

## ADULT SIBLING GRIEF

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You are probably reading this brochure because your brother or sister has been killed by an impaired driver; or perhaps your sibling was intoxicated and caused the crash. You may have read other books, brochures or articles to learn about grief and to better understand what is going on with you and those around you. With few exceptions, most literature dealing with sibling grief issues is designed for children. This brochure focuses on the unique grief response of an adult facing the death of a sister or brother.

**M**ost people misunderstand the depth of grief that siblings experience when their brother or sister is killed. If your sibling was older than you, there was never a time in your life when he or she didn't exist. Even if your sibling was younger, you may not remember the time before he or she became a part of your life.

**O**ther loved ones can feel like biological brothers or sisters, even though they are not related by blood. Step or half-siblings, cousins who are very close and best friends of other siblings can seem like part of the family. So can a sister or brother-in-law, someone who lived with your family or a neighbor with whom you shared daily life. Those ties may extend back to childhood. When someone says, "We were like brothers," or, "She was like a sister to me," he or she is describing a relationship that differs from that of friendship, although friendship may be involved.

Siblings are the first people with whom we socialize on a regular basis. We grow around each other, not only physically, but mentally and emotionally. We may learn to test, harmonize, play, joke, fight and jockey for family positions with our brothers and sisters. We have our share of good times, but we also share bad experiences with them. They are familiar, yet unique. They are exasperating and entertaining. They are sometimes friends and sometimes antagonists. They are an important part of our lives because we have known them for a long time. There is a lifeline; a connection.

A sibling relationship carries with it a bond that preference cannot sever. You can choose to drop a friend, divorce a spouse or fire an employee, and that relationship will end. You cannot, however, fire a brother or divorce a sister. You may not have been very close; you may not have spoken for years; you may not even like him or her; but there is still a bond between you. That bond may seem especially strong, now that your brother or sister has died.

The contents of this brochure came from many bereaved adult siblings who shared their grief experiences with us, as well as a number of bereaved parents who told us about the experiences of their surviving adult children. We hope you will find comfort and practical advice as you cope with what may be the worst thing that ever happened to you.

## GRIEVING

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Grieving is not always fully understood. Each person grieves differently and on their own timeline. Although your grief will differ from that of your parents - and even the grief of other siblings - it will not be so different that you cannot find solace in sharing your pain with others.

Some people draw into themselves for a period of time and find everyday tasks to be utterly overwhelming. Others throw themselves into activity to avoid pain and to create structure. Still others vacillate between numbness and frantic activity.

Deep mourning, including crying and sobbing, can drain a person to the point of exhaustion. Fully leaning in to this intense sadness is painful, but may offer a kind of cleansing leading to acknowledgement of the death and a renewed commitment to living again.

## SUDDEN AND VIOLENT DEATH

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A unique component in drunk driving deaths is the fact that someone chose to drink and drive; therefore, the death of your sibling was someone's fault. The fact that your sibling's death could have been prevented is horrifying. When someone dies because of a criminal act such as drunk driving, he or she is usually referred to as "the victim." You, too, are a victim/survivor of crime because someone you love was senselessly killed, and you must cope with the corresponding anguish and loss that you feel.

Many additional feelings are involved in the grief of crash victims/survivors. Your grief work may be longer, lonelier and more detrimental to your lasting emotional stability. Research has shown that it takes years, not weeks or months as many suppose, to emotionally heal.

## DENIAL

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Your psychological need for denial may have been intense when you first witnessed or received word of the crash. The characteristic response, “Oh, no!” describes this aspect of the denial and shock. To keep the world sensible, this news simply could not be true. The sense of numbness may have taken over shortly after you knew your sibling had been killed. Feeling numb or dazed is a natural anesthetic that kept you from experiencing the full emotional and physical pain of your loss all at once.

Sometimes shock is interwoven with intense anxiety attacks or panic. You may have lost control and said or done things you would never have thought you would.

You may experience some lingering physical symptoms of shock, such as trouble sleeping and eating, or you may have noticed some strange feelings in your chest. Many victims/survivors speak of a “heavy heart,” almost as if it’s too hard to breathe. If this is your experience, don’t hesitate to see a doctor to rule out serious complications; but usually these symptoms are components of normal grief reaction.

It is not uncommon for numbness to continue weeks or even months after the crash. You may remember little about the first few days or weeks after your sibling's death. Some have described this period as feeling as though they are under water, of seeming to be outside of themselves and observing what's going on, or of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Perhaps you have difficulty recalling the funeral or remembering who visited or sent flowers. Shock is a helpful mechanism that temporarily shields us from pain that we probably could not endure if experienced without relief. Denial is perfectly normal and appropriate as long as it is not so extended that essential daily functioning remains impaired over time.

The numbness and denial interwoven with panic may prevail until long past the time that relatives and friends back away and expect you to be "handling it." Society tends to overlook sibling grief and concentrate more on the grief of a parent. Personnel policies at work may offer more funeral leave for a parent than a sibling. You likely have noticed that people inquire about your parents first - "How is your mother?" or "How is your father holding up?" - and ask about you and your sisters and brothers last, if at all. You may have noticed that you got few, if any, messages of condolence from friends or relatives, whereas your parents were well remembered. No wonder many bereaved siblings feel as though they need to subordinate their own needs to those of their parents.

## ANGER

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Anger can distance you from others when you need them the most. You may feel isolated because of the intensity of your feelings. Because your anger exceeds that of those around you, others may find you unpleasant to be with and may abandon you until they are more comfortable relating to you. You may be angry at other members of your family and find that they are angry too. You may be angry because they are not the same people they were before, and your family no longer functions in the same way. You may feel angry and resentful that your life has had to change and there is no stability within your family to help you make those adjustments. You may blame yourself because you were unable to prevent the death. It also hurts when you can't help your loved ones with their own grief.

Your anger may be focused on the person who caused your sibling's death. That's the most realistic place to put it. While you are in the most intense phase of your grief, you may even be tempted to take the law in your own hands. Although this is a perfectly normal feeling, engaging in retaliatory behavior never resolves the problem and will greatly endanger your safety and well-being. As difficult as it may be to think rationally, you must do it. Preoccupation with vengeance can get you stuck in your grief journey, rendering you impotent from leaning into sorrow and depression and then into a sense of acknowledgement and going on with

your life. Prolonged preoccupation with vengeance can serve as a distraction and defense, much like denial did in the early days following the death of your sibling. As long as the focus remains on the offender's criminality, some surviving family members can avoid the gut-wrenching agony of facing their own loneliness, guilt and sadness. Talking about your desire for vengeance, and even describing some of your revenge fantasies with a safe person in a safe place, are healthy ways to cope.

**T**he injustice of your loss, the frustration of your best efforts and hopes for your brother or sister, and the deep hurt you feel may add up to rage. You may feel an unreasonable drive to "do something" but can rarely find a rational approach to help you. It then becomes easy to feel guilty and worthless for not having been better able to cope.

**F**ind a way to release some of your anger, rage, despair and vengeance through talking, physical exercise, activism or artistic expression. Although these feelings are normal, and the tragedy of your sibling's death certainly warrants them, healing can come only with work. Hanging on to anger can trigger physical illness such as increased blood pressure, chronic aches and pains, or the onset of one of the stress-related diseases such as arthritis, asthma, ulcers, migraine headaches or even cancer.

**A**s you seek ways to channel the many feelings you are experiencing, don't overlook the value of talking about your loss over and over again. Research

in the area of grief and bereavement has shown a clear link between healing and the opportunity to talk about what happened. Find someone who will listen as long as you need to talk. It may be someone close to you, but it may also be someone who isn't directly involved with your loss. In addition to talking, some find writing to be helpful. You may want to keep a journal, compose stories or poems, or even write letters to your sibling.

## **GUILT AND COMPLICATED GRIEF**

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Sometimes early in grief, sometimes later, you and other members of your family may fall into a deep sadness as you come to grips with all that has been lost. You may want to withdraw, isolating yourself from others. You may have difficulty sleeping, and may lose your appetite. You may have headaches, difficulty breathing, or digestive disorders. You may find yourself apathetic and absent-minded. You may feel exhausted, finding it difficult to make it through the day. You may long to go to bed, but when you do, you don't sleep well.

**I**n most cases of sudden and violent death, guilt within the family is a major issue. In one study comparing guilt in anticipated death and guilt in sudden death, those experiencing a sudden death were four times more likely to experience deep guilt. "If only I had..." is stated over and over again. You may feel guilty that you are alive when your sister or brother is dead. You may feel as though you could

have or should have prevented her or his death. You may feel guilty as you recall fights or acts of unkindness to which you subjected your brother or sister. Perhaps you feel guilty because of your anger or resentment about the death. For some, the worst is the sense that it might have been better if you had been killed and your sibling had lived. This kind of thinking is normal for awhile following the death.

**F**or most people the guilt will eventually be resolved by rational thought and sharing your thoughts and feelings with others. Chances are, the fights you had as children, or even as adults, were normal family disagreements that were eventually resolved. Your family would be equally grief-stricken if it had been you that was killed. You certainly would have tried to prevent your sibling's death if you knew it was going to happen, but human beings cannot look into the future. If there is something for which you were responsible and some guilt is appropriate, you may be inclined to take on the whole load of responsibility. Regardless of what you did or did not do, regardless of what kind of relationship you had with your sibling, regardless of what you would have done differently if you had known, remember that your sibling's death was caused by an impaired driver.

**A**lthough deep-seated sorrow and sadness are perfectly normal parts of the grieving process, unresolved guilt may lead to complicated mourning and a need for professional intervention.

Most, if not all, bereaved persons benefit from talking with a mental health professional. However, you must obtain professional intervention if you feel driven by suicidal thoughts or behaviors, if you use alcohol or other drugs as a coping device, if you develop excessive physical problems or sleep disturbances, or if you experience prolonged denial of the death. Another indicator of your need for help is when your grief response does not change over a period of time. Although no one “gets over” the sudden and violent death of a brother or sister, the face of grief does and should change over time.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Eventually, victims/survivors who have allowed themselves to feel and express all their feelings will acknowledge the fact that their sister or brother was indeed killed, that nothing will be the same as before and that it is still possible to move on with life.

Your grief will no longer be a chronic condition. You will regain energy and resume a fairly normal way of life interrupted by “grief spasms.” Grief spasms are short periods of intense grief triggered by special events such as holidays or everyday occurrences such as seeing someone who looks like your sibling. You will probably experience grief spasms occasionally for the rest of your life, but they are not an indication of unresolved grief. They simply represent all your sibling meant to you.

Your life will never be the same as it was before

your sister or brother was killed. How much it changes depends on a number of variables, but your life will be altered by the death of your sibling. You are changed, and the way you relate to those around you changes as well.

## CHANGES IN THE FAMILY

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Whether you realize it or not, you play a unique role within your family. Perhaps you were the rebellious child or the family prankster. Maybe you were the responsible child or the one who got blamed for everything. Our roles change as we become adults, but most adults retain some relational habits from their childhood. You've probably seen this in your family. Perhaps no one was surprised when your "smart" sister started a business but everyone was shocked when your "wild" cousin graduated from college with honors!

When your sibling was killed, you not only lost a unique loved one, but you lost that person's role within the family as well. If your sibling organized the family parties, someone else must now take on that role. If your brother was the peace-maker during family quarrels, someone else must now take on that responsibility. You may feel your sibling's loss deeply as you become aware of the special part he or she played within your family. It is normal that you and other siblings will try to "fill in" some of these roles. Some changes may take place quite naturally and easily, while others may feel awkward and cause conflict within the family.

**P**art of your role within your family may be related to birth order. While some people believe birth order can predict everything from what you do for a living to what kind of person you marry, most researchers don't believe its influence is that great. But evidence does suggest that roles within the family depend to some degree on whether you are the oldest, youngest, or somewhere in between.

**I**f your oldest sibling was killed, you may have lost a caregiver or someone to whom you've always looked up. If the "baby" of the family was killed, you may have lost the one you protected the most. If the age difference was great enough between you and the brother or sister who was killed, you may feel almost as though you have lost a parent or a child.

**W**hen a brother or sister dies, you experience a gap in the birth order. If the oldest sibling was killed, the second oldest is now the oldest. If there were just the two of you, you are now an "only child." It is difficult to know whether or not you should try to assume a new role, but you are painfully aware of the chasm left by your sibling's death.

**I**f the sibling who was killed was your twin or part of a multiple birth, you probably feel that part of yourself died too. You will need to work hard at rational thinking to prevent yourself from concluding that the "wrong one" died. Another sibling may remind you of your dead brother or sister either physically or in some other way. All of these add unique features to your grieving.

Many bereaved siblings find it difficult to answer social questions pertaining to their life. When someone casually asks, “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” or, “How many are there in your family?” you may feel unable to respond. There is no “right” way to answer these questions. You may answer differently from time to time depending on how you feel and the setting in which you find yourself. Some feel very strongly that failure to mention a dead loved one is to deny their existence or their importance to the family. Others feel, at times, they don’t want to explain their sibling’s death, so they respond differently. Assuming you had three brothers and one was killed, you might want to say, “I have three brothers: two are living, one was killed by a drunk driver.” You may want to say, “I have three brothers,” and leave it at that. Or, you may want to say, “I have two brothers.” You have the right to answer these questions in any way you feel comfortable.

### *Relationships with Parents*

For some bereaved siblings, the fact that their sibling’s death has altered their relationship with their parents is deeply painful. Regardless of your age, you and your brothers and sisters will always be your parents’ children. Chances are, under the stress of coping with the death of their child, your parents now react to you in some ways as though you were still a small child. This isn’t so hard to understand in light of the fact that parents naturally resist any threat to their children, no matter the age and

capability of those children. Your family has been deeply threatened and hurt by the death of a sister or brother. In addition, your parents are struggling with the senselessness and the “unnaturalness” of being pre-deceased by one of their children. Most people understand that someday they will have to bury their parents, but no one expects to have to bury a child.

**Y**ou may find your parents trying to comfort you at the expense of themselves or attempting to protect you from the reality of the death. They are probably trying very hard to keep you from witnessing the depths of their own grief, which makes it difficult to share feelings with one another. You may struggle to make sense of the fact that each parent is grieving differently from you. Your parents may be terrified that another family member may be killed and go to great lengths to monitor your activities. If this behavior is creating a barrier within the family, talk with your parents and offer them some concrete ways they can be supportive of you. In turn, invite them to tell you what you can do to comfort them. In times of crisis, it is very easy to fall into old parent/child habits, but it doesn't have to be that way. They will need to give a little, but so will you.

**S**imilarly, you may find yourself falling into old patterns of behavior in an effort to protect your parents. You may feel they hurt enough without having to watch you grieve. You may go to incredible lengths to hide your pain from them. It may seem right for you to make decisions for your

parents or take on parental responsibilities in an effort to care for them and make their lives a little easier. Occasionally, people are so paralyzed by their initial grief that they cannot make good decisions or care for themselves. In those cases you may end up “parenting your parents.” Usually, though, adult children and parents care for one another because it gives them something to do with their grief. Ask if your parents feel you are over-protecting or smothering them. Respect their response and accommodate as best you can.

**P**erhaps you feel that in addition to losing your sibling, you’ve lost your parents as well. Your parents may always have been there for you in times of crisis. Even if you aren’t very close to your parents, it can be incredibly painful to become aware of their vulnerability and weakness. When we were children, our parents could fix just about anything whether it was a broken toy, a difficult homework problem or a sick pet. This may be the first time you’ve turned to your parents for support and they can’t solve the problem and make it better for you. You may need to grieve the loss of your parents; the parents that were always strong, always in control, never vulnerable. For some, the loss of parental figures is nearly as significant as the death of the sibling.

**I**n time, you will probably forge a new relationship with your parents. Talk with them about what you observe, and ask them to share with you how they see you differently. Tell them you want

to use these new understandings to build a new, more mature relationship with them.

## OTHER LOSSES

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### *Your Sibling's Spouse and Children*

Like watching a rock tossed into the lake, you may feel as though the grief of your sibling's death expands to every area of your life. If your sibling was married, your family may lose contact with the husband or wife and with the children, if there were any. It's easy to assume that your brother- or sister-in-law will stay close, but sometimes they do not. They may fear that their presence is too painful for your family, or that they are no longer considered part of the family. If you want to stay close with them, be direct about your desires and take the responsibility for staying in touch. Eventually most widows and widowers remarry, which can be extremely painful to the family of the dead husband or wife. Remember, if you can, that no one will replace your brother or sister, and remarrying isn't an act of disloyalty. A new spouse will probably be very uncertain about his or her relationship with your family and will welcome some clarification from you.

**I**f your sibling had children, they are precious reminders of your brother or sister's life. Discovering traits and physical features in nieces and nephews that are similar to those of your brother or sister are both joyous and painful. Similarly, the special moments in their lives - graduations, marriages, the

births of their children - are bittersweet as they will always highlight your sibling's absence. Children, especially those who were small when their parent was killed, will want to learn about that parent from those who knew him or her. Maintaining a relationship with nieces and nephews is one way bereaved siblings have honored the memory of their brother or sister.

### *Your Spouse*

If you are married, your own spouse may feel like one of the forgotten victims/survivors. Your spouse may have had a very special relationship with your sister or brother yet doesn't have the same official ties with your family. Don't forget to include your spouse and the spouses of other brothers and sisters in the family events following the death of your sibling. They have the stress of being supportive of you and your family while at the same time coming to grips with their own unique loss.

**T**hey have also lost the person you were before your brother or sister was killed. Their grief may be different, but it needs to be recognized and accepted.

### *Friends*

Friendships often change after a sudden death. Even those who did not know your brother or sister may drift away. They may not know what to say or do; they may feel uncomfortable with your grief; or they simply may not want to deal with the changes that have occurred in your life. If they were also friends

of your dead sibling, they too will be grieving. You may find yourself growing closer to those who knew your sister or brother, or you may find yourself moving away. Your dead brother or sister may have had a group of friends that you knew at least socially. Chances are, you may lose contact with that set of friends unless you make it a point to stay in touch.

## HOLIDAYS

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Holidays will be different for you and your family. For some, the absence of the brother or sister is felt most acutely on special days such as birthdays and holidays. Some families choose to maintain tradition as closely as possible as a way of remembering their loved one. Others find such traditions too painful and choose instead to create new ones. Do some thinking in advance about what you want to do on the special day or the death anniversary date. You may want to visit the cemetery or some place that was special to your sister or brother. Some bereaved siblings make a contribution of time or money to a charity that was important to their brother or sister. You may want to do something that your sibling enjoyed such as going to the beach, or you may want to have a quiet day alone or with family. These special occasions can be difficult and at times you may be overwhelmed with sadness, but don't be surprised if there are some moments that aren't so sad. Give yourself permission to experience joy again.

## HEALING

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Unfortunately, there is no such thing as closure to your grief. As you are already painfully aware, you are a different person from who you were before your sister or brother was killed. Your family has also changed. You may have learned some new things about yourself, even found some unexpected strengths and sensitivities, but you would give them all up to have your sibling back. Your future is altered because it no longer contains one of the persons with whom you expected to grow up and grow old. Remember that experiencing grief is a journey. Over time and with work, however, you will regain a greater awareness of laughter, happy times, and celebrations of what your sibling's life meant to you.

*For more information or assistance  
visit MADD's website at [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org)  
or call 1-877-MADD-HELP (1-877-623-3435).*

## NOTES

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