



## **A SIBLINGS GRIEF FOR YOUNG ADULTS**

### **The death of a sibling**

If our brother or sister dies when we are teenagers or young adults, we are able to understand our loss but not always able to grieve in the same way as adults; grief can be different for everybody so there is no right or wrong way to grieve. We are old enough to think about the situation like adults but not necessarily able to choose our own way to grieve, even though we try to cope in the same way. Sometimes, we might want comforting as if we were a child; at other times, we just want to be independent and cope on our own. Our grief may differ from that of others because of the individual relationship we had with our sibling

We have the problem of whom to turn to for support. We need comfort, understanding and sympathy from those around us but we are not always able to find these. It is difficult to approach our parents when their own pain is so raw, and we might think that they are too burdened already to talk; we might think that our own emotions are not important enough compared with theirs, but in fact it can be very helpful to all concerned to discuss how we're feeling. Sometimes we focus on relationships outside the family, but many of our friends may have never been in this situation to know how to deal with us, and we may even be looking for them to accept that we could be changing because of what's happened.

### **After the death**

After our sibling has died we might be in shock, numb, in denial, and struggling to believe what has happened. We may even want to join those we've lost or feel we're going crazy when we still expect our brother or sister to be near us; we may withdraw

into ourselves. We can feel neglected by everyone; that only our parents' grief is important; or guilty that we are the surviving sibling. It is a major event that can change the relationships within our families; for instance, we may now have become the eldest, the youngest or the only child.

### **Compensating after the death?**

We can be exhausted when we use up energy by trying to appear 'normal'. Our bereavement can make us over-protective of any remaining siblings or of our parents; we can feel guilty about many different things, including any arguments we might have had with the sibling we have lost. We might feel tired and restless, and have poor concentration, angry that our sibling has been taken from us, and we might be fearful for our own safety or for that of other members of our family. These feelings are natural and we should not suppress them. Help and support can be obtained to deal with these issues instead of going through them alone.

### **Making choices?**

Experience of death can teach us about life. We can learn to care about the things that are really important to us, learn about the things that matter in our lives. It can force us to evaluate the choices we have to make and, maybe, to choose different options from those that our friends would select. We grow up, thinking we are learning about all the things we might have to deal with in our life, but we learn nothing about what we might have to face if a sibling dies. Most people we will meet will not know how to deal with our loss, and they will often make comments that may seem cruel or uncaring, but this is more to do with their ignorance and fear of the unknown rather than through any willful desire to hurt. Few people will understand the way losing a brother or sister can make us feel and it can be frustrating when people assume how we feel and what is important to us as a result of our loss. Others won't even mention what we might be going through because they are not sure what to say; by explaining our feelings we can help them to understand more.

### **The empty space**

We may want to fill the space that has been left by our sibling but may have to take care that we don't try to be like the brother or sister we've lost. We have to continue to be the person we want to be and learn from the type of person our sibling was. Some of

us feel the need to do as much as possible to make up for the things our sibling won't get to do, but it is important not to put unnecessary pressure on ourselves by trying to do too much. It can be very hard to carry on with the 'pointless' everyday tasks such as going to school, college or work. Some might wonder why we should bother with work when it seems so unimportant in comparison with what has just happened. Others may welcome the routine that this commitment offers; we like to keep something that we are sure of in our life. There may be times when we can go through periods when we feel we've taken a step backwards in our grieving process. When we feel that we've been coping and then something happens to make us doubt it, it can be scary.

### **How many siblings do I have?**

When we move on from school to college or work we will undoubtedly be faced with the question, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" It's not an easy question to answer. It sometimes feels inappropriate to go into the whole family story about how and when a sibling died, but it can also feel horrible to answer that question without mentioning the person we love and we've lost. The answer can be different each time, but it will always make us pause for a moment.

Some schools and places of work have a counsellor or support system to help with our feelings of grief. In addition, there are organizations such as The Compassionate Friends (TCF) that have phone and email contacts (who may have gone through similar events) to listen and to talk with us. Schools and workplaces may also have an area that we can retreat to when we're having a hard day and are feeling low.

### **Forgetting**

Some bereaved siblings experience a fear of forgetting the person they've lost. There are different ways to help keep the memory alive, and these include writing, perhaps letters or poetry, or a diary recording thoughts and remembrances. We may also gather keepsakes for a memory box; photographs, of course; and music can be very evocative too. We can even help others by fundraising for a charity linked in some way to our brother or sister. This could be related to something in their life, their job or a particular hobby or interest of theirs, or a charity involved in work connected with an illness or even with the cause of their death. Volunteer work can be a way of helping not only others, but a way of helping ourselves by keeping us busy, allowing ourselves a break from feelings of despair, or as a way of encouraging us if we look back and fear we didn't give enough help to our sibling when he or she was alive.

## **Occasions**

When we've lost a sibling there are special occasions that can be very distressing, both the anticipation and then the day itself. We can discuss with other members of the family and decide a way to spend the day. It might be beneficial for us to carry out activities as a sign of remembrance, such as taking flowers to a special place, maybe releasing balloons, lighting a candle, or by spending some time at one of our sibling's favourite places. We might choose to plant flowers, to listen to favourite songs or to spend time with others who knew our sibling. To mark the day in a special way can bring comfort. We may need time alone to give thought to how much our sibling meant and still means to us.

## **The legacy**

As bereaved siblings, we can be happy to have had such special people touch our lives. The loss we feel will be overwhelming at times but with the support of others we can work through our grief and think of the person we've lost and smile at the good times we shared.

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