Objective

In this review we aim to bring sibling grief out and illustrate the ubiquitous effects of sibling loss on the surviving sibling.

Sibling relationships is still a unique bond that lasts a lifetime. With the death of a sibling during childhood, a child’s world is irrevocably changed. 1 Emotional turmoil is profound, the survivor struggles to find meaning, navigates a new family structure and tries to integrate the lost sibling into daily life. 2, 3 This change is immediate, but the effects on the surviving sibling remain throughout his or her lifetime. 3

Table adapted from: 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survivor Sibling</th>
<th>Physical signs related to grief</th>
<th>Behaviors related to grief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant (0-2 years)</td>
<td>Death is believed to be beyond the understanding of infants younger than 2 years old.</td>
<td>Increase crying.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toddler (2-3 years)</td>
<td>The concept of time is not understood, so any separation from a loved one can lead to a loss of security. At this age a child is egocentric and will use magical thinking to explain the world in which he lives. Although death is concrete, grief and bereavement are abstract concepts that are not understood.</td>
<td>Enuresis. Loss of skills. Headaches. Stomachaches. Sleep issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Children (5-9 years)</td>
<td>Concrete Operational Stage.</td>
<td>It is important to support the impact of the loss of a child on the whole family system. More research is needed on potential influences on the grief process, on how culture and ethnicity affect the grieving process, on how grief impacts the parental role and the impact on the child–parent relationship and to understand risk of significant negative health outcomes.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Method

A research was made on PubMed and B-on using key terms “sibling grief”, “bereavement”, “death concept”.

Loss of a child is a severe trauma to the members of any family. Although the reactions of parents to the loss of a child has received a considerable amount of attention in the literature, relatively little has been written about the impact of such a loss on the remaining sibling. 3, 4 The literature purports that the loss of a sibling during childhood, particularly for a girl, has a greater impact than the death of a parent. 3

Grieving parents, overwhelmed by their own grief, may have limited capacity to look after the needs of the surviving siblings: a double loss—both the deceased brother or sister and the parents, who are at least temporarily unavailable to the child. 1, 2, 3 Often the surviving siblings is often the most neglected family member. 1, 2, 5

Numerous authors have identified 3 tasks that a sibling survivor undertakes during the journey of grief. 3

1) Understand and accept the concept of death to permit the transfer of the emotional and physical bond from the life with the sibling to the memory of the sibling.
2) Adjustment of the surviving sibling in a world without the deceased - the child mourns the death. The child takes on a different role within the family and the world as a sibling survivor.
3) Formation of new bonds or relationships. This task is not to replace the lost sibling but to move forward in the new world. The childhood sibling survivor faces an increased risk of complicated or unresolved grief.

Among the common reactions cited are numerous: 4, 5
• negative symptoms
• distorted concepts of illness, death, hospitals and religion;
• death phobias;
• comparisons, identifications and misidentifications with the dead child;
• disturbances in cognitive functioning
• separation anxiety
• behaviour problems

Many children do not show outward signs of grief. Others may demonstrate a short acute grief period. Others have a prolonged grief process over many years. 3

These children may have difficulty expressing their feelings, and think that they are not recognised in their sorrow: these feelings can lead to social isolation and early school leaving or low attainment levels. 3

Adult siblings experience a change in the sense of self that may lead to feelings of emptiness and hopelessness and fear of dying. 2

Grief intensity correlates inversely with Posttraumatic growth - a positive outcome of traumatic events such as the loss of a sibling. 1 Research on bereaved siblings, usually adolescents, reports significant positive results, such as maturity, personal strength, independence, improved communication skills, compassion, and spirituality. 2 The association between posttraumatic growth and attachment patterns suggests that secure attachment involves also positive changes following a crisis. 1

How to facilitate the process?

• Reminding child and teens that their grief is unique gives them permission to grieve in the way that reflects their ideals and culture. 3
• The child must be assured that he did not cause the youngster’s death nor will he become ill and die as did his infant sibling. 3
• Consistency in routine helps continue on their task to gain autonomy in a world that has been disrupted. 3
• A funeral service honours the recently deceased - the ritual may begin to facilitate the transition of the sibling survivor to life without the deceased. 4, 5
• Parents should be completely candid with the surviving sibling about their feelings and should encourage the child to verbalise his concerns. 3
• Moderately positive preloss cognitions appear to have a buffering effect, with the bereaved at a lower risk for a problematic grief response. 7

Conclusion

• The future of the surviving sibling depends on a successful journey through the grief process. 3
• It is essential to know grief’s different manifestations, so that we can strive towards emotionally balanced development. 1, 2, 4
• It is important to support the impact of the loss of a child on the whole family system. 4
• More research is needed on potential influences on the grief process, on how culture and ethnicity affect the grieving process, on how grief impacts the parental role and the impact on the child–parent relationship and to understand risk of significant negative health outcomes.

Bibliography