

# Grief After the Death of an Adult Sibling

You're not alone.  
We're here to support.

There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

To better understand the complexities of grief after a sibling dies, it is essential to understand the various forms of grief that may be experienced and the factors that can impact healing.

## Forms of Grief

**Normative (Typical) Grief:** Emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, and spiritual responses experienced after a death or loss. Grief responses are initially intense, but the intensity does subside over time.

**Complex Grief:** When you have been experiencing intense feelings of grief for longer than 6 months after the death of your loved one or are experiencing extreme difficulties with day-to-day functioning, which negatively impacts your health and/or safety.

**Ambiguous Grief:** This form of grief can be experienced before and after a death.

**Ambiguous grief with no death:** When your sibling no longer appears or presents as the person you had known them to be. This form of grief can occur when a sibling has a neurological disorder (Alzheimer's or Dementia) or substance use disorder.

**Ambiguous grief after death:** When your sibling has died, but the information surrounding their death is limited, or the majority of information remains unknown.

**Disenfranchised Grief:** When judgment from the larger society occurs, or others do not acknowledge a person's grief. Grief is not recognized or validated by others, impacting a person's mourning practices and often reducing the amount of support the bereaved receives. This can also occur when death carries societal stigma (i.e., suicide, homicide, overdose, grief for non-death losses).

## Factors that Impact Grief

- Age of the sibling who has died and your age
- Circumstances surrounding your sibling's death
- The nature of the relationship you had with your sibling
- Number of losses you have already experienced
- Both yours and your family's coping and communication styles
- Your cultural background, religious or spiritual beliefs



# Six Needs of Mourning (A. Wolfelt, 2008)

## Acknowledge the reality of the death

Distracting yourself or making attempts to avoid thinking about your sibling's death is a normal response to loss. Give yourself time to process your sibling's death and how this loss has altered your life.

## Embrace the pain of the loss

Allow yourself to experience the pain connected to your grief in "doses", shifting back and further from grief work to present moment (distractions), instead of attempting to numb or push it away. The pain related to your loss is normal and necessary as your connection with your sibling has been an integral part of who you are.

## Remember your sibling who died

Allow yourself to reflect on the memories you have of your sibling. Remembering and celebrating the life they lived, the life you had together. This can be done by displaying pictures, talking about their life and death, as well as sharing and listening to stories of them with those around you.

Find ways to maintain connection with your sibling. Talk to them; speak their name; keep them involved in holidays and special occasions (i.e., placing an object on the table as a remembrance, serving a favourite dish, lighting a candle).

## Develop a new identity

This task is challenging and takes time. Over time, you will naturally notice adjustments within your personal belief or value system, within the roles you hold or release, or during interactions you have with others.

As you begin to change or notice changes, you may experience feelings of disloyalty or even anger, particularly if you find you are now taking on more responsibility. These feelings are normal during this part of your grief experience.

## Search for meaning

It is natural to question the meaning of your sibling's death and your own mortality. Allow for "Why?" and "How" questions to occur, beginning your work towards accepting that you may not be able to find the answers you are looking for.

These questions support your work towards acceptance of your loss and your progress towards developing your new identity.

## Receive ongoing support from others

Although grief after a sibling's death is often overlooked (disenfranchised), you do not need to grieve and mourn alone.

If you feel you require more support than your circle of family and friends can provide, consider joining an adult bereavement group, engaging in individual therapy, connecting with your religious community, or mental health organizations in your area.

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Hooyman, N. R., Kramer, B. J., & Sanders, S. (2021). Loss and Grief in Old Age. In *Living through loss: Interventions across the life span* (second, pp. 310–311). essay, Columbia University Press.

Wolfelt, A. (2008). *Healing the adult sibling's grieving heart: 100 practical ideas after your brother or sister dies*. Companion Press.



**We're a part of your story.**