When a Sibling Dies

When a sibling dies, the world changes in a heartbeat. 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, and not the siblings who may live far away.

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.

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.

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. Each travels a separate path, and sometimes communication is lacking and ambivalent feelings about maintaining the relationship surface. 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.

- 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 question how many years they have left, 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 religious 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.

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 for many years.

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. 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.

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, sometimes turning instead to drugs, alcohol, and other addictions for relief. Instead of helping, these habits hinder the ability to confront the loss.

When the sibling of a senior citizen dies, often those around this person feel that it is more normal for people to die as they age, and so there is no need to provide comfort or even acknowledge the death. In reality, whether the sibling who died is nine or ninety, the loss still wounds the heart. One’s own mortality is often brought to mind and depression may set in.

Many siblings find help by talking with others about their brother or sister. Some communities offer sibling support groups. Often, simply finding another bereaved sibling with whom to share concerns and feelings provides a path toward healing.

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