

Dealing with Grief: A Sibling Viewpoint

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Two things happened to me on January 11, 1992. I lost my brother to death, and I lost my parents to grief. My dad, the one who always seemed to have the answers to my questions, the "rock" in the family, the one whose job was to fix everything completely lost it. The fear, anger and shock in his eyes when told that my brother had died is engraved into my memory. He fell limp in the arms of my mother and me in the emergency room at UCLA medical centre. This was the first time I had ever seen my parents lose control. At that moment our roles switched.

"I'll take them." I said to the nurse as she handed me a bag labeled "EDLER." It was the personal belongings of my brother. I quietly took them and placed them in my car. For the next three months, I seemed to make many of the decisions. It was not a courageous leader rising up to the occasion. I was the least common denominator. My parents, although they tried, could not help me. They were trying to deal with the tremendous grief themselves.

For this reason, I put off dealing with Mark's death for many months. I cried and felt sad, but never addressed the issue. My friends were concerned and asked how I was doing. But no one, unless you have been there, really wants to hear the true answers. Mark was the only other person in the world who was a combination of my mom and dad. My friends could not relate nor would I want them to. I would never wish this upon anyone. But this left me alone to deal with it and I chose to put it off.

After three months I met a gentleman at a family retreat with a group of which my dad was a part. Kevin had lost his brother to suicide about 9 months earlier. He was further along in his "coping" than I was. I could talk to him about Mark, mention Mark's name and share stories without making the whole room uncomfortable about the subject. I saw someone who was dealing with it and it gave me hope. There is a certain vocabulary that you learn after going through this that no book, no story, and no amount of explanation can do justice. I don't talk about certain things with my friends because I do not have the time or energy to explain (or try to explain) the many feelings I am having. Kevin understood. He had the vocabulary.

This was the first step into healing. I came to grips with the reality of my new life - different than the one before, but there was no going back. At this point I went on autopilot. I remember many events of the three years following the death. My girlfriend and I broke up. My parents changed houses. I went through the many firsts but just kept moving forward. I was not depressed however. My lows were not very low. But my highs were not very high.

I became involved with The Compassionate Friends Sibling Division of our local chapter in the third year. I did it half out of responsibility to my parents and half out of the knowledge that if I was running the meeting, then I was in control of how much sharing I needed to put into it. Kind of a control thing. To my surprise the meetings have become so beneficial to my healing that I am surprised at myself. By sharing with others, I feel that I help them and in turn myself. Many feelings, thoughts or emotions that I may have thought were just mine, I have found are universal with others.

After three years I began to come "out of the valley." I can only say that by looking back, hindsight has allowed me to see my steps of healing. I stepped into the role of being strong for our family because I felt that was best. Many others I have talked to mention a similar reaction. Your parents are barely able to deal with their own grief. The last thing you want to do is bring more pain on them, so you don't share with your parents.



Last July at The Compassionate Friends conference, many parents walked up to me and asked, "How do I know if my son/daughter is dealing with this? I am concerned since they do not tell me anything." "You don't know" I answered, "and neither do I, but unless you see something obviously dangerous, they are dealing with it in their own way at their own speed and you may not be a part of their grieving."

I now have a different outlook on life. It is precious. I feel that in my life I am closer to my parents. Each one of us has to live our lives 1/3 better in Mark's memory. I value my friends and time more. I can handle stress much better.