



**The Grieving Teen**  
**Helen Fitzgerald**

## When a Sibling Dies

When parents lose a child, the whole world grieves with them. But what about the grief of surviving siblings?

"How many brothers do you have?" That's a pretty simple question--unless you had two brothers once and now, thanks to a car accident, you have only one. How do you answer it? Do you say, "One" and ignore the fact that you used to have two? Or do you go into the whole sad story of how your brother died. What do you do?

If you have had a brother or sister die for any reason, you may have been confronted with this question. It's just one of many that teenagers have asked me through the years. In each case my advice has been to gauge your response by your relationship with the questioner. If that person is a close friend, of course you would want him or her to know what has happened. But if that person is a casual acquaintance at best, he or she probably doesn't want to know all that, and you have no obligation to tell him. The short answer will suffice.

Have you had a sibling die? If you have, please accept my deepest sympathy. This is a terrible loss that will remain with you always. Do you sometimes wish you had died instead? Perhaps you and your brother had a special relationship; he was your confidante, and you were his. Now he's gone. On the other hand, you might have had a big argument, and he died before it could be settled. Now you're feeling terribly guilty.

You may also feel that nobody cares how you are dealing with your grief. When young people die, who gets all the sympathy? The parents! It may seem unfair, but that's usually what happens. Siblings are generally expected to support their parents, who are seen as doing most of the suffering. Sometimes there is even a role reversal, with older children assuming the role of parents to their own parents. Making matters even worse, parents may be so devastated by the death of a son or daughter that the deceased becomes almost a "saint" in their minds, setting a standard that siblings can't hope to match.

When this happens, you have to realize that the death of a loved one throws people off balance. I know of a father who was shocked to learn many years after his wife died that his little daughter felt abandoned at the time. "You mean I didn't put you on my lap and hug you? I didn't tell you how much I loved you?," he asked. Something like that could be going on with your parents; don't write them off.

No matter how your family responds, the death of a brother or sister can be very hard to accept, particularly if you were very close. Painful as it may be, it's important for you to express your grief and not keep it bottled up. Here are some things you can do:

- Find others to talk to. You will be amazed at how much better you feel after you have shared with others the things that are troubling you. If you aren't able to talk things over with your parents, perhaps you have an aunt or uncle you feel close to, or a coach or counselor at school. And, by all means, share your feelings with close friends.
  - If you belong to a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious body, make use of this important resource to find help with your grief.
  - Find out if there is a group for teens who have had similar losses and who meet to share their concerns. Ask your school counselor to find out whether there is such a group either at your school or elsewhere nearby. If not, maybe your counselor could start one. I have found that teenagers are often reluctant at first to share their pain with others but quickly discover how helpful this can be.
- 
- Check the bulletin board on this web site to see if other grieving teens have posted messages that might be helpful. If there aren't any, you might post your own message asking if there are other teenagers out there who have suffered the loss of a loved one.
  - Find a book to read on the subject of bereavement and loss. Lots of other people have

suffered terrible losses. Reading about their experiences can help you feel less alone in what you are going through and give you ideas on how to deal with the anger, guilt, regrets, denial or other feelings that are boiling up inside you. A good one is "Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers" by Earl A. Grollman (Beacon Press, 1993).

The death of your brother or sister can never be viewed as anything but a terrible loss. It may have shaken your basic beliefs. It may have made you wonder what life is all about. But it can also be the occasion for you to discover inner strengths you never knew you had. When this time of grief has passed, you may find that you know yourself better than ever before and that you're glad to be alive.

---

*Do you have comments about this column, or questions you would like Helen to address in future columns? While Helen cannot respond personally to each message, she will select representative questions to answer in her weekly column. Send an email to [fitzgerald@staff.beliefnet.com](mailto:fitzgerald@staff.beliefnet.com)*

Helen Fitzgerald is a renowned educator and writer on death and dying. For Beliefnet, she will be writing a column on the 'grieving teen' and one on the 'grieving child.'