



## Losing a Sibling in Adulthood

By Rayna Vaught Godfrey, PhD

“We’ve lost Wes.”

I heard my father say this and then everything went silent in my head. I saw the tears streaming down his face, felt his and my mother’s arms hold me as I started to crumple to the floor, knew my mouth opened as the screams burst forth, but everything was surreally quiet to me in those first few moments after I learned my 16-year-old brother and only sibling had died in a car accident a few hours earlier.

After that initial plunge into grief 15 years ago, I began to search for information about sibling loss and found very little, especially on adult sibling loss. I felt extremely alone, not only because I was missing my brother, but because society didn’t seem to even recognize my loss. How many times did I hear, “Oh, your brother died; how are your *parents* doing? How awful for them!” Yes, it was awful for them. But it was awful for me as well and very few people seemed to notice this. Wes had been my best friend, my confidante, my strength to get through the tough times. Here I was, navigating the toughest time of my 20-year-old existence without him, in a society that expects that the pain of sibling loss is “neither intense nor of long duration” (Moss & Moss, 1986, p. 412).

When I entered graduate school seven years later, I returned to my search for information with academic earnestness, fueled by my continued relationship with my brother and a sense that I needed to do something about this missing information. I felt compelled to write my doctoral dissertation on this topic. This qualitative study (Godfrey, 2002) revealed the following important themes of the experience of losing a sibling in adulthood.

### **Importance of Siblings in Adulthood**

Contrary to popular Western beliefs, the sibling relationship does not dissipate when people leave the parental home. Siblings have the opportunity to be friends, and provide love and security from childhood into adulthood and old age. The sibling bond sustains distance, conflict and family dynamics. Even those siblings who aren’t as close can experience a mutual understanding, an enrichment of relationship and a unique connection. Siblings are important in adulthood. They provide companionship and support, play a prominent role in the tasks of adult development and constitute a

significant part of one's sense of self and family. If not for death, they would be with us longer than anyone else on earth.

### **Profound Loss**

Bereaved siblings experience profound loss, even though this loss is often unrecognized by society. People miss the companionship, understanding and support shared with their siblings. With the loss of such an enriching relationship, there is an absence of a specific level of understanding, a set of interactions, a resource of support. We miss our sibling's presence in everyday life and at important events where he or she would have been there to celebrate or cry with us. There is a sense of being robbed, of losing an important component of our sense of family. On a deeper level, there is a part of ourselves missing after the death of a sibling. Such a death leaves a seemingly unfillable hole, both within us and within our families. This is magnified for those who lose their only sibling and no longer have someone who shares their histories, who can reminisce with them and can validate their family narratives. The pervasive grief of adult sibling bereavement is raw and intense initially, turning familiar and expected around three to five years after the death.

### **Dealing with the Loss**

Bereaved siblings are not passive bystanders, but actively deal with their losses. Some find expressing emotions helpful, including using therapy as a means to do so. Adult siblings often find it helpful to be able to "tell their stories" in such a way as to find meaning or make sense of the loss, or simply to share their siblings with others. Many times, bereaved siblings do not have this opportunity outside of therapy because the loss is not recognized. Adult siblings use a variety of ways to deal with their losses including distraction, gaining control, taking action and self-soothing. Some rely on other people as a source of support, while other siblings need to grieve on their own. A significant part of dealing with the death of a sibling entails trying to make meaning of the loss.

### **Making Meaning of the Loss**

The process of meaning making begins with the details of the death or of the illness leading up to the death. Fact gathering, although helpful initially, is insufficient in the long run when information dwindles, is incomplete or is even contradictory. Thus begins a search for meaning, for some sense, some reason; a way to restore order to the universe or accept that there is no order. Previous world assumptions have to be revised to include new knowledge about life and death gained from losing a sibling. This is no small task and brings with it an increase in anxiety and a more serious outlook on life, as well as an increased sense of vulnerability for both the surviving siblings and their loved ones. People also experience personal growth and discover a greater appreciation for life and those around them. Relationships may change for the better and people may feel stronger for being able to survive such a loss. Rituals provide an opportunity to create meaning as well as to connect with the deceased sibling. Many people describe having a continued relationship or connection with their siblings after the death.

The impact of losing a sibling in adulthood is far-reaching and affects one's sense of self and relationships. As a result of the loss of a sibling, people change. Some may become more outgoing and risk-taking as they internalize those aspects of their sibling. Others may gain confidence in themselves as they realize they have survived such a penetrating loss and faced subsequent difficulties on their own. There is a deeper appreciation for life and those around us, and an increase in compassion for others. To some extent, people may become more anxious and less trusting. Bereaved siblings are forced to confront the randomness of existence and a loss of control, as well as question world assumptions. The death of a sibling impacts who we are, what we hold dear and how we relate to people. For better or for worse, we are never the same.

### **Grief in the Context of Others**

Although grief is a very individual experience, it exists in a social context and is influenced by those around us. Society often does not recognize the death of a sibling in adulthood as a significant loss and as such, many bereaved siblings feel ignored. The focus of concern falls to parents or to the sibling's family of procreation. Often, parents are not helpful in the process of sibling grief. They may be too consumed by their own grief to provide much in the way of consoling for the remaining children. However, as adults, siblings are often expected to assume a care-taking role with parents. Grieving in the context of others is a mixed bag. People are helpful when they allow bereaved siblings to grieve in their own ways and in their own time. They are not helpful when they offer platitudes and uncomfortable sympathy, when they don't listen, when they rush the griever or when they ignore the griever's experience. Talking with others is often helpful, however, as a way to keep memories alive, share the sibling with others and make meaning of the loss.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of losing a sibling in adulthood is not something to be ignored. Siblings are important to us in adulthood. When a sibling dies, it is an incredible loss and there is something profoundly missing from our lives. Adult siblings grieve this loss and are impacted on many levels. This impact sets into motion a journey as people cope with the loss and try to make meaning of it. This journey includes both the painful and the positive. It is often solitary, but includes those around us who are both hurtful and helpful to us in our grieving. My own process of making meaning of Wes' death has taken me on a complex journey. This journey moved from a time when I couldn't find much to read about adult sibling loss to being able to write about adult sibling loss instead. It has also included connecting to my brother's very powerful presence along the way and being able to say, "I've found Wes."

### **References**

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