

Helping Yourself Heal When Your ADULT SIBLING Dies

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

One of the great losses in life is the death of a brother or sister, and many of us will face the loss of a sibling more than once.

Yet this is one of the most neglected types of grief, especially in adulthood.

Following a death, the focus of support is usually on the surviving spouse and children, or on the parents who have lost their child, rather than on the siblings, however it's important that surviving siblings get the support they need from others in their family or community.



“To the outside world we all grow old. But not to brothers and sisters. We know each other as we always were. We know each other’s hearts. We share private family jokes. We remember family feuds and secrets, family griefs and joys. We live outside the touch of time.” ~ Clara Ortega

Your brother or sister has died. I am truly sorry for your loss.

Whether your sibling was younger or older, whether the death was sudden or anticipated, whether you were very close to your sibling throughout your lives or experienced periods of separation, you are now grieving.

To grieve is to experience thoughts and feelings of loss inside you. If you loved your sibling, you will grieve. To mourn is to express your grief outside of yourself. Over time and with the support of others, to mourn is to heal.



Consider your unique relationship

Brothers and sisters often have strong and ambivalent feelings for one another. Sibling relationships tend to be complex, characterized by a mixture of anger, jealousy, and a fierce closeness and love. What was your relationship with the sibling who died? I'll bet it wasn't entirely simple.

Sibling relationships are so complex because while we are growing up, siblings are both friends and enemies, teammates and competitors. We play with our siblings, and we fight with them. We share our parents' love, and we compete for our parents' love. We enjoy being part of a family, and we struggle to become individuals.

Sometimes we carry our childhood rivalries and differences into adulthood, and our ambivalent feelings toward our brothers and sisters remain. Sometimes we separate from our siblings completely as adults. And sometimes we become very close friends with our grown-up brothers and sisters.

Yet no matter what your present-day relationship with your sibling was, his or her death is a blow. You shared a long history with your sibling. Your stories began together and were intimately intertwined for years.



Know that sibling grief is important

The loss of an adult sibling is often a significant one. I have had the privilege of companioning many sibling mourners, and they have taught me that they often feel deep pain and a profound sense of loss. Yet our culture tends to under-appreciate sibling grief. When an adult dies, the myth goes, it is the parents, spouse, and children of the person who died who suffer the greatest loss. We seem to think that siblings are affected less.

Yet the truth is, the more deeply you feel connected to someone, the more difficult his or her death will be for you. And siblings—even when they have not spent much time together as adults—often have profoundly strong attachments to one another.

Yes, your grief for your sibling is very real. And it may be very difficult for you. Allow yourself the time and the support you need to mourn.

Accept different grief responses

There is no one right way for you to mourn. Neither is there one right way for other family members to mourn. Each of you will mourn differently.

If you have surviving siblings, you will find that each will mourn this death in his or her own way. While you might have anticipated some of your sibling's responses (for example, your emotional sister has probably been emotional), other responses may have surprised you. Try not to let these differences alarm you or hurt your feelings.

If your parents are still alive, they, too, will have their own unique responses to the death. You can help by facilitating open and honest communication with them about their grief and yours.

Feelings will naturally run high in your family in the weeks and months after the death. The best approach is to be open with one another without blaming.

Embrace the healing power of linking objects

Linking objects are items that belonged to or remind you of the sibling who died. Photographs, videos, CDs, ticket stubs, clothing, gifts you received from him or her—all of these connect you to the sibling who died.

Some items may bring sadness, some happiness, some sappiness (i.e., when you are happy and sad at the same time). While linking objects may evoke painful feelings, they are healing feelings. They help you embrace the pain of your loss and move toward reconciliation. They may also give you comfort in the weeks and months ahead.

Whatever you do, DO NOT get rid of linking objects that remind you of the sibling who died. If you need to box some of them up for a time, do so. Later, when you are ready, you will likely find that displaying linking objects in your home is a way to remember the sibling who died and honour your ongoing feelings of love and loss.

Honour the sibling who died

Sometimes grieving families ask that memorial contributions be made to specified charities in the name of the person who died.

Consider your sibling's loves and passions. If he were still here, what would make him proud to have his name associated with?

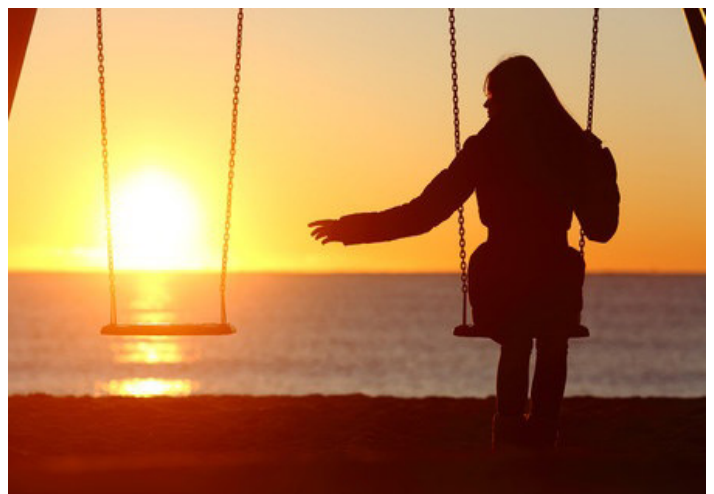
Some families have set up scholarship funds. Some have donated books to the library or schools. Some have donated park benches or picnic tables, inscribed with an appropriate plaque. Some have planted gardens. You might also choose to carry on with something your sibling loved to do or left unfinished.

You will find that honouring your sibling is both a way to express your grief and to remember what was special about him or her.

If you are a twin, seek extra support

If you are a twin whose twin brother or sister has died, you may be especially devastated by this death. Twins often report a sense of being halved after their twin has died. Without their twin, they simply do not feel whole.

Your grief work may be particularly arduous. I recommend that you seek the support of an experienced grief counselor if you are struggling. The wonderful website www.twinlesstwins.org and the resources this organization offers may also be of help.



Understand the concept of “reconciliation”

Know this: mourners don’t recover from grief. Instead, we become “reconciled” to it. In other words, we learn to live with it and are forever changed by it. This does not mean a life of misery, however. Mourners often not only heal but grow through grief. Our lives can potentially be deeper and more meaningful after the death of someone loved.

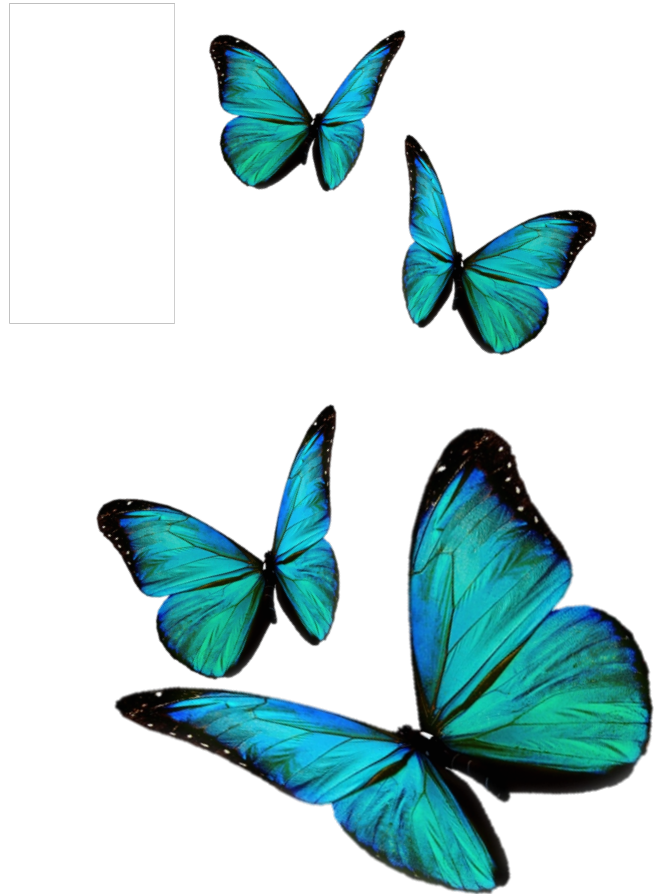
Yet we only achieve reconciliation if we actively express and receive support for our grief. Find someone who will listen without judging as you talk about your grief. Cry. Journal. Make art. Find things to do that help you express your grief, and keep doing them.

I believe every human being wants to “mourn well” the deaths of those they love. It is as essential as breathing. Yet because our culture misunderstands the importance of grief, some people deny or avoid their normal and necessary thoughts and feelings. Choose to mourn. Choose to heal. Choose to live and love fully again.

A final word

To be “bereaved” literally means “to be torn apart” and “to have special needs.” When a sibling dies, it is like a deep hole implodes inside of you. It’s as if the hole penetrates you and leaves you gasping for air. I have always said that we mourn significant losses from the inside out. In my experience, it is only when we are nurtured (inside and outside) that we discover the courage to mourn openly and honestly.

Remember—you are not alone, and you are not forgotten. No, your love does not end with the death of your brother or sister. You can and will carry your sibling with you into the future, always remembering your past and what he or she brought to the dance of your life.



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