



How to Help Children & Siblings Cope with Grief

by Dr. Christina Hibbert

Especially in the case of very young children, our initial instinct may be to "protect" or "shelter" our offspring from a tragedy with which we, as adults, are barely able to cope.

We tell ourselves that they are "too young to understand." We may leave them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. This can be a serious mistake. Whether we talk about it or not, our children will certainly become aware of our own feelings of sadness.

Failure on our part to be open and honest about those feelings leaves our children feeling anxious, bewildered, and alone. They will be left on their own to look for answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them, and may end up coming to the conclusion that they are personally responsible for Mommy and Daddy's tears. Sharing grief as a family can be a meaningful experience for everyone involved and an important opportunity for growth.



- As soon as possible after the death, explain what has happened in a simple and direct manner.
- Listen to the child and try to understand both what is being said and what is not said.
- Encourage questions. Keep answers brief, straightforward, and to the point.
- Let children know that death is an open subject and that it is okay to feel sadness and to try to talk about it.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Children crave and are reassured by regularity and structure.
- Show affection.
- Reassure children about the cause of death.
- Be tolerant of regression and other behavior changes.
- Let your child attend the funeral or memorial service.

10 Things Everyone Should Know About Siblings & Grief

1) **Sibling grief is often misunderstood**—by parents, families, friends, and counselors, even by the siblings themselves. So much focus is given to the parents of the lost child, to the children of the lost parent, to the spouse of the lost adult sibling. And, rightly so. But, what about the siblings? What about the ones who, like me, have grown up with the deceased? Who believed they would have a lifetime with their sister or brother? Who now face that lifetime alone?

2) **Sibling grief "has been almost entirely overlooked in the literature on bereavement."**^[1] It's no wonder, therefore, that even mental health providers misunderstand sibling grief. How are families supposed to know how to help siblings through grief if even the research on the subject is lacking?

3) **Common emotions siblings may feel when a brother or sister dies include:**

- Guilt
- Abandonment
- Loss of Innocence
- Fallout from the Family
- Somatic Symptoms
- Fears and Anxiety

4) **Siblings may feel "trumped" by the grief of other family members.** This is common, since the focus is usually on the parents if a young sibling dies and on the surviving spouse or children if an older sibling dies. This may lead to minimizing a sibling's own loss.

...Don't Worry About a Thing...Cause Every Little Thing Is Going to Be Alright...



5) **Young siblings lose innocence when a brother or sister dies, which may lead to fears and anxiety; “Survivor guilt” is also common.** Experiencing death as a child becomes a lifelong experience of processing and understanding the loss. Children grow up with grief, understanding more as they get older. Fear of death or dying is common. Anxiety or worry about getting sick may become prevalent. In young siblings, guilt for provocative behavior or for unacceptable feelings (jealousy) is common. Young children may think, before the death, “I wish my brother were dead!” then believe they somehow caused it to happen. Older siblings may wonder, “Why them and not me?” Because siblings are usually similar in age, it can bring up many questions about the sibling’s own life and death, and guilt along with it.



6) **Surviving children do, unfortunately, end up taking the fallout from parents’, siblings’, or other family members’ mistakes, emotional blowups, or neglect.** In many ways, siblings often experience a double loss: the loss of their sister or brother, and the loss of their parents (at least for a time, but sometimes, permanently). I know this from experience. Though my parents did the best they could, after my youngest sister died, our entire family was different. My mom retreated into her own grief, staying in her room, depressed and sick for years. My dad retreated into work and anything to take his mind from his pain. Luckily, I was already on my own, in college, at the time; my younger siblings weren’t so lucky. At 9, 11, 14, and 17 years old, they grew up with a completely different set of parents than I had. I tried to step in as a “parent” figure over the years, but the separation from my parents in their time of need profoundly influenced their lives. It profoundly influenced *my* life. It profoundly changed our family.

7) **Siblings may manifest somatic symptoms of grief, including symptoms that mimic the deceased sibling’s symptoms.** Especially in young children, symptoms like stomachaches, headaches, nightmares, body pain, digestive symptoms, and trouble sleeping are common. These should be seen as symptoms of grief, and hopefully, an adult in the family can help siblings work through their feelings and show them how to grieve.

8) **Having someone explain the loss to younger siblings, to be there for them and help them grieve, is ideal.** Little children don’t comprehend death in the same way adults do. It is therefore important to have somebody who can walk them through the loss and the grief process, to explain it wasn’t their fault, to validate what they feel. If parents aren’t able to do so, another family member or friend may, and hopefully will, step in.

9) **Even adult siblings will feel the loss deeply.** The pain isn’t less simply because you’re older. In fact, in many ways, it’s harder. You understand more. You know what it means to die, and you will feel the pain of the loss in a different way than young children, who still haven’t developed abstract thinking and understanding, will. Grieve your loss.

10) **My best advice for siblings in grief: Feel the loss as long as you need to, and give yourself time to heal.** Because sibling loss is so misunderstood, you may receive messages that make you feel like you should be “over it by now.” They don’t know sibling loss. Now, you do. It takes time. Lots of time. It’s not about “getting over” the loss of a sibling. You don’t get over it. You create your life and move on, when you’re ready. But you will always remember your brother or sister—the missing piece of your life.

I once heard someone say,

“When a parent dies, you lose the past. When a child dies, you lose the future. When a sibling dies, you lose 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. Just remember these things, my friends. Remember to be there for siblings in grief. You can be the difference in helping them create a bright future, even if they now must do so without their beloved sibling.

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