



ADULT LOSS OF A SIBLING

There appears to be no other loss in adult life that is so neglected as the death of a brother or sister. Many of us will have to face this loss, sometimes more than once. Yet, the general expectations from society is that the death of a sibling in adulthood will have little or no disruptive effect upon their surviving brothers and sisters. However, the loss has significant meaning to many adults and gives rise to mourning that can be very difficult.

There are special characteristics unique to siblings. Research reveals that brothers and sisters influence each other's identity, self-concept and personality in fundamental ways: through birth order; impact and influence on parental attention, affection and expectations; and the very world into which younger siblings are born. The sibling relationship is ripe for ambivalence! Our brothers and sisters are competitors for precious parental commodities of security, attention and love. Sometimes our siblings are also sources of affection and security as well as conflict. For this reason, ambivalence about our brothers and sisters is most common.

The loss of a sibling in adulthood can have many meanings. It is the loss of someone who shared a unique co-history with you. This person was a part of your formative past, and for better or worse, is part of the roots to your past. He or she shared common memories, along with critical childhood experiences and family history. When death takes your brother or sister, it also takes away one of your connections to the past. That brother or sister knew you in a very special way, unlike those who know you now as an adult. Consequently, a constant is gone. This can make you feel insecure, for although you may not have had frequent contact with your sibling, at least you knew another member of the family was there.

Your sibling has a symbolic spot in your life even if he or she did not have a current impact on your day-to-day activities. This brother or sister's death can make you feel older and indicate that your family is dwindling. Because you have the same genetic background, the death of a sibling may increase concerns about your own death.

Mourning after the loss of a sibling can be complicated for several reasons. The ambivalence that is normally present in a sibling relationship may rise to guilt, and guilt is known to complicate mourning. Also, depending on the relationship, you can experience guilt, sadness and regret if the relationship never was what you ideally would have wanted it to be. Perhaps you had not spent as much time together since you became adults with your own careers and families. Your survival itself can be another source of guilt, especially if you recall the times when you wished your sibling would disappear.

The adult who loses a sibling shares many similar issues with parents who lose adult children. You may find you do not have much part in decisions pertaining to the death and the funeral or other rituals. The lack of control often is combined with the failure of others to recognize that you are profoundly bereaved, as the attention may go to the deceased's spouse and children. It may be difficult to accept the death if you have already grown accustomed to the sibling living elsewhere, and there is no acute absence to signal that he or she is permanently gone. Changes in family reorganization of roles and relationships can occur and may constitute additional losses or stress. The death may change your position in the family. You now may be the eldest and expected to care for an invalid parent, or you may have become an only child.

Unless your sibling was very much a part of your family's life, this death may not have the same impact on other members of your immediate family as it does on you. While your sibling may have been a pivotal person in your life, he or she may have been insignificant to others who are now quite an important part of your life. For this reason, your family may not understand your grief or help you with it in the same way they would if it were someone they knew well.

It is important to recognize that your grief is legitimate. Be patient and understanding to yourself. Give yourself permission to feel as you do while you work through a healthy grieving process.

Much of the above essay was taken from an article written by Therese A. Rando, Ph.D. that appeared in "Caregivers Quarterly" published by the Bradshaw Family of Funeral Homes. Dr. Rando is an author of such books as Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies (1988)