



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## A Sibling's Grief



A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

# A Sibling's Grief

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In this leaflet we will look at some of the common issues that follow the loss of a brother or sister of any age. You can find out more at the website of The Compassionate Friends (TCF): [www.tcf.org.uk/siblings](http://www.tcf.org.uk/siblings)

## The death of a sibling

Grief is different for everybody and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Our relationship with our sibling was unique, and our grief will be too. We may handle our grief differently to others, including family members.

Sometimes, as a brother or sister, it is unclear where to turn for support. We need comfort, understanding and empathy from those around us but we are not always able to find these. We may not like to approach our parents when their own pain is so raw. We might think that they are already too over-burdened to talk, or that our own emotions are less important than theirs. Sometimes we focus on relationships outside the family, but our friends might not have been in this situation and may not know how to deal with us. They may be surprised at our reactions.

Our sibling's death is a catastrophic event that will change the relationships within our family. We may now have become the eldest, the youngest or the only child.

## Life has changed

After our sister or brother has died we might be in shock and denial, numb and struggling to take in what has happened. This could be particularly the case if our brother or sister died suddenly or unexpectedly, but can also apply if he or she suffered an illness and we were told (or knew) that they would die. Even in that case, many people hope for a reprieve, perhaps never truly accepting that their loved one will not survive. This means that even an 'expected' death can still cause immense shock and disbelief, although we may also feel a sense of relief that they are no longer suffering.

Our emotions can go all over the place. 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 or lack of contact we might have had with our sibling. We might even feel guilty that we are the one to survive. Grief can cause poor concentration or make us feel tired and restless, angry that our sibling has been taken from us, and fearful for our own safety or for that of other members of our family.

Bereavement can make us feel vulnerable and isolated, with a loss of confidence and self-esteem. We can feel neglected by everyone and lonely; it may seem that only our parents' grief matters. In our lowest moments, we may even want to die ourselves in the hope that we will re-join our sister or brother.

These feelings are common and we should not suppress them. Help and support is available; we do not need to try to manage them all by ourselves. Besides family and friends, we may be able to access help through our GP. The Samaritans are also available 24/7 when we need to speak to someone. Their service is confidential and it is not necessary to be suicidal in order to call them. Call the Samaritans in the UK on 116 123 (free call).

Some places of education and employers have a counsellor or support system to help with our feelings of grief. In addition, there are organisations such as The Compassionate Friends (TCF) that have phone and email contacts as well as a Facebook group for those who are in similar situations. Places of education and workplaces may also have an area that we can retreat to when we are having a hard day and are feeling low.

## As time goes by

Experience of death can teach us about life. We can learn to care about the things that are truly important to us and appreciate the things that really matter. It can force us to evaluate the choices we have to make and, maybe, to choose options different from those of our friends. We grow up thinking we are learning about all the things we might have to deal with in our lives, but we learn nothing about what we might have to face if a sibling dies.

We may want to fill the space that has been left by our brother or sister but should beware of trying to become a substitute. We have to be the person we want to be, as well

as 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 will not get to do, but it is important not to put unnecessary pressure on ourselves by taking on too much.

It can be hard to carry on with the everyday routine of life, such as going to school, college or work. We might wonder why we should bother with these things when they seem so unimportant in comparison with what has just happened. Others may welcome the structure that this commitment offers; we like to keep something that we are sure of in our lives.

There may be times in our grieving process when we feel that we have been coping and then something happens to make us doubt it. This can be scary.

## Our families

Grief can draw families together, or it can cause tensions and divisions. Our families might be a huge source of support to us as we grieve and share memories of our brother or sister. On the other hand, sometimes members of the same family may handle grief in different ways, and we might feel isolated or unsupported within our own families.

Our parents may be completely absorbed in their own grief and unable to offer us much support. Each parent may handle grief differently to the other. This might lead to tensions and arguments, which can be difficult to cope with. Our parent or parents may expect support from us although we may be struggling too much to provide this.

Hopefully our family will include us in plans for the funeral and commemorations, but this is not always the case, particularly if we are living in another part of the country or even further away. We may need to communicate our wishes to be involved.

If our brother or sister was married, in a civil partnership or other long-term relationship, it is likely that their partner will be the one who will make arrangements for the funeral. Again we may or may not be included. Much will depend on our prior relationship with them. If they do not initiate much contact, it is probably a good idea for us to get in touch and express our wish to be involved.

## Other people

Many people we 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 ignorance rather than any intention to hurt. Few people will understand how we feel and it can be frustrating when people assume that they do. Others will not mention what we might be going through because they are not sure what to say. It should not be our job to tell them how best to deal with us, but it may turn out that way.

When we meet new people we may be asked, “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” It is not an easy question to answer; it will make us think for a while. It sometimes feels inappropriate to go into the whole family story about how and when a sibling died, but it can also feel disloyal

to answer without mentioning the person we love and have lost. It is up to us to decide what to say when asked this question, and we do not need to feel guilty about whatever that is. It can help to plan in advance although circumstances at the time may dictate how we respond.

## Social media

Social media can be a great source of support, although it is not without pitfalls. It can be a great way to maintain contact with supportive friends, or form new contacts with people who knew our sibling. Social media can be a way to share photos or memories. We can also seek out support in the digital world and connect with people, such as those in TCF, who can support us in our grief.

However, social media postings can be a way for journalists or trolls to contact us or get information about us and our siblings, particularly if our brother or sister's death has already been a subject of public interest. It is advisable to take care with our privacy settings and consider what we do and do not want to be public knowledge. We can also block those whose comments are unhelpful or unkind.

## Remembering

We all experience a fear of forgetting the person we have lost. There are different ways to keep the memory of our loved one alive. These include art, craft, writing, letters, poetry or a diary. These can be shared with others or kept private. It is the act of creating that can help us with our

struggles. We may also gather keepsakes for a memory box, such as photographs and personal belongings, or create an online memorial. Certain songs and music can be very evocative.

We can 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. It could be connected with an illness or even with the cause of their death. Volunteer work can be a positive way of helping not only others, but also ourselves.

## Occasions

When we have lost a sibling there are special occasions that can be very distressing, both in anticipation and on the day itself. We can discuss with other members of the family and decide on a way to spend the day. It might be beneficial for us to carry out activities as a sign of remembrance, such as planting flowers or lighting candles. We may spend some time at one of our sibling's favourite places. We may want to listen to much loved songs or be with others close to 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. Most importantly, this is a time to remember in a way that feels right for us.

See the TCF Leaflet *Coping with Special Occasions* for more on this.



## Other topics

It is beyond the scope of this leaflet to deal with all of the potential issues that anyone could be facing since the death of a brother or sister. There are many possible scenarios, for instance: if our parents are deceased and we are handling our brother or sister's affairs and planning the funeral; how we manage our relationship with our sibling's partner and/or children; what follows if our sibling's death was unexpected and there will be an inquest; and so on.

If you are facing these or any other issues, we recommend that you visit the leaflets page on the TCF website and hopefully you might find something useful there. Although the majority of the leaflets are written for parents, there is much that could be applied to siblings as well.

Follow this link: [www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets](http://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

TCF hosts a closed Facebook page, a forum and organises supportive events for bereaved siblings, and any of these can be a source of support. Find out more here:

[www.tcf.org.uk/siblings](http://www.tcf.org.uk/siblings)

## Going forward

**As bereaved siblings, we can feel fortunate to have had such special people in our lives. Our loss will be overwhelming at times, but the intensity of grief changes as time passes. We can become stronger and live full lives with happy memories of our lost brother or sister.**

## Where can I go from here?

The Compassionate friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way.

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved siblings and parents (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline – the number is on the back page of this leaflet - and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, who can tell you more about the peer-to-peer support available for bereaved siblings (and parents) from TCF.

Our website at **[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member and private Facebook groups, including a Facebook group for bereaved siblings (18 years and over), where you can talk with other bereaved brothers and sisters who understand. We also publish a quarterly magazine, *Support in Bereavement for Brothers and Sisters* (SIBBS Newsletter), containing articles and poems written by bereaved siblings about their own experiences. This magazine is available to all donating members of our charity. You can join at **[www.tcf.org.uk/join](http://www.tcf.org.uk/join)**.

Siblings are also warmly welcome at many of our supportive weekends held throughout the year and we also hold an annual weekend especially for bereaved siblings.

If you would like further reading, please contact our Library at **library@tcf.org.uk** for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.

For more information about support for siblings go to **www.tcf.org.uk/siblings**.



The  
**Compassionate  
Friends**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

**General Enquiries**

0345 120 3785

E: [info@tcf.org.uk](mailto:info@tcf.org.uk)

**TCF Library**

0345 120 3785

E: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

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