



A sibling's grief - for young adults

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



A SIBLING'S GRIEF

- for young adults -

If our brother or sister dies when we are teenagers or young adults, we are able to understand our loss but do not always grieve in the same way as adults. This leaflet is written for teenager and young adult siblings.

The death of a sibling

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 have difficulty dealing with the enormity of what has happened. Sometimes, we might want comforting as if we were a child; at other times, we just want to be independent and left on our own. Our grief may differ from that of others because of the individual relationship we had with our sibling

We have the added problem of whom to turn to 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 not important enough compared with theirs. Sometimes we focus on relationships outside the family, but most of our friends will never have been in this situation and will not know how to deal with us. We may even be looking for them to accept that we could be changing because of what has happened.

After the death

After our sister or brother has died we might be in shock and denial, numb and struggling to take in what has happened. We

may even want to die ourselves in the hope that we will re-join him or her. We can feel neglected by everyone and lonely; it may seem that only our parents' grief matters. It 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.

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 our sibling. We might even feel guilty that we are the one to survive. Grief can make us feel tired and restless, and have poor concentration, 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. These feelings are common and we should not suppress them. Help and support is available instead of our worrying about them by ourselves.

Making choices

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. Most 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 is not really our job to tell them how best to deal with us, but it may turn out that way.

The empty space

We may want to fill the space that has been left but should beware of trying to becoming a substitute. 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 will not get to do, but it is important not to put unnecessary pressure on ourselves by taking on too much. It can be very hard to carry on with the everyday routine 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. It can be scary.

How many siblings do I have?

When we meet new people we will undoubtedly be faced with the question, "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.

Some schools and places of work 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 (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 are having a hard day and are feeling low.

Remembering

We all experience a fear of forgetting the person we have lost. There are different ways to keep the memory alive. These include writing, letters, poetry, or a diary. We do not need to publish these, or to show them to anyone: it is the act of writing that can help us with our struggles. We may also gather keepsakes for a memory box, such as photographs and personal belongings. 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 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, planting flowers, releasing balloons, 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.

As bereaved siblings, we can be happy to have had such special people in our lives. Our loss will be overwhelming at times but, with the support of others, we can become stronger and live full lives with happy memories of our lost brother or sister.



Where can I go from here?

TCF was initially founded by, and for, bereaved parents, but it was quickly realised that other family members – siblings, grandparents, aunts etc. – all needed support and friendship too.

TCF publishes a variety of leaflets, which are intended for all who grieve the loss of a child, and which try to help with special problems such as suicide, judgmental attitudes to drug and alcohol abuse, and sudden death. These leaflets are listed on our website **www.tcf.org.uk** and are available at no charge to all bereaved. For those with a larger reading appetite, there is our **Postal Library**, contact details on the last page of this leaflet.

TCF publish a quarterly newsletter, *Support In Bereavement for **B**rothers and **S**isters (SIBBS)*, and also run some sibling support groups. Call our National Helpline on 0345 123 2304 or email: helpline@tcf.org.uk for details of sibling groups, ways of

meeting other bereaved siblings through weekend gatherings and retreats, or to talk and chat to another bereaved sibling by telephone or via email. A website especially for siblings is at **www.tcfsiblingsupport.org.uk**, and includes a secure Forum, where siblings can 'talk' to other bereaved brothers and sisters.

For general enquiries, and details of how to become a member of TCF and receive our support publications on a regular basis, please contact the TCF office (details overleaf).

The Compassionate Friends

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TCF Postal Library

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