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Grieving the Loss of a Sibling [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2013

Key Messages:

- The death of a sibling triggers intense emotions like disbelief, despair, guilt, anger, and helplessness. This is a normal part of the grieving process.
- It is important to seek support for issues related to the loss of your sibling that are difficult to cope with, such as a fear of developing cancer yourself.
- Although there is no "right" way to cope with the loss of a sibling, there are several steps you can take that may help you through the grieving process.
- Parents need to recognize the grief of surviving siblings and provide them with support.

Grief, which usually involves a range of emotions, such as disbelief, despair, guilt, anger, and helplessness, is a normal response to the loss of a brother or sister. However, adult siblings are sometimes called "forgotten mourners" because their grief is often overshadowed by that of other family members, such as the person's parents, spouse, or children.

Regardless of the type of relationship you had with your sibling, you have the right to grieve. Because family members and friends may not understand the role your sibling played in your life, it is important that you communicate your need for support to them. This support will help you better cope with the effects of your sibling's death, such as:

The loss of a long-term relationship. Siblings are often deeply connected with each other, having been present in each other's lives through all of their ups and downs. As a result, the death of a sibling may represent the loss of a friend, protector, and confidant with whom you share many memories. You may grieve the loss of your past relationship, as well as the role you pictured your brother or sister playing in your future.

Guilt. Sibling relationships can be complicated, with love and affection existing alongside rivalry, jealousy, and arguments. You may feel guilty about things you once said or did, or you may regret that you did not maintain a closer relationship. In addition, you may replay "what if" and "if only" scenarios in your mind. Or you may experience "survivor guilt," questioning why you were spared, unlike your sibling. Learn more about [coping with guilt](#) [3].

The redefinition of your role in the family. Family members have different, sometimes

unspoken, roles and responsibilities that may change when a sibling dies. You may take on new responsibilities, such as becoming the oldest child or an only child to whom family members look for leadership. This can cause you to feel additional stress or resentment during the grieving process.

A fear of developing cancer. Because you and your siblings share many of the same genes, it is normal to worry that you could develop cancer as well. You may also be concerned that other family members will be diagnosed with the disease. Learn more about [collecting and sharing your family cancer history](#) [4].

Tips for coping with the loss of a sibling

Everyone copes differently with the loss of a sibling. There is no "right" way to work through your feelings of grief and no specific amount of time it takes to recover from those feelings. The following tips may help you throughout the grieving process.

Share your grief with other family members. Your entire family is grieving the loss of your brother or sister, but each person grieves in his or her own way. Talking about your shared grief can help you work through your pain and sadness together, sharing the burden and encouraging each other.

Find support outside your family. Although it can be helpful to seek support from your family, it can also be hard for some family members to provide consolation while coping with their own grief. Consider talking about your loss with people outside your family, such as a close friend, a clergy member, or a grief counselor. In addition, [support groups](#) [5] can provide a setting to talk with others who share and understand your experiences and feelings.

Forgive yourself. Siblings compete, argue, and challenge each other. Forgive yourself for any unkind things you did or said or for things you wish you had done or said but did not. Forgive yourself for not maintaining a close enough relationship with your sibling. It does not mean you did not love him or her.

Take care of your physical health. Help ease some of your fear about your personal [cancer risk](#) [6] by focusing on developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Have regular checkups and get medical tests as recommended by your doctor. Also, compile your family's cancer history and share it with your doctor, as well as other family members.

Take care of your mental health. Feeling extremely sad or numb are normal reactions to the loss of a sibling. But if these and other symptoms of depression do not begin to lessen over time, and feelings of hopelessness, [anxiety](#) [7], or anger begin to affect your daily life, ask your doctor about grief therapy. [Depression](#) [8] related to grief can be treated with medication, when appropriate.

Find ways to remember your sibling. As the pain of grief begins to ease, it may feel like you are beginning to forget your sibling. Finding ways to memorialize your brother or sister can help keep his or her memory alive and maintain a feeling of connection. You may decide to make a family memory book with pictures, stories, or other mementoes contributed by different family members. Or consider volunteering with a charity important to your sibling or with a cancer-

related charity. Read more about [ways to cope with grief](#) [9].

Parenting a child who has lost a sibling

The death of a sibling is a tremendous loss for a child. However, parents are often preoccupied with their own grief, overlooking the needs of grieving siblings. A surviving child may feel the need to "fill in" for the deceased child or may worry that you would have preferred if he or she had died rather than his or her sibling. It is important for parents to recognize the grief of surviving siblings and to support them.

Learn more about [how parents can help children cope when a sibling has cancer](#) [10] and [how to help a child or teenager who is grieving](#) [11].

More Information

[Understanding Grief and Loss](#) [12]

[Coping With Change After a Loss](#) [13]
[13]

[Grieving the Loss of a Child](#) [14]

Additional Resources

[The Compassionate Friends: Grief Support for Siblings](#) [15]

[National Cancer Institute: Bereavement and Grief](#) [16]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/grieving-loss-sibling>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24491>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30761>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25007>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25481>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25480>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25289>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25301>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25290>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25293>

[13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25291>

[14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25288>

[15] http://compassionatefriends.org/resources/grief_support_for_siblings.aspx

[16] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/Patient/page2>