

SIBLING SURVIVOR GUILT

How to survive the turmoil

BOB BAUGHER, PH.D. | bbaugher@highline.edu

What does it mean to grieve as a sibling?

Guilt is part of the human condition, and often part of most people's bereavement process. If you experienced survivor guilt when your sibling died, join the crowd. Let's look at some of the common types.

BEING ALIVE

Knowing that your brother or sister will never experience life again while you continue to live day after day may bring guilt feelings. You can't understand why your sibling's life was cut short and you continue to live.

PASSING THE AGE OF YOUR SIBLING

Survivor guilt can rear when you reach and pass the age of your sibling. And every day you live beyond that date may somehow feel strange or unfair. Yet, for some siblings, it is a relief.

USING YOUR SIBLING'S THINGS

For some siblings, using items that belonged to their deceased brother or sister brings comfort and produces feelings of closeness. Yet, others report that using their sibling's items brings feelings of unworthiness.



When an item inevitably wears out, gets lost or becomes unusable, you might feel bad that yet another part of your brother or sister's life has faded from use. Other people may not understand this significance.

DOING THINGS YOUR SIBLING NEVER GOT A CHANCE TO DO.

This is a common source of survivor guilt and becomes especially poignant when you see the look on your parents' face that says, "I wish your brother/sister could have done this or been here for this."

EXPERIENCING PLEASURE

Here you are enjoying yourself at a party, on vacation, at the beach, the movies, or out to dinner and suddenly it hits you—“How can I be having fun like this when my sibling can never do this again?”

Friends may notice your sudden change of mood, but you may not wish to tell them for fear of spoiling their fun.



SEEING YOUR LOVED ONES CRY

One of the most difficult aspects of death is watching those around you grieve the loss and realizing there is not much you can do to ease their pain. You may have had the awkward experience of standing there and having the desire to say, “Hey, I’m still here!” You feel guilty for standing there, being alive, and realize at that moment that your existence has little effect on easing your loved ones’ grief.

TAKING RISKS YOU SHOULDN’T

If you are or were a normal adolescent, you engaged in activities you knew were unsafe. However, because of your brother or sister’s death, you also know better than most of your friends that a young person can die and leave their family devastated. Yet, there you were, taking risks and feeling guilty as a result.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME

This is another common one, especially when you are feeling down on yourself or when your

parents have criticized you. While these thoughts are normal after the death of a sibling, if you are continuing to have them and they are disturbing to you, it is very important that you call a friend, a counselor, your parents, the crisis center, or some other person who can listen to you.

NOT DOING ENOUGH

Not doing enough to keep his or her memory alive. Here you are going through the course of your day when it hits you that you have not been thinking of your brother or sister.

One sibling said it well. “Here I am catching myself feeling bad for not thinking of my sister every minute. Yet, when she was alive, I could go for an entire day and hardly think of her at all!”

However, here you are kicking yourself for forgetting. Do you realize that you’ll never forget your brother or sister?

One way to help with this guilt issue is to begin writing down all your memories. If you’re not a writer, then talk into a voice recorder. It’s a great way to ease this aspect of survivor guilt: stories are the way we best remember.



HOW TO EASE YOUR GUILT

Before I get to the last type of survivor guilt, I want to offer some ways that you might ease some of your guilt:

1. Go back through the list and circle the ones that are relevant to you. Next, ask yourself, "Is there anything I can do about this?"
2. Find someone who will be a good listener and not judge you. Tell this person you wish to talk about some guilt that you have been feeling around your brother or sister's death. Most importantly tell this person that you want them to listen without trying to fix it, and without saying, "Don't feel guilty." You simply want someone who will listen. There is something positive about getting out your guilt feelings and not letting them eat away at your insides.
3. Next, focus on the positive. Tell your friend all the good things you did when your brother or sister was alive and all the good things you've done since their death. Don't be modest. Omit the term "I should have" from your vocabulary because you can never fix the past. You can only work on the present.
4. Ask yourself the following question: "What would it take to forgive myself?" And do something to work on this.
5. Write a letter to your brother or sister saying any or all of the following:
 - a. All the things for which you are sorry.
 - b. All the grief you've been feeling since the death.
 - c. How much this person is missed by everyone.
 - d. What has happened in your life since the death.

NOT LIVING UP TO YOUR SIBLING'S STANDARDS

Someone said it well years ago. "The dead have it easy—we are reluctant to say bad things about them and, unlike us, they make no further mistakes in their life."

In other words, your brother or sister was a hard act to follow. So, you feel more guilt because you are not this ideal person. Your challenge is to live up to your own realistic standards and allow yourself to make mistakes.

A good method to follow the next time you make a "stupid" mistake is to say, "What would I say right now if my best friend made the exact same mistake?"

Now say that exact thing to yourself.

I challenge you to treat yourself as well as you would your best friend! Besides, I bet that's what your brother or sister would want for you. Don't you agree?

Remember: You need not walk alone.



Sibling Survivor Guilt originally published in The Compassionate Friends Magazine *We Need Not Walk Alone*, Summer 1998, p.15, 17.