

A YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE TO DEALING WITH THE LOSS OF A BROTHER OR SISTER

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Introduction

We tend to think about death as a natural order where older people die first. As a result, things can feel very different when someone dies 'before their time', and very hard to process when it's a sibling.

The death of a brother or sister is likely to be one of the most difficult things that's ever happened to you. It may even feel like nobody understands what you're going through, but the fact is help is always at hand.

CLIC Sargent has worked closely with young people who have lost a sibling to put together this booklet. As well as showing how this is something others have experienced, we've provided contacts at the back to help you find further support and information. Even if you just want someone to talk to, you'll find all the info you need right here.

We're hugely grateful to our contributors for their courage in opening up and expressing things they might not have shared before. Throughout, you'll find useful quotes from them along with advice and information to help you out.

How you might feel at the time

The death of a brother or sister can be intense, upsetting and even confusing, but the fact is whatever you're going through is a natural response. It's all part of the process in adapting to what's happened. Here are some of the emotions you might experience in one way or another:

Shock

Guilt

Emptiness

Disbelief

Abandonment

Loneliness

Devastation

Numbness

Exhaustion

Confusion

Anger

In processing our feelings, it can come as a comfort to learn how other young people learned to live with losing a sibling. Often, they say they only began to make sense of their feelings over time.

"I felt cheated by life – it's not fair on my brother or on me. I felt totally out of control and powerless."

"I felt guilty – guilty that I couldn't help - guilty that it was them, not me and that I was going to live."

"I was really angry. Angry that there was nothing I could do. If you've got a cold, you can have medicine... why couldn't they just do something? I was desperate."

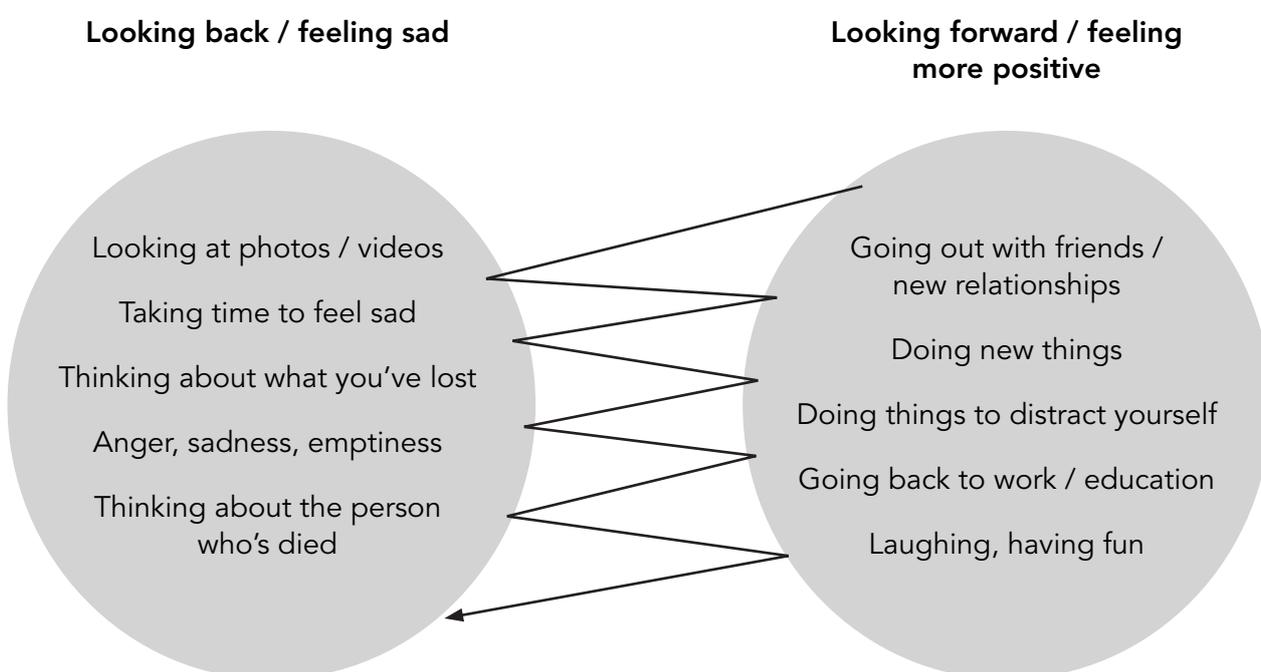
"I couldn't tell my parents or even my friends what I was feeling or thinking 'cos I didn't want to upset them. I kept it all in and pretended I was OK. But I really wasn't."

Getting to grips with grief

Everyone experiences grief in different ways, and sometimes it can seem overwhelming. What's important to remember is that grief evolves over time until you make sense of it in your own way.

There are lots of different ways of explaining grief. One that people often find helpful is in the diagram below. It shows that people tend to swap between feeling sad and reflecting back on everything that's happened, and looking more to the future and getting back to day-to-day life.

As time goes on, people often find themselves doing more of the things on the right, more of the time. But there will always be times where you're thinking about your brother or sister and feeling sad, and that's really normal.



Based on Stroebe and Schut, Dual Process Model of Grief

It's important to remember that whatever you're feeling is just a human response to losing a loved one. This is also true if you don't feel anything at all. Grief isn't something you can rush through, avoid or block out. It's a case of going on a journey with it while recognising that help and support is always available along the way.

Life after loss

The challenge is in recognising and accepting that you're still here with a life to lead. With no set rules for dealing with grief, it becomes something we face in our own way, and by turning to those who can support us through it.

"I still remember everything so clearly. I think I always will – but I can think about her and smile sometimes now, rather than bursting into tears every time."

"Various things still set me off though – certain songs or adverts on TV. I have to change the channel if I'm at home, or get out of the shop if it's a song. I've also learnt to block it and other ways to cope if I can't escape though. Like thinking what I'm going to have for tea or about something really random. It's hard though, and I guess there'll be certain things that'll always do that to me. It's just getting used to that and accepting it."

"I still block it a lot. Sometimes you just have to think of something else so you can get on with your day. That's easier now than it was at the start."

Up and down days

There'll always be moments you find harder than others. Sometimes you'll know a tough time is coming, but there could well be occasions when you simply wake up feeling low, or something happens that triggers difficult emotions.

Learning ways to help you through these difficult episodes is really important, no matter how fleeting or long they last. A good starting point is to think about ways you've coped with stressful situations in the past. This way, you can feel prepared as best you can.

"Sometimes I will actually just indulge in it. If I'm feeling really sad, I think it's OK to just sit there and feel really sad sometimes."

"I just kind of bumble through it. I don't really have a 'set way to cope' – you just kind of make it up as you go along and get through each day."

"Finding distractions is useful. I make sure I'm doing loads of stuff so I don't just sit there getting miserable."

"If I'm really struggling, I like to actually go away for the weekend or stay at a friend's overnight or something, just for a change of scenery."

“If I feel down, I just accept that I’m not going to be able to concentrate on work for the day. I stay in my pyjamas all day, watching films and having some me time - even if that’s spent crying - but I allow myself that without feeling guilty.”

All about anger

Grief can cause all kinds of emotions. While no two experiences are alike, it’s common to go through times when you feel really angry about what’s happened. We’re talking about a natural reaction to a traumatic time, after all. Losing a sibling can feel deeply unjust, and that’s bound to have an emotional impact.

“When people complain or are over-dramatic about silly things like they’ve lost their jobs or stubbed their toe: it all seems so insignificant compared to losing your sister.”

“Some people ignore me if they see me, like in the supermarket – even though I’ve known them for ages. It makes me sooo mad.”

“When my friends talk about what their brothers and sisters have been up to and I realise I have nothing to say. Reality hits home at moments like that. I’m not angry at my friends – I’m angry at the world and the whole situation.”

In many ways, anger can serve as an emotional pressure release in the grieving process. Here are some tips for expressing it constructively:

Write it down – it doesn’t need to be neat, articulate, prize-winning or even literate - just scrawl it all down, even if it’s a tirade of swear words! This can help to get it out of your head without having to actually say it out loud.

Get physical. Any kind of activity that sets your heart pumping is a brilliant way of cooling off. Why? Because it helps to reduce stress levels and produce feel-good endorphins to lift your mood. From walking the dog to going for a run or bike ride, playing a sport or heading for the gym, you’ll find any anger you’re feeling serves as a kind of fuel – and eventually burns out to leave a sense of calm.

Find space. You might choose somewhere peaceful where you can be alone, or a place that reminds you of your brother or sister, and just process your thoughts and feelings. Taking time out like this can help you to feel restored and ready to take on the world once more.

Music matters. Whether you're up for something intense or calming, a handpicked soundtrack can serve as an effective tool in processing how you feel.

Safe screaming! Take yourself somewhere quiet, like a car or your room when nobody is in, and then literally scream the place down. Why not? It might feel weird but just go for it and find out how therapeutic it can be.

Anger is nothing to be ashamed of, and nor should you feel the need to contain it. By giving it some thought, you'll find all manner of creative ways you can express yourself safely. Eventually, even the most full on feelings of anger will subside, and you can look back knowing you handled a difficult time to the best of your abilities.

Anger is only a problem if you find it hard to control or express in destructive ways. If you're at all concerned, have a chat with your GP. If appropriate, they can refer you to someone who specialises in helping people manage their feelings. Ultimately, it can be sorted.

Remembering your brother or sister

When it comes to connecting with memories of a sibling, it can be useful to turn to sensory sources such as sights, sounds, smells or even tastes. Here are some suggestions:

Photographs: A visual reminder can work wonders. With photos on your mobile phone, for example, you can have a quick look whenever you want to feel close to them.

"I've made a big photo collage of photos of her and us and our family – fun times we all had together, and her as I want to remember her. Most of them are her before she got ill as that's my real sister. My sister when she was ill was still my sister, but just like a different version of her. I love looking at the photos – sometimes they make me happy. Other times I feel really sad. But I think they're both important."

Talking to them: Addressing a sibling who has died - as if they're listening - is both a common and healthy way of managing your memory of them. Talk out loud or say it in your head – whatever works for you.

"We'll have little conversations sometimes – not out loud, but I say stuff to him in my head and just imagine what he'd say back. I like it."

Music: Music can be a powerful force, and often plays a central role in the grieving process. As well as expressing how we might be feeling at any moment, listening to music that was special to your sibling can bring you closer to their memory.

“We both loved music and it’s really important to me.”

Visiting their favourite places: This can help to reflect on your time together, while often providing you with time to yourself.

“He used to have a favourite beach. I love going there and just thinking about him.”

Adopting their special belongings: It can be comforting to turn to things that used to feature in their lives, and you might be surprised what triggers special memories.

“I’ve kept some of his clothes and shoes: I can’t make myself wear them yet, but I love that they’re mine now. They’re like treasured possessions.”

Anniversaries

Birthdays, festive periods or just significant dates in the life of your brother or sister can be tough to mark each year. In fact, many people find that the build-up to a special day can be harder than the actual day itself.

Throughout this time, it can help if everyone in the family is communicating openly, honestly and respectfully with each other. Calmly talking through what you’d each like to see happen can help to bring you together – even if you choose different ways of coping.

How grief can affect relationships – parents

Most people’s relationships with their parents change as they grow older. The death of a sibling can shake up this process considerably. You might feel closer to them, or more detached, or worry about upsetting or burdening them further. What matters is that you’re transparent with each other, and review how things are going.

“I definitely feel closer to them. I think it’s the shared experience of losing someone you love. It brings a new dynamic to the relationship. There’ll be days when one of you is really emotional and you’ll just know what’s wrong without having to ask.”

“I feel more pressure – to achieve ... to always do the right thing, to make the most out of life all the time because my sister couldn’t – it’s really tough-going. I know my parents don’t really feel that and it’s kind of what I’m putting on myself if I’m really honest, but it’s always there.”

“They mollycoddle me sooo much! I moved out to get away from it: I just couldn’t live like that.”

How grief can affect relationships – friends

While you’re dealing with your loss, it’s common to feel sensitive towards the way people relate to you. A lot of bereaved brothers and sisters say they find out who their true friends are when something so profound happens. Some step up, but unfortunately others stand back. It can leave you feeling like you’ve lost a friend as well as your brother or sister, but it doesn’t have to be the end of that connection.

Often it boils down to the fact that people just don’t know how to respond to your loss. You may well know from experience that it can be comforting when someone manages to talk to you about it. Even if it feels awkward, there’s a very good chance that you’ll appreciate the courage it took for them to speak up. It simply shows they’re thinking about you, and that can mean a great deal. So, if you’re with someone who’s struggling, it often helps if you can let them know what it’s OK to say. In a sense, you’re clearing the air, and both of you will feel better as a result.

“Understanding that you might not want to talk straight away is helpful. Just a thoughtful text saying they’re thinking about you means so much.”

“I hate it when people tread on eggshells around me – like if the words ‘cancer’ or ‘dying’ are said randomly in conversation and they’ll say sorry to me. I don’t need special treatment!”

“I need a break from family time which can be really full-on – just act normally.”

How grief can affect relationships – partners

Relationships can be hard enough at times, without the sadness and stress of someone close to you dying. If you have a boyfriend, girlfriend or partner, they can feel incredible pressure to say and do the right things. They’re supposed to be there for you, after all, which means inevitably they ARE going to get it wrong sometimes.

In this situation, the key is to simply open up to them as best you can. Communicating is central to managing any stage of a relationship. You don’t need to tell them how you’re feeling all the time, but it’s equally helpful to consider how THEY might be feeling too. It’s easy to get swamped in your own emotions and forget how hard it must be for them too. It may be very different for them, but just as hard to handle.

As well as sharing what’s on your mind, give them a chance to talk. This way, you can work out a way forwards that enables you both to be more sensitive towards each other. Naturally, neither of you are likely to be experts in any of this. You’re both feeling your way through it as you go, which is fine, and makes talking about it so essential.

"It was nice or easier that she'd been there and had seen some of the things going on – it just made it easier afterwards as she knew what I'd been through."

"My boyfriend can be really overprotective though, which can be a bit annoying. I'm like 'Just be normal!'"

Moving on with your life

Dealing with loss doesn't happen overnight. In many ways, grief is an emotional wound. It will heal, but it takes time, and along the way you may well feel differently about yourself and the world around you. Essentially, it's about learning to live with it alongside all the other things going on for you. It's also a learning process for friends and family, but with openness and honesty you will come to adjust to what's happened. It may be an emotional rollercoaster and you may have many ups and downs along the way; grief can hit at unexpected times, and sometimes long after the actual event. But it's all part of the process. You'll never forget your brother or sister, of course, but eventually the experience of losing them becomes a part of you - rather than something that governs your life.

"I totally see things differently now – things seem really trivial that used to bother me before. I don't sweat the small stuff."

"It's made me a stronger person. I've got, like, motivation and drive to do new things now: to go and have new experiences."

"I'm more emotional now. Previously I was more in control. But I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing."

"I'm more angry than before. That's not good but I guess it's because I appreciate how precious life is now, and I guess that's a good thing."

Further help:

If you're struggling to cope with your feelings, or just need someone to chat to, there are all sorts of places to go to for help.

A good first place might be your GP who should know what is available locally. There are lots of local bereavement counselling charities or cancer support centres, or general counsellors, and they can make sure you connect with the right source of help.

You could also talk to a local bereavement charity or cancer support centre, a family member, a friend, a counsellor, someone at your local hospice if your brother or sister had links with the team there

Other ideas include:

Child Bereavement UK

Provides information and support to bereaved children and those supporting them.

0800 02 888 40

childbereavementuk.org

Counselling Directory

The Counselling Directory website provides information about different types of counselling and other therapies, as well as a postcode searchable database of counsellors and psychotherapists from across the UK.

counselling-directory.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Helps bereaved people to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

0808 808 1677

cruse.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

T: 0845 600 2227

W: www.crusescotland.org.uk

Hope Again

Website designed to support young people after someone close to them dies. Includes advice and a message board, developed by Cruse's Youth Involvement Project.

0808 808 1677

hopeagain.org.uk

The Mix

Offers emotional support to under-25s and a database of trusted organisations across the UK with sources of further specialist help.

0808 080 4994

themix.org.uk

Lifeline

A crisis phone line for people in Northern Ireland experiencing distress or despair. The helpline is available 24 hours a day.

T: 0808 080 8000

W: www.lifelinehelpline.info

Samaritans

Provides 24-hour confidential emotional support for anyone in distress or despair.

116 123 (UK and ROI)

www.samaritans.org

Winston's Wish

Offers support and guidance to families supporting a grieving child.

08088 020 021

info@winstonswish.org.uk

winstonswish.org

Thank you

CLIC Sargent would like to thank Kayleigh, Jack, Sarah, Lee & Rebecca for sharing their experiences and thoughts.

The quotes in this publication are personal views and do not necessarily represent the view of CLIC Sargent. CLIC Sargent makes every effort to ensure that information provided is accurate and up-to-date at the time of printing. We do not accept responsibility for information provided by third parties, including those signposted to in this publication. Information in this publication should not be relied on in place of appropriate professional or other advice specific to our circumstances.

About CLIC Sargent

From the moment the doctor says cancer, life is never the same again. It's shocking, overwhelming, isolating... and completely unfair. Especially when you're young. It's bad enough having to go through gruelling treatment, but then cancer takes over your life. Your ambitions for the future – education, relationships, career, travel – suddenly seem very far away.

We understand how devastating cancer is, not just for the child or young person but for the whole family. That's why CLIC Sargent fights tirelessly to stop cancer destroying young lives. We help families navigate the complicated and frightening world they've been dropped in to. We provide financial grants and free accommodation close to hospital to help with spiralling costs. And we lobby the government to make sure families get the support they're entitled to. We're here to make sure young cancer patients get through treatment and can focus on getting their lives back on track.

For information about the sources used to put this publication together, or if you have any comments or queries about it, please contact CLIC Sargent on **0300 330 0803** and ask to speak to the Information Manager.



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