

The Sibling Connection

Experiencing the Death of a Sibling as an Adolescent

Farewell to Childhood

Adolescence has been described as the "farewell to childhood", as the teenager lets go of his or her childhood, grieves its loss, and begins to move into adulthood. Loss of a sibling during this period intensifies the issues related to the normal tasks of adolescence.

Adolescents are capable of an adult understanding of death, but the way in which they grieve is related to both children and adults. Since they have the capacity to think like adults, adolescents may suffer more from the effects of loss than children, who are protected somewhat by their concrete or magical way of thinking.

The main difference between the grief of adults and the grief of adolescents is the amount of power or autonomy the individual holds. Autonomous adults can reach out for the help they need through counseling, church, or support groups. Powerless adolescents, who cannot survive without an adult, may not be able to seek sympathy, comfort, and understanding from those around them.

Like hermit crabs, that seek a larger shell because their old shell has become too small, adolescents leave their childhood identity and seek an adult identity.


Adolescents are midway between the two domains of adulthood and childhood and it affects the way they grieve. On the one hand they have a strong drive towards autonomy and independence, and they may resent being over-protected by parents. On the other hand, the loss of a sibling is so intense that they may wish to regress like a child and seek support. This conflict is critical to understanding the unique experience of grieving teenagers who have lost a sibling.

Although adolescents know and understand mentally the reality of death, what makes grieving particularly troublesome at this age is the conflict in their feelings. They are just at the point when they are moving away from their families emotionally in the normal separation/individuation process we all go through to form a unique identity. They often appear to know everything, and feel that nothing bad can happen to them.

Faced with the death of a brother or sister, the awareness of the reality of death and subsequent sense of vulnerability shakes the very foundation of their still fragile identity. Not only have they lost a loved one, but they are faced with the reality that they too will die someday. So, they desperately want to regress to get the needed support.

The importance of peers

At best, this conflict in an adolescent's feelings is resolved by going to their peers for support. They can get support from their peers without having to regress to what seems to them as a childlike state when they get support from parents. However, many surviving siblings have told me that they could not go to their peers because they felt so different from them.



At the worst, their grief is pushed underground, and may result in disorders of conduct, such as the use of drugs and alcohol, poor school performance, loneliness, a tendency to withdraw from relationships, low self-esteem, depression, and difficulty in making long-term commitments.

There has been a great deal of research on sibling loss as an adolescent. Based on research findings, the experience of losing a sibling results in adolescents feeling different from peers, being more mature than his or her peers, and being angry and insecure in relationships. Often teenagers become protective of their parents or other siblings, and they feel guilty about feelings they have had towards the deceased brother or sister.

Depression as adults

The question of whether the death of a sibling during childhood or adolescence leads to depression as an adult is not known. However, it is clear that what happens after the loss is significant in contributing to or preventing adult depression. According to current theories of attachment between family members, children, and even adolescents, cannot always tell the difference between themselves and their siblings. When the sibling dies, it may feel as if part of the self is lost too.

What contributes to a healthy resolution of grief depends on a number of factors. First is the nature of the relationship with the sibling prior to death, and the relationship with the parents. When the family is secure, and the children feel their home offers a comfortable place for them to retreat to when they are hurt, they will probably fare better after the loss of a family member. Being given timely and accurate information about the sibling's illness or circumstances surrounding the accident is crucial.

Some siblings have spent years in wondering what actually happened to their brother or sister because the parents did not want to talk about it. Others have suffered needlessly because parents tried to hide the facts surrounding the death. Young people need to ask questions and have an adult answer and explain whatever they need to know. They should be given the opportunity to attend or even participate in the funeral. They need to be reassured about the continuing security within the family, although one of their members has died. Unfortunately, in many families, these healthy activities do not take place and the grief remains unresolved for a life time.

Statistics of trauma

If you were a teenager at the time of a sibling's death, it is statistically very likely that your sibling died in an accident. A sudden, unexpected death like this (car accidents, for example) is surrounded by trauma for the survivors. Psychic trauma follows a sudden and unexpected event which exceeds the capacity of the individual's coping skills and psychological defenses, so that they become temporarily helpless. This may result in distorted memories, lack of trust, a pessimistic attitude towards life, and low self-esteem. The trauma itself gets in the way of the successful resolution of the grief. People may want you to "talk about" your grief at a time when you are still reeling from the shock of the accident. Such cases may result in complicated grief which, over time, leads to an anxiety disorder or depression.

Depending on the nature of the trauma, the person may develop post-traumatic stress disorder, and become over-vulnerable to stressful situations. Often, the bereaved individual is not allowed to talk about what happened, in order to protect the feelings of others, and therefore, has no way to work through the trauma.

The other side of the story

All of the results are not so negative, however, and many adolescents find that their experience with death has taught them a great deal about life. Site visitors have written to me and complained about this statement, saying that "Nothing good can come from the death of a sibling." I understand the feelings that are being expressed in this statement, but I believe they are being expressed by someone who has not yet integrated the loss. Humans have the capacity to learn from their experiences, whether they are positive or negative. In spite of the unfairness and devastation associated with the loss of a brother or sister during adolescence, the pain and guilt leave wisdom and love in their wake. Survivors appreciate life and relationships more, feel closer to God, and are able to listen to and be with others who are grieving. Many bereaved adolescents go on to become adults who work in the area of counseling, research on sibling loss, ministry, and social work. Finding ways to make sense of this loss motivates some adolescents to make significant contributions in the realm of emotional healing.