



## SIBLING GRIEF FOR PARENTS

### Helping your other kids

When a brother or sister dies, a child begins a confusing, intense journey of grief while surrounded by a grieving family.

The child doesn't usually have the skills to grieve in a healthy way. They depend on their parents to help them.

Even though parents are grieving their child's death, it's also their job to support the other kids' grief or make sure that another trusted adult is doing so.

Your kids may sense that showing their feelings makes it harder for you so they try to protect you by hiding their feelings.

If you recognise that this is the case, arrange for them to talk with another trusted adult.

Your kids may feel that no one else knows what they're going through or no other kids are grieving.

A support group with other grieving kids may help your child shed the burden of grief.

Your child may use denial as a necessary way to avoid the intense emotional pain of this loss. This means the child simply won't accept the death. They refuse to talk about, or even think about, it.

In time, the denial lessens, and then goes away. Be patient. Don't argue. Give Hugs.

When a loved one dies, people usually are sad. When a sibling dies, it's intense. The sadness may come and go, lasting for short bursts of time.

Help them express this feeling by making a collage of the sibling's favourite things or looking at photos and sharing stories about times you spent together.

### How Siblings react

After a death, kids may have anxiety about something bad happening to them, their parents or other siblings. They may also feel anxious about whose fault the death was, wondering who to blame.

Set aside times to talk over these worries. If no one is talking, it may seem that family members don't care about the child that died or about the kids who are left.

Kids may get angry at the doctors, their parents or even God for not preventing the death. Many times this anger goes undetected because the child hides it.

Be aware that the rage or hostility may still be there. If not expressed in a healthy way, these feelings will come out without warning or at odd times that don't have anything to do with the death.

As your child gets older, the outbursts may become bigger and more intense. That's why it is vital that the feelings are expressed and released as soon as possible after the death.

If grief isn't expressed, the sadness could turn into depression.

Signs of depression in kids are:

- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- A tendency to be alone
- Low concentration;
- Increased irritability, decreased energy.

Contact your doctor if you're worried.

If feelings don't come out, they can turn into physical problems like head or tummy aches, restlessness, sore throats, or appetite and sleep changes. Kids may show unusual hostility and stubbornness. Physical activity helps.



## **SURVIVOR GUILT**

When a sibling dies, surviving siblings may turn their natural anger and possibly guilt on themselves. This is usually true if there was the normal sibling rivalry of competing for the family's attention.

Before the death, a child may have told their brother or sister, "I wish you were dead!"

In the case of a younger child, they may think somehow their thoughts or words killed their sibling.

Being in these situations puts the child in a bind. If they tell their parents about their thoughts they think they face the risk of being punished.

To avoid punishment, they try to deal with it alone which can lead to physical problems, behavioural changes and emotional outbursts.

They may begin to believe they should've died or that they don't deserve to enjoy themselves. They may

seek out ways to be punished or even think about suicide.

If the child died as a result of an accident while under the care of an older sibling, the older sibling can take on enormous guilt.

Reassure them that you know the accident was not done on purpose. Let them know that people make mistakes and no one is perfect. (Note: If the circumstances of the death say otherwise, consult directly with a counsellor.)

Explain that after a death of this kind, everyone in the family should work on forgiving themselves and each other.

Unresolved guilt turns to bitterness which is difficult to get rid of. Talk about the guilt and support each other to ease the guilt.

Sometimes these feelings last for years. Parents should regularly check to see how their child is feeling and encourage them to talk about these feelings.

**When a parent dies, you lose the past.  
When a child dies, you lose the future.  
When a sibling dies, you lose the past *and* the future.**

**That is the grief of a sibling — grief for what was past, and grief for what should have been the future.**