



# When a Brother or Sister Dies

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS BEREAVED PARENT SUPPORT & INFORMATION CENTRE, MELBOURNE

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*I was just an average teenager. I had my friends and school activities. My family was just my family. Then the worst nightmare imaginable happened. My sister died. "*

- Jennifer, age 17

In a world suddenly gone crazy, how can you keep your balance? How can you cope with something that is shattering to you as well as to those adults closest to you in your world?

We hope this brochure offers you some directions and some choices in order to help you find your way in a world that has changed in ways you never expected it to.

You may have the same or very few of the emotions of other family members.

## **Please remember:**

- Your grief is yours, not theirs.
- Your grief is unique because your relationship with your brother or sister was different.
- Your way of grieving is just as important, however you choose to express it, as long as it is not destructive.
- Remember, that before this sad experience, there may have been times when you felt jittery, hyper, or depressed when you were nervous or worried about different situations. Grieving can be very much like those other times, but it may take longer to work through your feelings of loss or hurt.

## **You may experience:**

- sleep disturbances;
- tiredness or restlessness;
- anger towards yourself, other people, God, even your brother or sister who has died.
- emotions stronger than you have experienced before.
- fear for your safety and those you care about;
- feelings of rejection from parents who are distracted, irritable or inattentive;
- trouble paying attention and remembering;
- mood swings between feeling very good and very bad;
- guilt about the way you sometimes treated your brother or sister when they were alive.
- guilt about surviving, or enjoying life.



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*"But I feel so strange sometimes. I can't talk to my folks. I just keep my feelings to myself so I won't upset them anymore. They're so overprotective now. They probably wouldn't let me out of their sights if they knew how I felt. Mostly I just want to get away with my friends, but they aren't the same anymore either. Sometimes they pity me. I hate feeling so mixed-up. "*

- Bill, age 16

It is hard to talk about emotions, especially to parents. If you are concerned about upsetting either your mother or your father and feel your friends won't understand, seek out a sympathetic listener (relative, teacher, counsellor, minister, or another bereaved brother or sister). It may surprise you how much they can help you through this ordeal.

You are faced with a situation for which you have had little or no preparation. At an age when just growing up can be a struggle, this experience may make you feel like a little kid again. Don't be ashamed! Even adults need to hug and be hugged and cared for when they are hurting.

Sometimes you might think you have to fill that empty place left in your family. You don't have to be just like your sister or brother—we are all unique and have good points that are worthwhile.

You may wonder "Why doesn't the world stop, don't they know how big this grief is for me?" Your friends may back off. Your marks may go down at school; your motivation may slump; you may even feel like giving up studies and other things you love, thinking "What is the point, I might die soon, so why try?"

You may feel emotions like those listed here at different times, maybe even long after your brother or sister's death. It can be frightening to suddenly think about such things. But other young people, just like you, have had a brother or sister die. They have struggled through feelings very much like yours.

They have survived and so can you.

### **It's okay ...**

to cry and feel depressed. You've lost a great deal. If the feelings get too scary or overwhelming, find a caring friend (no matter what age) to talk it out.

### **It's okay ...**

to want to copy some of your brother or sister's habits and interests, but be yourself, too.

### **It's okay ...**

to live "in the past" for awhile. It is one way to keep alive the memory of your brother or sister. However, you have a life, too—one that should be lived to the fullest.



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## **It's okay...**

to forgive yourself for the fights, arguments, and mean things that you said or did to your brother or sister.

## **It's okay ...**

to have fun and enjoy life, to laugh again and to go on living.

You may turn to drugs and alcohol to ease your pain and hurt, but it will take longer to accept the hurt then. Drugs and alcohol can only hide the pain not heal it.

## **Seek help if....**

- you get into a drug or alcohol habit that stops you from regular daily activities.
- you are acting out your frustration with reckless driving or skipping school.
- you are doing things out of anger to hurt others because you hurt so much yourself.
- you are experimenting with sex just to get close to someone.
- you are behaving badly so you appear tough to hide the pain.
- you are giving up things that you loved to do before your brother or sister died.

It is rough, but hang in there, grieving takes a lot of energy. Commit yourself to getting through the emotional and physical work of grieving. Some young people have found journal writing, prayer, poetry, sports, music and art as positive outlets for their feelings.

Share your grief experiences with other bereaved siblings if you can. You will probably be surprised and comforted at how similar your experiences are to theirs.

You and your family are changed by all the sadness you have experienced. The pain does decrease with time, but family members will have their own way of dealing with grief and sometimes this may irritate you. Be patient with them when you can.

When the acute grief has gone, some people decide that the emotional bond they have had with their brother or sister will have a positive effect on their future. So they take up studies, or a particular career or hobby that has interested them or do something in memory of their brother or sister. While most people would rather have their brother or sister back, in the long run grief can strengthen you if you work through it.

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