

Adult Sibling Loss: Forgotten Grievors



By Brenda Marshall, PhD, CT

"Invisible." "Like I don't matter." "I didn't think I was allowed to feel sad." These are just some of the comments bereaved adult siblings have shared with me over the years. At a recent presentation I gave on the topic, one woman sat at the back and sobbed throughout. Her brother died, and this was the first time she felt entitled to acknowledge her own deep sadness. Another woman approached me afterward, tearfully explaining that four of her five brothers were now dead and if I was doing more research, she would welcome the opportunity to participate. Like the other woman, she never felt entitled to speak of the impact her brothers' deaths had on her. Being part of a research project seemed like one way she could be heard.

Why is this? Why do so many bereaved siblings feel like "outsiders" as it relates to grief? Sibling relationships are potentially the longest relationships individuals will ever have (Cicirelli, 1982; Gill White, 2006). Siblings know each other in ways friends and other blood relatives do not. They have shared bedrooms, bathrooms, holidays, school days, family milestones, meals and a way of growing up that people outside the family cannot fully understand. The bond is intense, complicated, sometimes difficult, often wonderful and absolutely irreplaceable. And yet, the loss of that bond, particularly when it occurs in adulthood, receives little attention in the bereavement literature. In a recent search, I found only two new references to the topic in the past five years (Berman, 2009; Marshall & Davies, 2011). It is not surprising then that community-based support groups do not always include programming for adult siblings. Within my own community, I've approached two well-known bereavement support agencies multiple times, offering to run sibling groups at no charge. Neither accepts the offer. "We don't have enough requests" is a common refrain. And yet, any time I've presented on the topic, even for an hour, bereaved siblings are present. Many approach me afterward to recount their stories of loss and the loneliness of feeling isolated in their grief. "Others do not understand," I hear repeatedly.

In my work with siblings, there are themes that repeat regularly. Many share how difficult it was to parent their own children in the months and sometimes years following the death of their brother or sister (Marshall, 2009). Their grief at the loss of such a special relationship overshadowed all, and often was exacerbated by the lack of support and validation they felt from others. The phrase "it's like a giant hole in my life" is one I've heard so many times now, I am surprised when I don't hear it. And this hole creates ripples across all aspects of the surviving sibling's world.

Once those who lead support organizations come to understand the depth of the pain and unique challenges bereaved adult siblings face, they do make changes to include this population in their programming.



Within their family of origin, especially if parents are still living, new responsibilities and roles emerge quickly. As one woman who lost both her sisters within a 10-year period said to me, "...I felt like I had to be there to bring sunshine to my parents' lives...I was the daughter for three" (Marshall, 2012, p. 25). Elderly parents, now dealing with the death of their child, are changed; and it's not unusual for health to fail and illnesses to suddenly present. Webster Blank (1998), herself a bereaved parent of an adult child, writes about the special difficulties elderly parents face when they lose a child. "It is late; life is winding

down; they have less energy, flexibility, and resiliency to cope with the tragedy" (p. 18). In addition, bereaved adult siblings have the cognitive ability to understand the depth of their parents' grief. Knowing how dreadful their parents feel contributes significantly to their own distress, and they often take on the near impossible role of "comforter." In many families, silence about the deceased child becomes the norm (Marshall, 2009). Photographs are removed and stories forbidden, taking away any opportunity for surviving siblings to celebrate the life that was lived. In other families, the deceased sibling takes on heroic qualities, and parents gradually disappear into the memories of the child that died.

Neither response is easy for surviving siblings to navigate, especially when they do not feel supported in their own grief from outside sources.

For those whose only sibling died, there is a new reality of "life alone on the planet" that needs to be integrated. Many talk of the loneliness that follows their sibling's death, knowing they will be the last surviving member of their family. "I know I will

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have to care for my parents through illness and bury them all on my own," said one. When there are surviving siblings, the relationships are sometimes strained. As is the case in any family, each member deals with their grief differently, and styles may at times conflict. As one sibling shared with me, "my older sister despised my brother, so I can't talk to her about how I'm feeling." And sometimes, the reality that a sibling died before a rift could be healed or a better relationship developed leads to deep feelings of regret and guilt. Just knowing that the living relationship can never become something different can be an ongoing source of pain.

Creating space to share these feelings and experiences can be enormously helpful. Connecting with interested and empathetic listeners validates that they (siblings) too are entitled to feel pain. As Karen said after finding an empathetic counselor, "I think that somebody just had to validate the fact that I should be feeling that terrible and it was okay..." (Karen, as cited in Marshall, 2009, p. 81). Community support organizations, practitioners and counselors can assist by placing siblings on their agendas. Military and paramilitary organizations can extend their bereavement support programs beyond spouses, parents and children of fallen members. I'm deeply moved by the changes a local military family resource center in my area is making as a direct result of what they've learned of sibling loss. Siblings will soon be invited to participate in special programming. Similarly hospice organizations, who traditionally offer support programs for spouses, parents and children, have a unique opportunity to connect with siblings before the death. Many working in palliative care settings have vivid recollections of siblings sitting vigil day and night as their brother or sister nears death. Making an effort to seek out these siblings for conversations during this process can mean so much and creates an opening for a dialogue that could continue post-death in a support group.

I am convinced that education is the key to changing how the world views sibling loss. Once those who lead support organizations come to understand the depth of the pain and unique challenges bereaved adult siblings face, they do make changes to include this population in their programming. Every time I receive an email, note or call from a bereaved sibling who has never felt validated in their loss, I am re-energized and even more committed to sharing stories of our siblings. Our brothers and sisters matter. Yes, it is dreadful for our parents. And yes, it is dreadful for us.

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About the Author

Brenda Marshall, PhD, CT, is principal and founder of The Solacium Group, a research-based firm dedicated to improving workplace response to loss. Her research interests also include: grief related to sibling loss, grief at work and narrative and arts-informed research practices. E-mail: brenda@solaciumgroup.ca.

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