

# Parent Grief / Sibling Grief: Similarities and Differences

## *A Topics Around Grief Discussion Workshop*

**Saturday, 16 September 2017**

The notes that follow were prepared for the "Topics Around Grief" workshop, *Parent Grief / Sibling Grief: Similarities and Differences*, held on Saturday, 16 September 2017. There is also a summary of the group discussion that followed the presentation of the notes. It was a really informative afternoon - we all seemed to come away with a lot of insights; in fact, there was such a range of insights that our minds were brimming with thought come the session's conclusion!

Workshops such as this one reflect what TCFV intends for the "Topics Around Grief" program to provide; that is, the opportunity for a group of bereaved people to come together and discuss a single topic, and through their sharing of similar and different experiences, come away with a broader understanding of the topic. This exercise, in turn, can be comforting in the understanding it provides. Furthermore, the understandings gained can extend beyond the discussion group to the wider TCFV community.

The potential of this program is really exciting, and another way we can pay tribute to the lives of our children and siblings.

## **The Presentation Notes**

*Written by Andrew McNess, a bereaved brother, and Jan McNess, a bereaved mother.*

**"So, in part 1 of our discussion today, we'll be looking at and discussing the similarities and differences between parent grief and sibling grief. That is, how is the bereaved parent grief journey and bereaved sibling grief journey similar to one another? Also, how is parent grief and sibling grief unique from one another?"**

*Before we present the notes, we want to highlight that we will be looking differences between the grief of parents and the grief of their surviving siblings. In this regard, then, the discussion on sibling grief is weighted towards siblings, say, between the ages of 10-40 years of age when their sibling/s died. But we can also consider sibling grief across the lifespan.*

### **Part A. Some similarities between parent and sibling grief**

**ANDREW'S NOTES:** a few years ago, I asked some TCF group leaders about how they felt bereaved siblings coped in group meetings that were overwhelmingly attended by bereaved parents. I expected to hear a range of negative stories of extreme differences in experiences that made it impossible for participants to connect. But instead I was pleasantly surprised to hear stories of how parents and siblings found they had much in common with each other in how they experienced grief. And where their experiences differed, they all took an interest in this difference and sought to understand it more by asking each other questions. And they wondered if the information they took from each other might have benefit in their own family lives, in supporting their children or parents.

So, what were these similarities between parents and surviving children that were reported at meetings? (Well, to an extent, I suppose I already knew some of these similarities through my Mum, Dad and sister, but it was very interesting to hear all the same.)

- Both parents and their surviving children experience shock and trauma after the death of a child. I suppose that's to be expected, but still it IS a similarity to note
- Parents and siblings shared complex relationships with the child/sibling who died (complex doesn't necessarily mean negative)
- In social situations, we all dread that question, at least initially, of "how many family members do you have?"
- We all miss our child/sibling profoundly
- Both parents and siblings often experience an apathy towards the everyday essentials and everyday trivialities: we feel "purposeless", "going through the motions", etc.
- We have all often felt "shut down" or "rejected" in social situations where we spoke about our child/sibling and/or our *ongoing* experience of grief
- We have all felt anxious that the grief we continued to feel did not tally with the general community expectations on when we should recover.
- We all have had to renegotiate our relationships with one another (we switch between supporting and being supported, which can take some getting used to, especially if we're used to "enacting" particular roles)
- We all often feel fatigued and struggle with concentration

***So those were some similarities. And there's something really reassuring in knowing we have those similarities.***

### **Part B. Differences between parent and sibling grief**

I'll first of all draw directly on some of my own experiences...

- I was seven years younger than Jeremy, so I was very much his kid brother, and he was very much I figure I idolised ... which I think would have suited Jeremy to a T! Mum and Dad, by contrast, had a relationship of nurturance and friendship. I think their grief was regarding a love lost; my grief was regarding a heroic figure who slipped out of my grasp. For my sister, two years apart from Jeremy, it was the loss of her greatest friend.
- Both my sister and I very quickly got the impression that socially less time was given for siblings to grieve than parents. And we know that parents, themselves, are often given a short time to grieve! And a number of times I experienced an opinion from other people that sibling relationships are inherently competitive and combative. By contrast, a parents' love for their child is rarely questioned, it seems to me. It is treated as a given.
- My sisters and I were also at the stage where we were trying to establish ourselves, in terms of work, relationships, getting a clear sense of "who we are". Sometimes it felt like we had to submerge our grief to address these other issues.

Based on conversations I've had with other bereaved siblings, together with my own experiences, it seems...

- fairly common that bereaved siblings find that their new-found maturity/insight into the precariousness of life doesn't fit with their peer's more carefree preoccupations. Their peers may seem frivolous and superficial in their preoccupations; at the same time, bereaved siblings want social connection with their peers!
- At the same time, despite this maturity, bereaved siblings can feel behind their peers – in terms of developmental milestones - because they've often disengaged from life for a period of time, so catching up on relationships, work skills, social skills, etc. can feel very daunting. It can become a self-perpetuating problem.

- There are also socioeconomic differences between parent and siblings (siblings who are young adults, this is). Typically, parents are relatively established in career; their surviving children, however, are often just stepping into that world. "Slowing down" to grieve often doesn't feel an option.
- Bereaved siblings falling within the 10-30 age bracket may feel very alone in their grief and have less life experience to draw on. While the death of a child or sibling is often described as a grief like no other, individuals in the 30, 40s and 50s are more likely to have dealt with a range of adverse experiences, and thus have more of a reference point – even if a slim one, in the face of such grief – to identify particularly feelings, like distress, depression, subtle waves of sadness.
- Also, siblings' friends, also have less life experience, particularly with adversity, so it seems slimmer pickings in finding someone similarly bereaved, and finding people prepared to sit with your grief.

**JAN'S NOTES on "Similarities & Differences":** I agree with the above similarities and differences, and would add the following: a parent can feel that when a child dies, he/she has not fulfilled their parental role. We feel a very particular sense of guilt: that we have not protected our child from death. We can feel this guilt no matter what type of death has occurred. We understand we are not responsible, but that doesn't mean we do not *feel* responsible, that we do not feel that guilt, that we have not fulfilled our obligation as a parent. The guilt a sibling can feel, by contrast, can relate to feeling a greater burden to their parents; that sense that if they died, rather than the sibling who did die, their parents wouldn't be suffering as much.

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**So, let's move onto part 2 of this presentation, which is looking at how parents and surviving children can support one another, and why this is often so hard....**

**ANDREW'S NOTES:** *sometimes it would seem the key for supporting one another is coming to understand, over time, why we each respond in unique ways to bereavement. This can be difficult because we can feel hurt by the way other family members respond to bereavement. Moving beyond that hurt is often an effort in itself. But, here's some thoughts, that relate to why surviving siblings can find it hard to support their parents. These thoughts partially relate to my own experiences and the experiences other bereaved siblings...*

Even though children can be seeking independence from parents, particularly during teen years and young adulthood, this does not mean we do not want the supportive cushion our parents typically provide. But when a sibling's death occurs, there can only be so much support our wounded parents can give us. This can create a tension, a feeling of "Is it not possible to be more regularly happy and supportive for me?", even though we know our parents need time – lots of time – to grieve. But our knowledge and our needs do not always match up.

Parents' raw grief can be confronting - a very new and unsettling thing to observe - and we may feel trepidation in bringing up the subject of grief, should it trigger additional episodes of our parents' raw grief. So, while not talking about grief may reduce the likelihood of being again exposed to parents' grief, there's an element of avoidance in all this, which is anxiety provoking (and tiring) in itself. We're not exposed to the raw grief; but on the other hand, a subtle form of grief is felt - - spiritual malaise, a tiredness, a flatness, coupled with troubling confusions (*and it can leave parents wondering "Why won't my child talk to me? Does he/she not care about the child who died? Is he/she suffering? And if so, why will they not say so, or admit to so?"*)

**JAN'S NOTES:** when we are in such weakened states, the potential to misinterpret each other's behaviour is increased. And we can often attach our worst fears to other family member's confusing behaviour. So, a parent may fear that a surviving child's silence and unwillingness to talk is a sign that the sibling did not have a strong attachment to the sibling who died. Alternately, a surviving child might feel that their parents' great grief is a sign that their parents loved them less than the child who died.

***So, what has been helpful in supporting one another?***

Often it is recognising as a family unit that we will fumble through this grief journey. Sometimes, our grief will be so great that we will be unavailable for one another, and thus it is unavoidable that we will sometimes be annoyed and disappointed with one another. This awareness that annoyance and disappointment may occur won't "cure all ills", but it helps stops us from beating ourselves up, or lashing out, when these feelings do occur.

Also, the way we have dealt with other traumatic events in our lives will likely be our way of dealing with any new traumas, and it is likely to occur in a more intense form. It's valuable for us to keep this in mind when we are dealing with family grief. Therefore, the family member who has previously coped with adversity with silence will likely adopt this method with their grief. The one who "flies off the handle" will likely do the same on occasion with their grief. The one who strenuously avoids the painful, drawn-out aftermath of a traumatic event will likely do the same with bereavement."

**So, let's now move onto GROUP DISCUSSION...**

- Attendees similarly echoed that surviving children are shocked by their parents' raw grief; they are used to a routine where parents soothe their distress. This is now turned in its head.
- Reference was made to occasions where parents had said to their surviving children that even though the grief they were experiencing was huge, they did not love their surviving child or children any less. This was an important and hugely valuable message to convey to their surviving children.
- On the question of "What often makes it difficult for parents and their surviving children to support one another?", a common theme that emerged from the parents' perspective was an acute fear, particularly consuming in those early years of grief, that another child might die. The acute need to protect could use up so much emotional energy, that it was hard to put one's mind to being a support. Siblings could similarly experience a concern for other family members' safety. Often it seemed their greater concern was not to trigger any more grief for their parents, which could then leave parents wondering why the children were withdrawing.

**How can parents and surviving children support one another?**

- Sometimes to support one another, we have to find support *outside* of the family as well (to relieve some of that support burden). Somewhat ironically, we sometimes need "support breaks" from one another, so we can actually support each other more effectively.
- On a similar note, sometimes we need to reassure each other we can't fix each other's problems, but we will be there for them as much as humanly possible (this can help parents and their children feel less burdened with an overwhelming level of responsibility for one another).
- A child, in death, can become "perfect". It can be a great relief to surviving children to hear their parents refer to the child's less-than-perfect moments.

## THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS VICTORIA

- On a similar note, it was noted that it seemed important that parents and surviving children recognise the differences in their relationships they each had with the child who died. Attendees observed that parents' love for their child could often be more "unconditional" in nature. A sibling, in his/her relationship with the sibling who died, might have been more likely to take the sibling to task for certain behaviours. (These observations helped shed some light on the speculation in the presentation notes about the seemingly greater community recognition of parents love for their children, compared to the recognition afforded the love in sibling relationships). It was important in the family for the different relationships we each had with the child who died to be openly recognised. Sometimes in our great grief we can assume we share the same "type" of love for the child who died, and then be taken aback to find we have differences.
- Attendees similarly acknowledged and recognised the parental guilt of feeling one has failed to protect one's child.
- Group discussion unearthed a form of sibling *survivor guilt*: "Why them? Why not me?"
- Attendees noted that there could be a certain "luck of the draw" in family's grieving styles: sometimes you find both parents and surviving children grieve in the same way. It would seem more common, though, for there to be differences.
- Attendees observed that gender could have a greater influence on how one grieves than whether one is a bereaved parent or sibling.
- Last, but certainly not least, we discussed the "double-hit" of grandparents' grief: grieving for the grandchild, and grieving for their grief-stricken child.

***Many thanks to Sue Brown for helping facilitate this discussion workshop, and thanks to all who participated!***