

SIBLING GRIEF

I was a sophomore in high school when my little brother, Arthur, was killed. As a sad coincidence, the woman who killed him was the secretary at my school. I must have seen her at school the day he died, but I am not able to consciously remember it. I can't remember seeing Arthur lying in the street either, though I know I did. All I can recall is being horrified and needing to get away from there. I took my younger sister home and never saw Arthur again. It was the dreadful beginning of a very long and painful journey.

The pain of the grief is unavoidable, so is the family disruption. What can be changed, however, is the length of the grieving process. There are things that can be done that will help or hinder this process. Unfortunately for our family, we were given no help and we stayed a mess for a long time. I would like to share some of my experiences in the hope that they will help you to cope with your brother's or sister's death.

The first thing I remember is not knowing how to act or what to do. I felt terribly alone and awkward. I was shocked. One minute it was a nice, normal day and the next minute everything was changed. I didn't know how I was supposed to act at school. Part of me wanted to tell everyone what had happened and part of me didn't want to talk to anyone at all. I felt guilty for getting some comfort from the attention (I asked myself if this meant I was "glad" my brother had died), but on the other hand, I felt that people would think I didn't care when I said nothing. It hurt either way. One way I dealt with my grief was by being sarcastic and laughing whenever something painful came up. I laughed outside, but I think my friends knew I was crying on the inside. Many people don't know how to help us, but hopefully you will have someone you can talk to. If not, perhaps you will be able to talk at home about how you feel.

Home may become a pain-filled place. Our parents have been hurt badly. They aren't the same parents we knew before the death. The biggest mistake I made in my grief was trying to "fix" my parents' pain. I wished for and acted in ways that I hoped would change them back to happy, whole people again. I know now that it was not my responsibility to do this. In fact, I couldn't do it, no matter how "good" I was, or how much I tried to make our home pleasant, they were still sad. The bad thing was, by trying to make them better, I stuffed a lot of my own sadness, fears and worries inside. This added even more problems to my grief. In some ways, it felt better to worry about them instead of myself, but as I got older, those old painful memories wouldn't stay covered up anymore. It is like a splinter that gets covered up with skin and feels better until the infection sets in, and then it hurts so much more when it comes out. We have to take care of ourselves and trust our parents to take care of themselves.

For years I rarely cried about my brother. I always thought that was strange. It was years before I was able to let the tears flow and then I cried for him and for me. I cried for Arthur because he was dead and I missed him; I cried for myself because of all I had missed. I missed feeling happiness in myself and my family. I missed feeling safe and secure. I missed the attention my parents were no longer able to give me. I missed the

years of carefree childhood that were ripped away. Those are all losses that sibling grieve for besides the loss of a brother or sister.

Yes, it hurts! Cry about it. Laugh about it. Talk about it. Write about it. Pray about it. Just don't try to bury it, that won't work in the long run. And you know, I can do all those things today and it doesn't hurt nearly as much as it did when I started.

I now realize that my feelings about my brother's death were not the same as my parent's feelings. I used to think that I didn't love my brother because I wasn't as sad as long as they were. They hated the holidays, but I wanted the fun of the holidays. They couldn't be happy, but I could, especially after the first terrible set of holidays. Our parents have the right to feel sad because that is how they are feeling. We have the right to be happy if that's how we are feeling. Each one of my brothers and sisters had their own feelings. Each was sad, happy, and regretful in their own way and time. We grieved with our separate timetables. Sometimes we shared feelings, and many times they were different. None of us, however bad we felt, came close to having the depth of the pain that our parents did. I didn't understand this then as I do now. This is an important thing to know so that we don't feel guilty about getting on with our lives.

I remember that I used to think about things I did or didn't do with my brother before he died. I felt guilty because I didn't play with him the last time he wanted me to. Of course, I didn't know at the time that he was going to die. I remember times when I got mad and yelled at him for no reason. I felt guilty about that too. I know now that this is just a normal part of a brother-sister relationship. I can now realize that what I did or didn't do had nothing to do with his death. We need to be careful not to take on guilt. One of my brothers had always felt guilty because Arthur was riding his bicycle when he was killed. My brother did not kill Arthur. The woman who was driving the car did. It is important not to blame ourselves. Even if we did have a part in the death (or think we did), we need to forgive ourselves as we certainly didn't deliberately do it.

My brother's death definitely changed my life. It brought pain and unhappiness, but it also brought an awareness of other people's pain and the ability to understand and help others. I hope that you can take something from my experience and use it in your grief and maybe you can pass it on someday, too.

Marggie Gerner
Bereaved Sibling
St. Louis, MO