

Losing a Brother, Sister, or Friend

It is difficult to lose anyone, but losing a brother or sister can be especially traumatic and devastating. Here's why:

The Age Factor

The "normal order of life" maintains that children are born, grow up, marry, have families of their own, grow old and *then* die.

- A child, a teen, a young adult—at any of these stages—are all too young to die.
- It is out of order—a child should not die before a parent. And we never expect to lose a brother or sister.
- It is simply not fair.

The Cause of Death

This is the most difficult part of the loss, but important information for you to know as you work through your grief.

- Get the facts. Don't listen to rumors. You should know what happened. Ask your parents or another close family member for this information, and revisit this question when needed. It's common for people to grow up feeling like they don't understand what really happened and why the death occurred. Being able to talk about this is very important to your moving forward with your life.
- Just take in the information that you can handle. You may not want or need to know all of the details.
- If you were with your brother or sister when he/she died and were responsible for any of the care, you may feel guilt that the death could have been prevented. Talk with someone you trust about your feelings. Know that accidents happen and are not caused on purpose.

The Guilt Trips

How many times has your brother or sister irritated you or even driven you crazy? And how many times have you joked about being the only child or wished they were gone?

- You may feel guilt that it was in some way your fault or that you should have been the one to die instead of your sister or brother.
- If your sibling was ill, you may have resented the attention he/she received. You may even have thought or said you wished that they were not here. Your thoughts or statements did not cause the death of your brother/sister. It is natural and normal to feel competition and sometimes not get along with your sibling. Many other teens have felt this way, too.
- Look at the source of your guilt, and then work toward forgiving yourself.

The Family Unit

- Why did this happen to your family? And how do you continue being a family with such an important piece gone?
- Everyone in a family expresses and experiences grief in an individual way. You may think that some family members are not sad or not feeling it. It may be that they just don't know how to or don't want to show it to you.
- You may feel unsafe or vulnerable—like this could happen again to someone else in your family.
- You may feel your age—young, inexperienced and overwhelmed—at this time. This is very normal. Sometimes adults feel "younger," too, especially if they have not had much experience with loss.
- It may be difficult to talk to your parents because they are experiencing the grief of losing a child, and you do not want them to feel additional sadness. You may be trying to protect your mom and dad and feel like you are living a dual life—one living in total grief and one totally ignoring grief. This can be exhausting and difficult to keep up.



More this way...

The Family Unit, *continued*

- You may experience anxiety especially if mom and dad are not getting along or not sharing their feelings with you. It is very common for parents to fight and take out their grief on each other or to hold their feelings inside to be strong for the rest of the family. They are just as heartbroken as you are.
- Know that you are your own person and do not have to fill the missing piece in the family. You are unique and different than your sibling. You each hold a special place that no one else can replace.
- Your family has changed without your sibling there. You have all suffered a terrible blow. Know that it takes time to live a new normal, but it is possible.

The Future

- How can you even imagine a world without your brother or sister? Yet somehow, you continue to breathe in and out, taking one day at a time, slowly moving forward with your life.
- Find someone you trust that you can talk with, for example, another relative or friend that really gets grief.
- Talk about your feelings and express your guilt. Once you get them to the outside, you can begin to move forward.
- Ask for help when you need it. This does not make you a weak or younger person; it is smart to realize when you need some assistance.
- Remember your sibling—create a memory book, write a song, poem, paint a painting. Share your sibling's life and special memories with those you trust and love.

Losing a friend can also be very devastating for all of the same factors listed above and a few more:

The Friend's Family

You may feel uncomfortable or helpless around your friend's family because:

- You do not want to remind them of what they have lost. Yet you may also be a source of comfort and connection to their loved one.
- You feel guilty that you are alive and your friend is not. This is a very natural response, as long as it does not become extreme.
- You cannot say or do anything to make them feel better. Sometimes it is easier to express your feelings on paper. Letting your friend's family know your thoughts and concerns for them may provide comfort for you both.

The Return to School

You may feel uncomfortable or nervous about returning to school because:

- You have heard there are rumors* going around about the death. Stick to the facts and have your friends do the same.
- You don't want to face seeing that empty desk* next to yours. You can request a new seat assignment or that the desk be removed. Let your teacher know what works best for you.
- Other students might treat you differently or avoid you. Most people who may do this really just don't know what to say or do. It is just easier to stay away or not say anything at all. You can let these students know that they can still talk to you.

* Your parent or guardian can contact the school ahead of time to request that some of these worries be addressed before you return.