

Supporting families after bereavement

Adults grieving the death of a brother or sister

What helped us...

Adults grieving the death of a brother or sister

“I got told: ‘Don’t cry - your mum’s in the room.’ And me? I was dying inside.”
Bereaved sister

Nobody asks: do you want to talk about it?

When a parent dies, you lose the past. When a child dies, you lose the future. When a sibling dies, however, you lose both the past **and** the future. That is the grief of a sibling – grief for what was past, and grief for what should have been the future.

Yet our grief is not always acknowledged. Support and care is often reserved for parents or for younger siblings.

“No-one asks you how you are. It was all about my parents.”

“It’s not even recognised. Someone in work said to me: ‘Oh, I heard your brother died...’”

When this happens, you can feel like you are in a terribly isolated place. You feel like you are left to fend for yourself.

And even **you** can fail to acknowledge your need to grieve.

“As much as I missed her, I still felt sorrier for my parents, for her children, for her close friends, for everyone but me. I’m just the sibling, I thought.”

This sense of our unimportance can lead us to ignore our own needs. Yet while there can be some comfort in caring for our other family members, we must still take time to allow ourselves to grieve. If we don’t look after ourselves, this could develop into anxiety or depression or even resentment.

On autopilot

“If I woke up, I got up. If I got up, I went to work.”

In public we tend to put on a mask, while deep down inside we are heartbroken. In private, a song on the radio can set off a flood of tears.

"I used to wake up with palpitations and sweats, terrified of death. I still can't speak about it."

In the early days it is a good idea to accept any offers of help as even practical day-to-day activities can prove difficult.

It can take time when we are grieving before we feel able to do the things that once gave us pleasure.

"It was a long time before I again had a social life. About four years till I did anything or went anywhere. I didn't want to have fun. Why go out and have fun when he can't?"

We can be consumed by the 'what ifs?' and 'if onlys'. Because siblings are usually close in age, questions about your own life and death, and feelings of guilt, are common and part of the natural grieving process. You question your own mortality a lot more.

"Why her and not me?"

At work

"I'd no support from my employers. Work rang a week later and asked me when I'd be back."

People will have different experiences at work. Most employers will be supportive, and this can make a huge difference. The routine of work can also help.

If you can, ask for a 'back-to-work' meeting. This can give you a chance to let your boss know how you feel.

In the family

You might experience a double loss: the loss of your sister or brother, and the loss of your parents (at least for a time, but sometimes permanently).

As your parents struggle to cope, you may find you are thrust into their role of caring for younger siblings. This can be stressful.

Some parents will over-compensate or over protect their surviving children while some can seem to forget about them altogether.

You may also find that relationships in your family can suffer for a time.

"Losing my brother out of the house and then my dad – I felt like I'd lost a parent as well as a sibling."

Yet many of us have found that family helps hugely as time goes on. Often through necessity, surviving siblings are brought closer to each other in the family. But celebrations and shared rituals can, especially in the first few years, be harsh reminders of the family's incompleteness.

Some suggestions

Siblings in Anam Cara found the following to be of help:

- Going away together as a family, maybe at difficult times like Christmas or your sibling's birthday
- Talking about your brother or sister: keep their memory alive, cherish the happy memories
- Marking their birthdays as a family
- Doing activities they liked to do

"We end up making a bigger deal out of his birthday than we would have if he were alive, while for our own birthdays we don't do anything!"

"Celebrating her birthday gives us an opportunity to do something for her."

"He loved Jack Daniels, so we pour a bottle on his grave each birthday!"

Surviving siblings

Each sibling had a different relationship with their dead brother or sister and so will grieve differently.

Remember that some siblings might have had a difficult or conflicted relationship with the deceased. This can cause great conflict for the surviving sibling in their grieving. They may

struggle between the reality of what was and the wish for what might have been – a more ideal relationship.

At family events, some siblings will be more open than others – try to make sure that each sibling is included in conversations.

You may find that a brother or sister takes on the role of carer for your parents, even over-attentively. Don't feel guilty or put pressure on yourself – they may need to do this for themselves.

Consider checking in on other siblings occasionally rather than waiting for a family event – a simple 'how are you?' that no one else might ask can be so important.

Your sibling's friends

Many of us have found maintaining contact with our brother or sister's friends to be a great emotional help.

"My brother's friends still come up to the house and all the stories come out – it's great!"

That's not to say that it is always easy. Your sibling's friends may not know what to say, or they might even look to you as a shoulder to cry on. It may be best not to expect too much from them initially. Seeing them move on in their lives can also be difficult.

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"I find I'm jealous of his friends – because they're alive and he's dead. To this day I can't have a conversation with my brother's best friend – why is he so happy and my brother dead?"

But many of us have found keeping in touch to be valuable. It is a great opportunity to keep your sibling's memory alive among people who have loved him or her.

Getting through as time goes on

Here are some practical suggestions that other siblings have found useful.

- Read books on grief and bereavement.
- Make a memory box – keep a few things of your deceased sibling in it. You might look at it occasionally (or never), but it will always be with you.
- Make a comfort quilt – you could use your sibling's clothes.
- Stay healthy: eat and live well.
- Keep busy. Distract yourself.
- Keep contact with others – don't isolate yourself.
- Read the stories of other bereaved siblings or connect with them on Anam Cara's website or private online forum.
- Attend remembrance events.

The connection remains, the question is how to live it. Some of us write notes or letters, not to send but just to write. Others write their thoughts in a journal.

"Setting myself a task helped me, giving me something to focus on. I spent a few weeks creating a photo collage."

"It's good to meet others who've been through this experience. To get that glimmer of hope, a bit of reassurance."

Some final words: "It's all in your own time."

Know that there's no time frame on grief.

Feel the loss as long as you need to. Give yourself time to heal. It takes time – lots of it. It's not about "getting over" the loss of your sibling. You don't get over it. You just learn to live with the loss and create a different kind of life without your sibling – when you're ready. But you will always remember your brother or sister – the missing connection in your life.

"It would have been nice if someone had told me then what I know now – you're going to be ok."

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Everyone in the family will deal differently with their grief and may need different types of support. Initially that support will be your extended family, friends or a professional.

However, as time passes, know that groups like Anam Cara are available to provide a safe and comfortable place for you to access information.

Visit our website to view the Anam Cara Information Videos, on themes such as 'The Death of a Child' and 'Sudden and Traumatic Death'.

We would like to thank the bereaved siblings associated with Anam Cara for their contribution to this leaflet.



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