

Something's Wrong with My Surviving Child... He (or She) is Not Grieving Right

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Have you ever thought the words in the title? Let's explore what it means to "grieve right."

Over the past three decades much of the research on bereavement has broadened the concept of grief. Still today many people think of "grief" as when a person is crying and pleading "No. No. No, this can't be true." As you know so well, grief has multiple components. Since the death of your child, you have been bombarded with an array of emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions.

Public vs. Private Grief

Grief occurs in our life in two modes: from the outside that all can see—such as facial expressions, tears, jaw clenching, and body posture (Public Grief)—and from the inside that no one can see—such as thoughts, desires, emotions, internal aches and excruciating pain (Private Grief). Does it make sense that your adult child is grieving in his or her own way, and that you just can't see all of it?

So, Public Grief is all that you will ever see. Over the years your child will experience thousands of thoughts and emotions related to the death of his brother or sister: It happens at night when he lays his head on his pillow, during times he is with you as he watches you grieve, and throughout the years of his life as he comes face-to-face with the many, many reminders of a life lived. Unless your child tells you, it is impossible to know what goes on inside as the grief ebbs and flows. Do you really want your child to call you each day and give you a moment-to-moment account of his peaks and valleys? You respond, "Of course not. I just want to know that he misses his brother or sister and that he's doing okay." Fair enough. You are reading this article because you aren't getting what you want. Let's look at why.

There are at least three dimensions of Public Grief that we might observe in our child: Ideal (perfect) Grief, Bad Grief, and Absent Grief.

Ideal Grief Reactions

What would ideal grief look like with your child? See if any of these ring true: my child cries, but not too deep or too often. My child brings up memories of their deceased sibling, displays pictures, wears sibling's clothing or jewelry, acknowledges birthdays and other important days, displays symbolic reminders, calls you saying, "I miss her," attends grief support meetings, reads grief-related material, frequently brings up sibling's name, assures you "I will never forget him," takes care of himself, and gets a little better as time goes by—but not too quickly. Perfect, right?

“Bad” Grief

What would bad grief look like? Heavy, frequent crying, deep sadness, inability to cope, grief reactions that interfere with the person’s activities of daily living, substantial guilt, extensive anger, lashing out at others, and an overall inability to see the extent to which the death has affected his or her life.

Absent Grief

Much of absent grief is opposite of ideal grief: virtual absence of negative emotional reactions, not bringing up memories or the name, no evidence of pictures, no acknowledgment of important days. All this gives the appearance that the sibling has been forgotten and that your child is simply moving on with life.

Incapable vs. Resistant

Research on the way people cope with emotional upheaval suggests that they either **can’t** show any or some emotions (because they have no reaction or because the reaction is somehow internally blocked) or they **won’t** show their emotions. Let’s look at each of these.

Incapable

This approach assumes that, because each person is wired differently, some people are incapable of grieving in demonstrative, observable ways. Pre-existing personality characteristics such as stoicism, introversion, narcissism, addictive tendencies, and neediness can be contributing factors. The generalization is: the traits that we had prior to death tend to persist after it. So, would you expect a stoic person to suddenly become demonstrative? Would you expect a narcissist to now be concerned for others? A person who has had addiction issues to not depend on drugs?

When the death of a brother or sister occurs in the life of a young person, we might expect reactions that involve tears or outward emotion. Weeks or months following the death of his sister, a male may be asked, “Since your sister died, what feelings have you been having?” He may respond, “I don’t know. Kinda’ down, I guess.” It may be the case that, early on, he may have discovered that talking about or showing his (Public) grief led him to *feel worse*. For example, from your perspective, his anger may seemingly be absent. In fact, he may have discovered that his anger about his sister’s death may have scared some people, including himself. So, in an almost involuntary way he suppressed his anger.

As another example, let’s say an older sister experiences the death of her younger brother. As the first-born she may at first channel her grief reactions into trying to find ways to *fix* her family, including herself. She tries to comfort her mother’s tears. She attempts to help her younger sister with her homework. She listens to her father’s stories of her brother. As weeks and months go by and she begins to discover that grief is not “fixable,” her outward expressions of caregiving may have proven neither to cure her family nor to ease her own grief. So, to preclude any further hurt, she may begin to abandon her caregiving efforts and keep her grief more private.

Resistant

Sometimes the previous relationship between siblings can be a factor that can complicate grief. Were your children: best friends? competitors? alienated? apathetic? If the sibling relationship was full of twists and turns, the ensuing grief reactions may take the form of relief, jealousy, or even betrayal (“You left me to deal with Mom and Dad. Thanks a lot.”) Perhaps your child feels that he or she must be the “rock” of the family. In any case your child’s internal dialogue may go something like this:

“I’m feeling all these things, but I won’t show those around me because I’ll cause them even more pain to my family.”

Even if you clearly understand that your child may be incapable or resistant to show grief reactions, you likely still find yourself worrying that their grief will show up at some point in the future. As you can see, you cannot really have it both ways. You cannot wish that your child was emoting all over the place and yet holding it together. Despite this, many parents say,

“He doesn’t have to emote. Just show me a little more emotion. Just tell me a little more often that he misses his sister.” or

If she would just mention that she thinks about her brother and that she would give anything to turn back time. All I want is just a little more than I’m getting.”

Sound familiar? I’ve talked to many parents who did get “a little more.” And what did this mom or dad want after they got more? You guessed it: More! Let me put it another way: no parent has come up to me and said,

“You know, Bob, since the death of my child my other children are grieving “just right.” They are crying just the right number of tears, displaying the perfect degree of anger, and feeling the appropriate level of guilt.”

Instead, I get, “He’s not grieving.” What I hope you’re getting from this article is the following fact: **Your child is grieving.** He or she is just not doing it the way you’d like, the way perhaps you expected, the way you’d hoped. Let me put it another way: there is no way that a person’s brain can be full of thousands and thousands of memories of a loved one, such as a brother or sister, and *not* be impacted by the death. When the life of someone ends, whether by chronic illness or sudden death, our brain doesn’t go, “Okay, she’s dead. I can accept that. I’m putting all this behind me.” The process by which the brain of your living child adjusts to the permanent ending of your deceased child’s life is essentially what we call “grief.” The manner of adjustment is as varied as the grains of sand on a beach. Your child’s brain *is* adjusting. You just won’t see it perhaps in the way(s) you hoped.

But even though you understand the logic in all this, you will continue to worry. Of course you worry—you’re the parent. That’s your job. Almost nothing can reduce your worry except perhaps the passage of time during which you will see that, despite this horrible tragedy that has forever changed your family, your child is moving on with life in the best way he or she can.

So, in the context of all this, what *can* you do? Here are some suggestions from parents who've shared with me what helped them as they watched their surviving children:

1. Respect your child's individuality. Yes, in some ways your child is like you. However, in the final analysis, this young person has a unique personality—one that will greatly affect the course of his or her grief.
2. As difficult as this will be, give your child the room to struggle, to deny, to hide grief from you with late-night thoughts of unrelenting regret and memories, to quietly search for meaning that may never come, and to come to see the death of someone loved as a way to deeply cherish what it means to be a family. Your child had a unique relationship with his or her brother or sister. Your job is to permit your child to struggle with forging a new relationship with his now deceased sibling.
3. Look for websites, articles, books, DVDs, YouTube, TV, lectures, and support groups that will give your child insight into his or her own grief. The TCF magazine *We Need Not Walk Alone* is an excellent resource for articles on sibling grief. During the past 40 years that I have taught a college course titled "Death & Life" I have had hundreds of bereaved siblings sign up for my course. Whether it was recent or years after their sibling's death, these students have chosen to delve deeply into the life and death of their brother or sister and the ensuing grief that followed over the years. Trust me: as demonstrated by these students of all ages, it's never too late to revisit their grief. Never.
4. 4. Find time to have a grief chat. Find a way to not force your child to look you in the eyes: you can text, arrange a phone call, or choose an online format. Any of these can be an excellent way to bring up the question, "How are you doing with your sister's death?" Take a deep breath and try it.
5. 5. Be a good listener. When you ask the question, "How are you doing with your brother's death?" your **very** next step is to shut up and listen. As you've learned many times over your lifetime, you learn much more with your mouth shut.
6. 6. Remember: Your surviving child or children will very likely be living with their grief longer than you; and in their own way they will adapt, cope, and adjust to their new normal. Your job is to find a way to ease up on some of your expressed or unexpressed expectations, to let your child know that your love is solid, and that you trust that this child of yours will live a life that not only you, but his or her brother or sister would be proud of.