

My Sibling Died--But I'm Still Here

Sibling Survivor Guilt: What it Is, What You Can Do About It

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We all know that guilt is a part of the human condition; and it is certainly part of most people's bereavement process. If you experienced survivor guilt when your brother or sister died, join the crowd. In an earlier article I discussed sibling guilt in general. In this article we focus on sibling survivor guilt. Let's look at some of the common types:

Being alive. Just knowing that your brother or sister will never experience life again while you continue to live day after day may bring guilt feelings. You can't understand why your sibling's life was cut short while you continue to live.

Surpassing the age of your sibling. Survivor guilt can rear its ugly head when you reach and surpass the age at which your sibling lived. And every day you live beyond that date may somehow feel strange, unfair, or even a relief.

Using his or her things. For some bereaved siblings, using items that belonged to their deceased brother or sister brings comfort and produces feelings of closeness. Others report that using items brings feelings of unworthiness. When an item inevitably wears out or becomes unusable, you may feel bad that yet another piece of your brother or sister has faded from use. Other people may not understand how this has affected you and may attempt to minimize its impact by saying things such as, "It's only

an item—you can get another one." Or "It's OK, the memories are what's important."

Doing things your brother or sister never got a chance to do. This is a quite common source of survivor guilt, and it becomes especially poignant when you see the look on your parents' face that says, "I wish your brother/sister could have done this or been here for this."

Experiencing pleasure. Here you are enjoying yourself at a party, on vacation, at the beach, the movies, at a sports event, or out to dinner and suddenly it hits you: "How can I be having a good time like this when she (or he) can never do this again?" Friends may notice your sudden change of mood, but you may not wish to tell them for fear of spoiling their fun.

Seeing your loved ones cry. One of the most difficult aspects of death is watching those around you grieve the loss and realizing there is little you can do to ease their pain. You may have had the awkward experience of standing there, wanting to say to your parents, "Hey, I'm still here!" You feel guilty for standing there, being alive, and realize your existence has little effect on easing your loved ones' grief.

Taking risks you shouldn't. If you are or were a normal adolescent, you engaged in activities you knew were unsafe. However, because of your brother or sister's death, you also know better than most of your friends that a young person can die and leave their family devastated. Yet, there you were, taking risks and feeling guilty as a result.

Feeling like it should have been you. This is another common one, especially when you are feeling down on yourself or when your parents have criticized you. If you are having serious thoughts of harming yourself, it is very important that you contact a friend, a counselor, your parents, the crisis center, or some other person who can listen to you.

Not doing enough to keep their memory alive. Here you are going through the day when it hits you that you have not been thinking of your brother or sister. Really? How often during the day did you think about this person when they were alive? Or you find that you aren't remembering your sibling as well as you used to. Then you kick yourself for "forgetting." Do you realize that you will never forget this person? One way to help with this guilt issue is to begin writing down all your memories. If you're not a writer, then talk into a voice recorder. It's a great way to ease this aspect of survivor guilt: stories are the way we best remember.

Before we get to another example, here are suggestions that might ease some of your guilt:

1. Go back through the list of types of guilt and circle the ones that are relevant to you.
2. Find someone who will be a good listener and not judge you. Tell this person that you wish to talk about some of the guilt that you have been feeling around your sibling's death. Inform this person that you want them to listen without trying to "fix" it, and without saying, "don't feel guilty." Just listen. There is something

positive about "getting out" your guilt feelings and not letting them eat away at your insides.

3. Focus on the positive. Make a list of all the good things you did with your sibling. Don't be modest. Make a second list that includes positive memories of your brother or sister.

4. Omit the term "I should have" from your vocabulary because you can never fix the past. You can only work on the present. Ask yourself, "What can I do now to feel better?"

5. Ask yourself the following question: "What would it take to begin to forgive myself?" Perhaps you can channel your guilt into a something that will help others.

6. Write a letter to your brother or sister. While this may sound strange, many siblings find it helpful. Here are just a few examples of what you can include:

- a. You can apologize for anything you said or did or failed to say or do.
- b. You can state how you've been doing since your sibling died
- c. You can talk about how your parents are coping
- d. You can express any anger you've been experiencing--even towards your sibling.
- e. You can express how much you miss your sibling.

Not living up to my sibling's standards—living in their shadow. Years ago, someone said it well: "The dead have it easy—we are reluctant to say bad things about them; and, unlike us, they make no further mistakes in their life." In other words, your brother or sister was a hard act to follow. So, you feel guilty because you are not this

ideal person. Your challenge is to live up to your own realistic standards, allow yourself to make mistakes, and not be so hard on yourself. The next time you make a "stupid" mistake, ask yourself, "What would I say right now if my best friend made the exact same mistake?" And then say that exact thing to yourself.

I challenge you to treat yourself as well as you would your best friend! Besides, I bet that's what your brother or sister would want for you.

Don't you agree?

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