



Grieving the Death of a Sibling

Your sibling has died. Whether their death was sudden or expected, the shock and disbelief you are feeling may be overwhelming. Perhaps this is the first death or maybe this is one of many that have occurred in your family-of-origin. Either way, without your brother or sister, your role in the family has changed.

You may be surprised by the range of your reactions. It may feel like you are not quite yourself and it may be difficult to understand how you are feeling. No matter how you are experiencing your grief, remember not to judge yourself or other family members. Everyone will respond differently at different times.

Remember that...

- You have the right to feel what you are feeling.
- Everyone has the right to grieve, whether you were close with your sibling or not.
- Regardless of the nature of your relationship, this person was part of your family-of-origin.
- You deserve condolences. It can often feel that your sibling's partner, parents, or children receive the most sympathy.
- There is no specific set of emotional or physical reactions that you "should" be feeling right now.
- Grief comes and goes and may fluctuate every day, every hour, or vary according to your surroundings or circumstances.

After your brother or sister has died...

In addition to the wide variety of typical physical and emotional expressions of grief, here are some reactions that are specific to the death of a sibling:

- You may find it comforting to be around family members, friends, or colleagues who are also grieving or who have memories to share.
- You may find comfort in looking at photos or doing activities that remind you of your sibling.
- On the other hand, you may feel apprehensive about being around others who are grieving and go out of your way to avoid reminders of him or her.
- You may feel more alone in your family if your sibling was your confidant.
- You may also feel relieved in some ways to not have them around, especially if you had a conflicted relationship.
- You may miss them when you want to share family news.
- Your grief may be triggered during holidays and other family gatherings.
- You may feel abandoned or left behind.
- You may feel that your grief is being brushed aside with everyone asking, "How are your parents coping?" and not asking how you are doing.

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- You may be wondering how the dynamics in your family will change and what your new role may be. With the death of your sibling, you may have become an only child, or the oldest child, or are no longer the middle child.
- You may now have extra responsibilities, especially if your sibling died before one or both of your parents.
- There may be additional pressure placed on you by your parents to achieve greater goals, or fulfill their expectations. For example: “I feel obligated to get married and have kids since my sister died. I’m the only one who can give them grandchildren now.”
- Your parents may become over-protective.
- You may have thoughts about your own mortality, especially if your sibling was close in age or younger than you.
- You may experience secondary losses such as your sibling’s widow remarrying or moving your nieces and nephews far away.

Consider ways to stay connected to your sibling...

- Create a memorial space in your home to display photos and memorabilia.
- Write a letter to your brother or sister sharing things you want them to know. For example: “I long to tell you all about my new job. You would be so excited for me.”
- Include them in holiday traditions. For example, you might want to continue to display your brother’s Christmas stocking on the mantle, to help you feel connected to him.
- Make a donation to your favorite charity in your sibling’s name.
- Do volunteer work for an organization that would be meaningful to your brother or sister.
- Share anecdotes and favorite stories about your sibling with people who knew them well.
- Plant a tree or flower in memory of your sibling.

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