



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

This leaflet looks at what you might be going through if your sibling has died. It has been written with the assistance of young adults who have also lost a sibling. We hope it will be a help to you.

What it is like to grieve

The death of our sibling shakes us to our core. We have lost our sense of security and belonging in the world. We may not be able to believe that they have died. We are in shock, struggling to take in what has happened. This may be especially true if our sibling died suddenly or unexpectedly, but we might feel like this even if they suffered an illness and it was known that they would die.

When somebody we care about dies, our emotions can go all over the place. We may feel:

- **Deeply sad** — we might cry a lot or we might be numb. The sadness might bring us to a dark place. In our lowest moments, we may not want to carry on living.
- **Guilty** — perhaps about arguments, lack of contact or that we are the one to survive. Survivor's guilt is a very common.
- **Angry** — about how or why our sibling died, or simply the fact that they are gone.
- **Fearful** — for the safety of our remaining immediate family members or ourselves.
- **Confused or unable to concentrate** — our thoughts might wander all over the place.
- **Vulnerable and isolated** — we can feel neglected. It may seem that only our parents' grief matters. The dynamics of our family might have changed. We might now be the only child or the oldest.

- **Shaken** — we might lose confidence and our self-esteem might be low.
- **Tired** — it might be difficult to sleep or we may have no energy.
- **Lonely** — We shared history and memories with our sibling. We have close friends, but our relationship with them is different.

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 our family members.

It is important to find ways to cope with the storm of feelings. Music, exercise, spending time in the fresh air or with friends, or doing activities with our hands such as crafting might help. Relaxing in some way or another can help give our minds a necessary break or alternative focus away from the stress of our grief.

We also need understanding and empathy from those around us. Sometimes we cannot go to our immediate family for this support, particularly if our parents are finding things very difficult. Talking to our friends can be a good idea, but it depends on their own life experiences. They may not know how to respond to us or what to say.

This means that sometimes it is worthwhile looking outside of our usual family or social circle for support, especially if we are feeling overwhelmed by our grief.

Where to get help

- It can be valuable to talk to other bereaved siblings. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has a group led by people who have lost siblings. They offer support online and in person. They also run a private Facebook group. Here we can discuss our experiences with no fear or judgement. See www.tcf.org.uk/siblings
- Some places of work or education have a counsellor or support system. They may also have areas where we can retreat to when we are having a hard day.
- Our GP might be able to signpost us to services such as bereavement counselling.

There are quite a few charities that offer listening support, by phone, chat or text. Here are a few websites that might be useful:

- **Samaritans** – call free on **116 123**
- **Shout** 85258 - free, 24/7 mental health text support in the UK
- **CruseChat** | Chat with a Trained Bereavement Counsellor
- **Hope Again** (Cruse for young people)
- **Mind**, the mental health charity

Coping with sudden death

Our sibling's death might have been sudden. It could have been the result of a road traffic incident. They could have been the victim of crime, or died as a result of their own actions. Their death could have been natural but unexpected.

The way they died could affect how we grieve. We may feel anger towards them for the choices they have made (if they have died from a drug overdose or by suicide, for example), which can then make us feel guilty. This is normal. It does not mean that we love them any less or that we will always feel anger towards them.

We might struggle to relate to our parents if they feel guilty, angry or judgemental about the way our sibling died, such as from drug use or other behaviour they disapproved of. We might find it hard to support our parents if their outlook is very different to our own.

We might know things about our sibling that our parents did not realise. It might take some time before we are able to discuss this with our parents.

Coping following an anticipated death

If our sibling died as the result of an illness, disability or genetic condition, we might have known for a long time that this was going to happen. The care of our sibling might have been the main focus within our family. We may even feel an initial sense of relief. They are no longer in pain, and the rest of the family can 'move on'. We might feel guilty about these responses, but they do not mean that we are not grieving for our sibling, or that we do not wish they were still alive. Our family has been living with a difficult reality, and it is not surprising if we are now left with a mixture of complex and seemingly contradictory feelings.

After seeing someone we love suffer and then die, it is natural that we may worry about the health of other people we love, or even our own. If we have medical concerns, particularly if our sibling suffered from a condition that we could also face, it could be a good idea to talk with our GP or a specialist.

Coping with difficult memories

We all have good and bad times as we grow up. There are few, if any, households where there have been no childhood squabbles. Later on, we might have had more serious differences. Perhaps we were not even in touch prior to our sibling's death.

All of this could leave us with a sense of incompleteness after they have died. We might have feelings of guilt or even anger towards them. Reminders of our childhood might be painful. These are difficult emotions to come to terms with, and they might take time to process. It might help to talk to someone who can see the situation from an objective viewpoint, who can perhaps offer some perspective on our relationship. Not all siblings are close for various reasons, but this does not mean that our sibling did not know that we loved them.

Our families

Grief can draw families together, but that does not always happen. There can be tensions, such as:

Parental grief

Our parent(s) could be absorbed in their own grief and unable to offer us much support. They might even start leaning on us emotionally.

Conflict

Each parent may handle grief differently to the other. This might lead to conflict and arguments.

Over-protectiveness:

Parents may begin to worry more, even excessively, about their other children. Their over-protectiveness can be overwhelming, although hopefully this will subside in time.

Out of sync grief

Members of the family will not all grieve in the same way. At the exact moment that one person wants to talk about their grief, another may not. This being 'out of sync' with each other can lead to misunderstandings.

Lack of involvement

Nobody may think to involve us with funeral plans or other arrangements, particularly if our adult sibling had a partner and/or family of their own. We may have to explain our wish to be involved with these matters.

Change within the family

Our place in the family will have changed. We might now be the oldest, or we might be expected to replace our sibling in some way. For instance, perhaps they were the 'life of the party.' Now all the attention is on us.

Becoming an only child

If we are now the only child, we might feel very alone. We might also worry about what will happen as our parents age or become ill, and that we will be left with all the responsibility. We may feel anxious about our life when both our parents eventually die and that we will then be all alone in the world with no immediate family left.

Weight of responsibility for our sibling's children

If our sibling had children, we may feel responsible for them in some way and want to keep their parent's memory alive. At the same time, we might feel inadequate and that our efforts are not worth much. We may also feel guilty that we are alive while their parent is not. While we may enjoy seeing our nieces or nephews blossom, it will be painful, knowing that our sibling is not here to see them too.

Future events

We may feel guilty celebrating Christmas or other events as our sibling isn't able to. We may worry that people seeing us celebrating will assume we have forgotten our sibling and think that our grieving is over.

Overwhelming grief

Sometimes it might seem everything within our family has become about the death of our sibling. This could be overwhelming. We might wish for everyone to give themselves a break and think about other things sometimes.

Every family is different. We may or may not experience any of the above. If this does happen to us though, it could make our grief harder to navigate. At times we might even feel angry towards our sibling for dying and leaving us to deal with the aftermath. Speaking to other people in similar circumstances, or professionals, may help us make some sense of what we are going through and give us ideas for how to manage our own situation.



“When my sister died, I felt a real need to do something for her memory. There was nothing I could do to bring her back but I could do something she would have been proud of. Running a half marathon for her favourite charity helped me through my grief because it gave me a purpose and made me feel close to her even though she was gone.” - Anna

Remembering

For many of us, keeping the memory of our sibling alive is an important part of our 'new normal.' There are many ways of doing this. We might work on some of these with family or friends, but other projects will be just for ourselves. **A few ideas:**

- Creating something – art, craft, poetry
- Gathering keepsakes for a memory box
- Collecting photographs or video clips, perhaps making something out of them
- Creating an online memorial
- Fundraising for a charity linked in some way to our sibling
- Taking on a challenge, such as a long-distance walk or cycle ride
- Volunteering or doing other helpful activities in honour of our sibling

There are many more ideas in the TCF *Handbook Remembering our Child* available to view online at www.tcf.org.uk/rememberinghandbook

These activities not only honour the memory of our sibling, but can also help by giving us a positive focus for our energies and thoughts.

Social media

Most of us spend a lot of time in the digital space and we are already aware of the potential pitfalls. Still, we might be more vulnerable following the death of our sibling. Even well-meaning comments could upset us. Taking a break from online platforms may help us avoid potentially upsetting content.

There is also a question of what to do with our previous communications with our sibling via social media. While it can be a wonderful thing to be able to 'hear' their voice through their past posts, messages and photos, looking back through these can be very painful.

Social media platforms are potentially a useful creative outlet where we can remember and pay tribute to our sibling. Besides posting pictures or videos at different times, we could also use social media to highlight charities or subjects that we are interested in. On the other hand, this might feel uncomfortable to be so public about our sibling and our grief.

Memories may flash up on social media of happier times when our sibling was alive, perhaps even videos of them. While it may be comforting to see happier memories, suddenly seeing our sibling like this can be upsetting.

Like with all aspects of our grief, it is our own choice how we handle this.

Occasions

When we have lost a sibling, certain days and times of the year can be very distressing, both in anticipation and on the day itself. This might include our sibling's birthday; the anniversary of their death; or celebratory occasions like our own birthday, Christmas, or New Year.

Marking these dates in a special way can be comforting. Alternatively, we may sometimes prefer to ignore a painful date. There is no right or wrong way to spend this time. It can be helpful to let family members or friends know our preferences in advance and perhaps make a plan together.

Some ideas for marking special dates:

- Planting flowers or a tree
- Lighting candles
- Visiting one of our sibling's favourite places
- Listening to the music they enjoyed
- Looking through photos or other mementoes
- Spending time creating a scrapbook or memory box
- Taking some time alone to think about our sibling
- Participating in a virtual candle-lighting, such as the one organised by TCF each December.

See the TCF Leaflet *Coping with Special Occasions* available to view online at www.tcf.org.uk/specialoccasions

It can be upsetting when friends or distant family sometimes forget or fail to acknowledge key milestones such as the anniversary of our sibling's passing, or to even mention our sibling anymore. Have they forgotten our sibling, or do they remember but are afraid of upsetting us? We might need to take the initiative to talk about our sibling.

As time goes by

Each of us will find our own ways of living with grief while carrying on with life, but one thing is certain: our life will never be the same again.

Grief is a bit like a rollercoaster ride – sometimes up, sometimes down. Arriving at a down time when we thought we had been coping can be discouraging. However, this is normal. Major life events like marriages, births or other deaths, or world events such as the pandemic, can be triggers.

It can be hard to carry on with the everyday routine of life, such as going to college or work. We might wonder why we should bother with these things — they might seem unimportant in comparison with our sibling's death. On the other hand, some of us welcome having something to keep us busy.

It will take time to adjust to the changes in our life, including in family relationships and perhaps even our own identity. We might feel pessimistic about the future. Not everyone feels like this, but some of us have found that our priorities have changed. This could set us apart from our friends and peers whose life journey is different.

We may find ourselves trying to fill the space that has been left by our sibling and feel driven to do as much as possible, as if to make up for the things they have missed. Putting ourselves under pressure in this way is rarely a good idea. We must be true to ourselves, our own personalities, and our own hopes for the future.

Going forward

While there may be times when we want our grief as a 'bereaved sibling' to be acknowledged, there will also be times when we just want to get on with living and perhaps forget about what has happened for a while. That's fine too. We need to live our own life and not always be defined by the death of our sibling.

Gradually, we will find our way to living the best life that we can. Our loss might feel overwhelming at times, but the intensity of grief does diminish as time passes – it simply becomes a part of us. We can become stronger and live full lives, while still also remembering our sibling. They are absent, but still loved and precious in our memory.

Further Reading

TCF has published over 40 leaflets on a variety of topics. You might find them useful if you are facing specific situations, such as needing to handle your sibling's affairs or planning their funeral, managing your relationship with your sibling's partner and/or children, or needing information about what happens if there is an inquest.

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge (see contact details on the back page).



The
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TCF Library

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Live, Laugh, Love,
my sister Sacha is always by my side.
Zack Wheeler

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