



# GriefConnections

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## ***Inservice Programs for Your Organization***

Did you know that we can provide an inservice speaker for your organization? Whether you are looking for a group presentation on some aspect of grief counseling or a program on today's funeral options, we have an excellent group of speakers ready to respond. To talk about options for a workshop in your organization, please call Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or email [info@phillipsfuneralhome.com](mailto:info@phillipsfuneralhome.com).

## ***Supporting Bereaved Siblings***

In a provocatively written book, *The Empty Room: Understanding Sibling Loss* (see review section), science journalist Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn (2007) uses her own experience with the death of her brother as a backdrop in interviewing more than 70 bereaved siblings. Like DeVita's own family, she discovered many families did not discuss the death of the child, most likely a decision made on the part of parents to "protect" the surviving siblings or to deal with their own sadness.

This often-overlooked bereavement, however, has long-ranging consequences. Bereavement literature and our collective clinical experience is replete with examples of sibling loss lying long-buried in what Worden (2009) calls delayed grief reactions. Moreover, siblings' own grief often goes unacknowledged. One teen with whom I worked confessed how weary he had become of being asked by well-meaning friends, "How is your mother?" This high school junior continued, "What I really want is for somebody to ask me how I am!"

As caregiving professionals and volunteers, we have incredibly important opportunities to support, care for, and counsel bereaved siblings, regardless of their age. Here are some important keys to keep in mind as you work with this group.

**Affirm that sibling loss is not restricted by age.** When hearing the term "sibling loss," many bereavement caregivers think first about children and teens. And while a death during these developmental stages can have significant long-term implications for growth, it is vital to not restrict our thinking to these age groups. Upon experiencing the death of a sibling, seniors seem to be at a heightened risk for clinical depression, for example (Cicirelli, 2009, see research review). All evidence to the contrary, very young children are thought by some to be incapable of experiencing grief or simply unaware of a sibling's death. And the grief of older children and teens can also be disenfranchised in relationship to a sibling's death because open communication in the family is not present (Horsley & Patterson, 2006) or because children refrain from discussing their own experience with loss for fear of intensifying a parents' feelings of loss (Crenshaw, 2002).

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### ***Supporting Bereaved Siblings con't***

**Acknowledge the reality of “continuing bonds.”** Beginning around the time of World War 1 and paralleling the early twentieth-century work of Sigmund Freud, westerners began to think of the grief process in terms of the necessity of dissolving old attachment bonds so we could “move on.” By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this out-dated notion has been discredited at nearly every turn, though that hasn't kept many well-meaning professionals and friends from continuing to extol the virtues of “forgetting the past and moving on!” Today, siblings and other bereaved people are known to experience a continuing bond with the deceased, perhaps through dreams, feelings of the sibling watching over, adoption of speech patterns or behaviors characteristic of the deceased, or incorporation of memories of the deceased into the bereaved person's ongoing daily life.

In her book, DeVita- Raeburn (2007) tells of a young woman who carried peach roses in her bridal bouquet in memory of her sister who had died several years earlier and whose favorite flower was a peach rose. Parents and other family members need to be encouraged about the appropriateness of siblings' continuing bond-reinforcing behavior. Though undeniably difficult, a surviving child is helped immeasurably when parents can accept his need to wear the football jersey of his deceased brother (Packman, et. al, 2006).

**Explore relationship “textures” with the client.** In spite of intense sibling rivalry, most siblings eventually develop supportive relationships. But not all do. As Packman and colleagues (2007) point out, “In instances where the relationship between the siblings may not have been a good one, such as in abusive or manipulative situations, reinforcing the development of ‘positive’ continuing bonds many not be a good idea. Because negative ties can sometimes bind more tightly than positive ones, it becomes even more critical to listen to siblings about their thoughts and feelings. . .”

One error sometimes made by inexperienced counselors, volunteers or paraprofessional caregivers is assuming that “your relationship is like my relationship.” Even experienced clinicians are not immune to this thinking. Therefore, asking questions like, “How do you wish things would have been different with your brother?” or “How have you seen your relationship change since childhood?” can be provocative ways to engage clients in this dialogue.

**Assess for elevated levels of death anxiety, depression, or other potential pathology.** The death of a sibling can certainly intensify thoughts of one's own mortality. Unlike the death of a parent or older friend, the death of a sibling proves that someone “my age” can die, even if that sibling is several years older than the bereaved survivor. Naturally, the death of a contemporary heightens our own sense of vulnerability, increasing the thoughts of “If it can happen to *her*, it can happen to *me*.”

A recent study by Cicirelli (2009, see review) concluded that older adults tended to exhibit more symptoms of clinical depression if one or more of their siblings had died than if all of their siblings were still living. Interestingly, the study also found that greater levels of sibling “closeness” seemed to protect against depressive symptoms. Though Cicirelli's research did not reach this conclusion, it would be a fair application of his findings to suggest that lack of closeness to siblings may increase one's risk for clinical depression in older age, reinforcing the importance of thorough assessment about the “texture” of relationships mentioned earlier.

**Connect clients to supportive people and resources.** Unlike major metropolitan centers, many of the smaller communities where GriefConnections readers practice do not have multiple, often redundant providers of support services. With hundreds of thousands of newly bereaved people every year in a major urban center, resources directed specifically at bereaved siblings may be found rather easily. For others, however, books and internet resources must provide the major share of support services to supplement the work of the individual therapist, pastor, hospice bereavement counselor, or school psychologist.

A “sibling grief” search on the website of internet bookseller, Amazon.com returned nearly a dozen titles published in the last few years (including the one reviewed below). Additionally, bereaved siblings will find written resources and even internet-based bereavement groups especially for siblings at the websites of organizations like the Compassionate Friends ([www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)) and Parents of Murdered Children ([www.pomc.org](http://www.pomc.org)). You might also want to start a group especially targeting bereaved siblings, but don't be surprised or discouraged if the work is exceedingly slow.

The death of a sibling potentially presents many roadblocks to successfully negotiating the bereavement process. Caregiving professionals and volunteers will want to pay close attention to clients and constituents, regardless of age, especially when offered stories about the recent or long-ago death of a brother or sister.

**References.**

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**The Author:** William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. For more than 25 years, Dr. Hoy has counseled with bereaved individuals and families, and over the last several years, has been primarily involved in writing and presenting continuing education workshops for caregiving professionals. He is the author of *Guiding People Through Grief*, and his newest book, *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*.

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**Research That Matters**

Cicirelli, V. G. (2009). Sibling death and death fear in relation to depressive symptomatology in older adults. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences, 64B (1)*, 24-32.

Hypothesizing that sibling death leads to increased fear of death (death anxiety) and increased depressive symptomatology, the author interviewed 61 men and 89 women ranging in age from 65 to 97 years. The study provided support for the researcher's hypothesis, confirming the findings of several earlier research projects.

Though the author concedes need for additional study and the shortcomings of the present project, the application for those who support and counsel bereaved people are significant. Acknowledging the reality of sibling bereavement is vital. But it is equally vital that support persons inquire "below the surface" when a sibling's death is mentioned by an older adult being served.

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**Library Notes**

DeVita-Raeburn, E. (2007). *The empty room: Understanding sibling loss*. New York: Scribner.

Provocatively-written, this book summarizes the conclusions drawn by the author based on her own experience with an older brother's death after a long illness as well as her interviews with 77 bereaved siblings. The author's writing style is poetic and engaging and reads like a fine classic tale. This book not only provides practical guidance to bereaved siblings and caregivers alike, but the writing is so engaging, this is a very hard book to put down once you start reading.

For a comprehensive listing of Grief Resources go to our website:  
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Or visit our Grief Resource Center at:  
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 9 am to 5 pm

### ***The Compassionate Friends Website***



Each month we will be featuring a different website that is based on the topic of Grief. The Compassionate Friends website can be found at [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org). This website is designed for those who need grief support after losing a child. The Compassionate Friends website states, "*The mission of The Compassionate Friends is to assist families in the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child and to provide information to help others to be supportive.*"

Phillips Funeral Home & Cremation Service website has several other online resources. Just visit [www.phillipsfuneralhome.com](http://www.phillipsfuneralhome.com), click Resource Center then click Grief Resources.

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### ***Upcoming Events***

#### ***Southern Tier Hospice***

- Saturday, September 12th Out of the Dark Suicide Prevention Walk at Hodgman Park in Painted Post, NY. For more information contact [rcarapella@afsp.org](mailto:rcarapella@afsp.org) or call 936-9077.
- Saturday, September 19th 5th Annual Houghtaling Golf Tournament—proceeds to benefit Southern Tier Hospice. For more information contact Southern Tier Hospice at 962-3100.

#### ***Compassionate Friends Support Group***

Meets last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at [jmorgan55@stny.rr.com](mailto:jmorgan55@stny.rr.com).

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