or less intensity around any loss they experience, depending on their personal circumstances. Every loss is unique and personal. The death of a brother or sister, while unique and different, is not necessarily less significant or painful than any other death. In fact, surviving siblings often experience it as a devastating loss.

Think about it: The sibling relationship is a peer relationship and is often the longest relationship of a lifetime. Siblings generally grow up expecting that their brothers and sisters will walk with them through life, from childhood through adulthood and into old age. When death interrupts this walk and destroys this expectation – an expectation that many siblings do not realize they have until a brother or sister dies – it can be supremely unmooring.

In many cases, siblings have never known – or cannot remember – a time when their brother or sister was not a part of their lives and may not even be able to conceive of the sibling being gone. Whether the sibling relationship was close or distant, positive or difficult, this tremendously confusing loss can challenge your trust, faith, and deeply held beliefs.

Sibling Death Changes a Family

As you navigate your emotions and experiences in the wake of what has happened, you may find yourself grieving the loss of the family you knew as well as the loss of your sister or brother. The loss of a sibling is, in a sense, the loss of a family that will never exist again in the form it took before the death.

How parents change as a result of grief brings significant change to a family and can be one of the most challenging issues for surviving siblings. As parents do their best to cope with the loss, they may have less energy, time, and focus to devote to surviving children. These children, in turn, may minimize their own grief (often unintentionally) so as not to add to their parents' pain.

Whatever you are feeling right now, know this:

- *Your emotions are valid.*
- *Your experience is real.*
- *Your loss is significant, and unique, and cannot be judged as “less” than any other loss.*

Another influential change is the shift in roles that takes place when a sibling group experiences the loss of one or more of its members. An older sister becomes an only child; a middle child becomes the oldest; a “black sheep” is thrust into a role of responsibility. Surviving siblings may try to fill the hole left by the sibling who has died, taking on the responsibilities that person used to fulfill within the family. These attempts are often unsuccessful and can create resentment and frustration on behalf of both parents and surviving siblings.

Bereaved families often experience a sort of “phantom limb” phenomenon, much as people who lose a limb to amputation may experience a “phantom limb,” meaning that they still feel sensation in the area where the limb used to exist. As a bereaved sibling, you may find that your brain struggles to accept that your sibling is gone. You may have to continually be reminded of the reality of your loss. You may even feel as though you’ve lost a physical part of yourself. You may turn to this “phantom limb” again and again, wanting to call or text your sibling, thinking your sibling will walk through the door at any time. You may find you have to face the reality of this loss over and over again.

Reactions You May Experience

Your experience of grief, like that of any other grieving person, may bring strong emotions and confusing physical reactions. As confusing as these may seem to you, they are normal and natural. Here are some you may experience:

- Profound exhaustion, possibly with either insomnia or excessive sleeping.
- Profound sadness, accompanied by constant crying, an inability to cry, or anything in between.
- Loss of appetite, or overeating.
- Inability to concentrate, forgetting things and misplacing items.
- Anxiety and a manic energy.
- Varying levels of depression, feeling no energy to get anything done.
- Anger at the loss, at your family, at anyone involved in the death, even at your sibling who has died.
- Looking for blame and blaming yourself or others.
- A heaviness in the chest and a feeling of not being able to get enough air.
- Denial of the death, feeling that it isn't real.
- Emotional triggers such as a song, a smell, a photograph, an event or holiday, anything that reminds you of your sibling.
- Needing to talk about it more, or less, than other people want you to.

Along with these reactions, others are particular to the sibling experience. You may feel that your grief is unacknowledged or given less attention than others in the family or friend group. You may feel protective of your parents and frustrated at not being able to comfort them. You may feel that you have lost your past as well as your future.

Coping Strategies

You have a right to grieve and feel deeply in your own way. Over time you can figure out what helps you cope with your loss. Try many strategies and see what gives you comfort and strength. Here are some ideas:

- Honor the intensity of your loss, and avoid comparing it to others
- Communicate needs and feelings as honestly and clearly as you can with family members and friends
- Find other bereaved siblings to talk to
- If your sibling had a family, find ways to stay connected with them
- Participate in rituals of grieving over time (birthdays, commemoration of death date, family holidays, etc.)
- Ask yourself what you need, and advocate for it
- Give yourself open-ended time to adjust
- Talk with family members who are willing and able to tell stories
- Connect with your sibling's friends
- Record memories in writing
- Invite conversation about the change in roles/responsibilities in your family
- Enlist help with supporting your parents
- Consider professional support

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Written in memory of Frank T. Lyman, III

To contact a sibling chapter; find information about our Annual Gathering Conference; subscribe to our newsletter or read grief-related articles, poems and other brochures like this one, please visit our website:

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WHEN YOUR SIBLING HAS DIED



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