

BROTHERS & SISTERS

October/November 05

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Dear readers

In this issue, we focus on the family and how it is affected by grief and loss. Most of us have experienced the transformation of our family after the death of our siblings – the way that individuals relate within the family and outside of the family, the things we do and say, and the things we can't or won't do and say. The changes to our family can be positive or negative and sometimes a bit of both.

Each family is different and will react to grief and loss in different ways. Some families will be drawn together, and will gain solace and comfort from being with those they love, who understand what they are going through. Grief and loss can also tear families apart – warped out of shape and damaged beyond repair. It can become unbearable to be around others who are grieving with a similar intensity, the layered pain and sorrow is just too much.

For many of us, our relationship with our parents will change. We may feel a greater responsibility towards our parents – to comfort them, to ease their pain, to give them a reason to live, to try to fill the void, to be there whenever they need us, to stay alive. Seeing our parents grieve, cry, scream, howl, withdraw and despair, can be

excruciating. It is not uncommon for surviving siblings to transition into the role of 'carer' and this can be a difficult and uneasy role reversal, particularly for those who are young when their sibling dies. Not only are we mourning the loss of our brothers and sisters, we are also dealing with the loss of our parents as they were before.

Our relationships with other siblings and extended family members may also change after the death of our brothers and sisters. We may become closer or drift apart. It can be difficult to openly grieve for our brothers and sisters alongside other family members. Instead, surviving siblings may become the 'pillar of strength' or the 'rock' that others rely on for strength and help. Or they may withdraw and try to cope alone, not wanting to place one more emotional burden on others in the family.

In this issue, we hear from those who have experienced both ends of the spectrum – families growing together and families drifting apart. If you would like to share your experiences or thoughts about your own family or your brother or sister, we would love to hear from you.

**In friendship,
Melanie (editor) and Karina (assistant editor)**

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Growing together...

Colleen O'Rourke (26 March 1963 – 28 March 2005)

My sister Colleen (Bubba as we used to call her), was the youngest of 5 children, yet was much wiser than her age even from a small child.

Melanoma cancer stole Col away from us all just before her 42nd birthday. Sis fought very hard to stay with her two beautiful boys Taylor and Caelan, her devoted husband Robbie and our mum who was also her best friend.

I have read many of the stories others have written, they have all touched my heart in a way that only a bereaved loved one can understand.

What is so special about Col's story is that she was able to bring together our family even though we had drifted apart emotionally and physically. Disharmony prevented us realising what a precious gift that family is. Col wasn't one to mince words, she knew right from wrong and helped us to see that our actions towards each other from the past had been wrong. Yet she did so in such a way that our love for her and each other was renewed and all disagreements were realised for what they were in the scheme of things... nothing, meaningless and petty.

Col helped us all look at the fact the past is just that... gone forever and that tomorrow was not a certainty for any of us and the only thing we had was the present because it is a gift, that's why they call it the present!

When Col's cancer returned after two years, we prayed, pleaded, begged and prayed some more for a cure to be found. Many cancers can be but not Col's due to its ferocious nature. Even while she was so very sick, she never gave up and never gave in. She wanted so desperately to stay with us and we all wanted so desperately for her to get well.

Col's picture is on the wall where I walk past her every morning and can stroke her beautiful cheek and say "Hi Sis, I miss you!" I feel it in my heart that she can still hear us and she is watching to make sure we don't fall back into petty judgements about silly things that have no place in our lives.

Our focus as a family now is unity for her two beautiful boys, her hubby and our mum who above all, are still devastated that she had to go.

My sister Debbie was asked by Taylor (13) a short time ago if Col had known that she was going to die, and if so why she hadn't told them. Debbie took a deep breath to stop from crying and said "Taylor, I think your mum knew in her head that her cancer was serious but she could never accept it in her heart because she was never going to give up because she didn't want to ever leave you and your little brother Caelan."

I was proud of Debbie for saying that because out of everything that Col went through, she never, ever gave in. Her body did, but the essence of Col still lives on because she wanted to stay so badly with us all, including her dear friends that became sisters of the heart to us as well.

It has been 5 months now since Col was taken from us. I don't cry as much but still feel numb and the rest of our family are the same. We function on almost automatic mode because our hearts are still hurting so much that our energy is used up just to continue in our lives.

We miss her, we honour her, we are proud of her dignity, we love her for all she has done to give love and harmony to our family. We will always remain united for our own sakes and especially for our baby sister Bubba.

**Marilyn Bridge
(Mally)**

Melbourne



Drifting apart...

In Memory of My Beloved Brother
Colin Cairns (12 Dec 1997 – 7 Dec 1995)

We drifted in and out of time. The world kept turning and life went on. We all stood helpless waiting on the platform of life, watching it pass us by again and again. Our house was no longer a home and we had all become strangers. We had little to say to each other, and I was grateful for the silences. It would become a place of comfort. Somewhere that I could hide. In silence there were no questions.

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My family did not survive this. Instead of bringing us closer, we drifted further and further away from each other. All our relationships had changed. My parents are divorced. I have no relationship with my mother, and a reasonably good one with my father. It seems that what held us all together, would eventually be what would tear us apart. Colin was the reason we could be a family. Without him, we were just three people.

I miss that word family. I miss what it once represented. It was never perfect, but then again when are families ever that?

Jacqueline, QLD

Excerpt from *TCF, Queensland Inc. Newsletter*
Jacqueline's article was written after her brother's suicide.



*I have to have two hearts now.
One for my mum and one for
my dad. 're n tog her
now and I'm n tog her.*

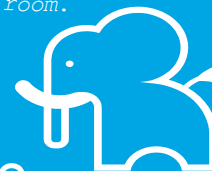
Girl, 15.

Taken from *The grief book: strategies for young people*,
Elizabeth Vercoe and Kerry Abramowski.

The elephant in the room

*There's an elephant in the room,
It is large and squatting,
so it is hard to get around it.
Yet we squeeze by with
"how are you" and "I'm fine".
And a thousand other forms
Of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather.
We talk about work. We talk
about everything else -
except the elephant in the room.*

Terry Kettering,
The elephant in the room.



Don't Take My Grief Away

*After my brother's funeral,
someone told me that I was
handling my grief well. "No",
I responded, "I am not doing
well at all, if I were, I
would crumple up on the floor
and let my grief flood this
room. As it is I am stoically
holding it all in because
there is no-one here who
would be comfortable if
I let it out."*

Origin unknown.
Taken from *TCF WA Reflections*,
December 1997.



