

Adult Sibling Loss

When a sibling dies, the world changes in a heartbeat. Oftentimes 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.”

Within this group of surviving siblings is one that is unique—the adult survivor who lives away from home and is mourning the death of an adult sibling. In the case of an adult sibling, attention and words of comfort are usually aimed at the parents, spouse and children.

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. The sharing of life’s unique and special events will never again take place.

What Adult Siblings May Expect

Survivor guilt is normal. Siblings usually have a relationship where they seek to protect each other. Despite the physical distance that may separate them as adults, this need to have provided protection weighs heavily in the aftermath of the loss.

Guilt about how the relationship was maintained is common. So often as adults, the sibling relationship has changed from younger years. Each travels a separate path, and 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.

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. Remaining family members may look to surviving siblings for guidance. All

these situations are possible reasons to feel anger over a sibling's death.

Fear of mortality. When a brother or sister dies, it is natural for the surviving sibling or siblings to look at their own lives and what their deaths would do to the family.

Surviving siblings may find positive changes within their lives. These may include greater emotional strength, increased independence, and a soul-searching reexamination of spiritual beliefs. Some survivors feel the need to make a change in their life's work, such as becoming a therapist, or working to effect a change in the area that took the life of the sibling.

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.

Understanding from Others

Society often encourages bereaved individuals to feel guilty for grieving too long. This failure to receive validation of their grief can cause siblings to hide their feelings, causing a type of depression with which they may struggle.

If the surviving sibling is married, stress may also be introduced into the spousal relationship. Individuals grieve differently, and the spouse may be bewildered and even unsympathetic that this loss is causing so much sorrow in their own family. This situation may provoke comments such as, "Why are you so upset? You haven't been close to your family for years." While this may sound reasonable, the emotions of grief and mourning are seldom reasonable—or even rational. Spouses may need to be told how they can be supportive. One woman simply asked her husband for a hug whenever she felt especially sad about the death of her sister.

College Students Who Lose a Sibling

Those away at college in an unstructured environment often find the death of a sibling particularly difficult at a time when they find themselves extremely stressed. This may be the first experience with death within the family, and upon returning to college the bereaved sibling tends to find little support.

Instead of helping, these habits hinder the ability to confront the loss. Many colleges have counseling and support centers. Consideration also may be given to delaying college for a period of time, reducing stress by decreasing difficult activities, and enjoying creative pursuits that provide positive ways of releasing frustrations.

Senior Citizens Who Lose a Sibling

Too often no support or comfort is offered and the loss is not acknowledged. In reality, whether the sibling who died is nine or 90, the loss still wounds the heart. When a senior citizen is grieving

the death of a sibling, their grief is oftentimes compounded by the fact that perhaps a spouse, other family member or good friend have preceded the sibling in death. This leaves a void for receiving comfort, and sharing memories with those who knew the sibling well.

Finding Support

Many siblings find help by talking with others about their brother or sister. However, even good friends can quickly become uncomfortable with the subject, often at just the point when their support is most needed.

Adult siblings (18 and older) are encouraged to attend meetings of The Compassionate Friends. A number of Chapters of The Compassionate Friends have separate sibling subgroups for 14 years of age and older. The national organization provides information through private Facebook groups, chat rooms in its Online Support Community and the national website. TCF National Conferences allow another opportunity for bereaved siblings to bond.

Often, simply finding another bereaved sibling with whom to share concerns and feelings provides a path toward healing. Adult siblings may be living in areas where no one knew their deceased brother or sister—or even of their existence. This can be painful at a time when the surviving sibling longs to share memories.

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 works together to ease the path toward healing and hope.

Adapted from The Compassionate Friends, USA.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email griefsupport@palliativecare.org
for more information, resource and support.*

Affiliate of Hospice & Palliative Care Buffalo
150 Bennett Road, Buffalo, New York 14227-1480 • (716) 836-6460 • www.WilsonSupportCenter.org