An Invisible Grief –
Group Work with Bereaved Siblings

by Barbara Dickson

Barbara Dickson is a Counselling Psychologist in private practice. She is an advanced trainee at the Australian College of Psychodrama in Melbourne. This article focuses on the grief of bereaved siblings and the group work approach Barbara has used with them as she has conducted groups for an agency called The Compassionate Friends over the past sixteen years.

I hope this article helps you to perceive and relate anew to the painful and distressing experience of bereaved siblings whilst they and their families struggle to navigate the terrain of grief in the first few years after the death of a brother or sister. I have discovered the grief of brothers and sisters is often overlooked or trivialised, becoming an invisible grief.

INTRODUCTION

My Own Grief

My involvement with The Compassionate Friends was foreshadowed one winter day in 1980, when my brother John died suddenly in a motor bike accident in Darwin. This experience was traumatic, "ten on the Richter scale". While I had experienced some grief when my grandparents had died, a three or four on the scale, it was nothing of this magnitude. And their deaths had been expected. The first shock came as members of my family visited my workplace in Melbourne to tell me John had died. While my first thought was that I was glad to get out of work for the rest of the day, I felt quite strange.

After the shock, I experienced tears, intense pain, lack of understanding from friends, work mates and employers, isolation and felt overwhelmed with intense emotions. I didn't know what was going on with me and the feelings continued as time passed. My parents, overwhelmed with their own grief, were unable to guide me. I had no map and no guide in this unfriendly and unfamiliar territory.

At this time I was a 27 year old nurse and an undergraduate student of psychology. I turned to grief theories to help me understand my experience of John's death. Three years later my grief was still occasionally acute, obviously longer than the one year which mainstream theorists such as Parkes (1972) allowed. Humanistic theorists such as Kavanaugh

(1972) consoled me more as he accepted that acute grief was experienced intermittently for several years. But his views were less accepted in psychological circles at the time.

When I went to the 'experts' for help I was told my grief was excessive, which made me feel inadequate. Friends were not much help as none of them had experienced much grief. Sometimes I grieved with my siblings and sometimes I was isolated from them. Playing music and dancing assisted me to express my grief, especially the music that John loved. That music helped me to cry.

It took me a long time to accept that my grief was legitimate. To get to this point, I had to work through restricted cultural ideas of grief, my mismatch with the mainstream theories of grief, and the 'expert' opinion that my grief was excessive.

The Compassionate Friends

I was still a psychology student in 1986 when I contacted The Compassionate Friends, a voluntary self-help and support organisation for bereaved families. I wanted to research the effects of their support groups on bereaved parents. Nine bereaved parents offered to be interviewed and I was touched when they shared their experiences generously. I wanted to give something back to them, so I asked them what I could do. Each one thought a group was needed for their children. They felt unable to care for them as well as they normally could because of their own grief. My experience as a bereaved sister led me to believe such a group was a good idea.

I responded to their request, and since July 1987, I have voluntarily facilitated more than 200 group meetings in which bereaved brothers and sisters shared their experiences. Most of these meetings were monthly, lasting between one and a half and two hours. More than five hundred siblings have attended, most of them teenagers or young adults. While ages ranged from 13 to 55, most of them were young women, who had experienced the death of a brother between 15 and 25. They had all approached The Compassionate Friends for assistance, as the organisation has a policy not to approach bereaved people without an invitation to do so. In addition to conducting these groups I spoke with individual bereaved siblings and other family members on the telephone between meetings. From this work, I developed substantial knowledge of the experiences and problems faced by these bereaved young people.

COMMON EXPERIENCES OF BEREAVED SIBLINGS

When I compare the experiences of non-bereaved people in these age groups with the experiences of bereaved brothers and sisters, I can see their lives have been radically changed by the death of their sibling.

Changes in Wider Relationships

People often don't understand just how painful it is to lose a loved family member unless they have had the experience. Most bereaved siblings experienced a lack of understanding about their grief from others at work, at school, amongst friends and sometimes from counsellors and psychiatrists.

Soon after the death, visitors commented: "You have to be strong for your parents, they've got enough on their plate at the moment without having to worry about you too." Well-meaning acquaintances made cliched comments such as "You'll be okay" or

"He's better off where he is". Family visitors would ask how their parents, particularly their mother, was coping with their grief, but would not inquire how they were themselves. After a few months these questions stopped and people seemed to expect things would be back to normal in the family.

Later, new acquaintances would ask the bereaved siblings how many brothers or sisters they had. This was no longer a straightforward question for them. Often siblings wondered: "Do I say how many siblings I have now, or how many I had before he/she died?" While they didn't want to make people uncomfortable by replying that they had a dead brother or sister, it felt like a betrayal if they just gave the number of siblings without mentioning the death at all.

One young woman reported that, six months into the grief for her dead brother, a psychiatrist had told her she was a "gloom merchant", "hard to be around", and that he hoped she would cheer up soon. She got the impression that her grief was not acceptable, and her self-esteem plummeted. Unfortunately many bereaved siblings reported these kinds of comments. The siblings that found psychiatric help useful for their grief were in the minority. More said they gained help from counselling, especially when the counsellor said they had significant grief experiences themselves.

Withdrawing and Critical Friends

Most friends of the bereaved siblings were young, had limited experience of death, and did not understand grief. Soon after the death, some friends deliberately avoided mentioning the dead sibling. Others actively avoided the bereaved sibling, by not returning phone calls, or walking the other way when they met unexpectedly, producing painful experiences of rejection.

Some friends wanted bereaved siblings to be as happy as they used to be, and criticised them for still grieving after several months. Some said, "It was only your brother/sister who died, how come you are so upset? " Comments like this put them 'out of sync' with their peers, even though their peers were well-intentioned towards them.

Experiences like these increased a sense of isolation, which could lead to depression, alcohol consumption, drug taking and a tendency to self-blame with thoughts such as "maybe I should be over it by now". Social life became a trial rather than something to be enjoyed. Friendships were severely tested and many did not survive.

A minority of bereaved siblings said some friendships improved, with sensitive friends learning to support their bereaved companions. Other friendships were forged when peers who had experienced a similar grief approached the bereaved sibling to offer support. Some friendships began in the Compassionate Friends support group, which delighted me.

In many workplaces and schools, little leeway was given to most bereaved siblings. They were expected to perform as normal, despite the known effects of grief such as lack of concentration, low energy and intense changeable emotions, which lead to lower school marks and to work performance dropping below previous standards. They were often in trouble with teachers for acting out. At work bereaved siblings struggled to achieve previous outcomes. Some were warned by employers that their performance was below standard.

Occasionally, an individual employer or teacher would display some compassion and understanding. These people usually assisted the bereaved siblings to continue going forward in their grief and did not add to it.

Changes in Family Relationships

I think the death of a family member is like a bomb exploding on the fabric of the family, leaving members shell shocked, isolated and devastated with grief; unable to be together the way they were before the death. The family changes, people get upset easily and they withdraw emotionally or fight each other. It takes many years for most families to develop a happy family life after the death of a child.

I found that surviving children did not want to add to their parent's burden of grief. They were fearful of overwhelming them further by adding their own grief onto what the parents were already experiencing. They could see just how devastated their parents really were with grief for their dead child.

Siblings would frequently pretend that they were OK, hiding their grief from their parents. The roles were often reversed, with bereaved brothers and sisters taking care of devastated grieving parents. So siblings struggled with the loss of the parents they previously knew, as well as their sibling. This left them to their own resources at a time they were also struggling.

Sometimes brothers and sisters reported feeling less important to parents than the sibling who had died. Occasionally they felt they had to compete for their parents' attention with the idealised memory of the dead brother or sister. This usually felt like a losing battle, which lowered their self-esteem. Frequently parents displayed many photos and mementos of their dead child, but not many of the living children, which added to this negative comparison. Some brothers and sisters commented "They wouldn't grieve that much if I died."

Many siblings said their parents had become over-protective towards them after the death of their other child. They experienced their parents' anxieties as a restriction, which made it more difficult for them to take normal risks in their lives.

The relationship with other surviving brothers and sisters was often close in the early days of grief. In most families, this closeness did not continue. Usually, a few months on, the grief deepened and people began expressing their grief in dissimilar ways, reflecting their own personalities and their particular relationship with the sibling who had died. Family members had their own unique ways of dealing with grief and could irritate each other, causing conflict. For example, one sibling might be full of emotion and urgently want to talk about their dead sibling, while the other was struggling to put their grief on hold, so they could get on with their career.

Some siblings did manage to find a way to support each other anew, but this usually took time, effort and awareness to achieve.

Emotional Changes in the Bereaved Sibling

Grief is hard work emotionally, yet the grief of bereaved siblings seemed invisible to most people. This made their grief especially private, leaving them with intense, overwhelming and confusing emotions that lasted for long periods. They made comments like, "Why doesn't the world stop? Don't they know how big this grief is for me?"

Isolation is an inevitable part of grief, initially coming from missing the person who has died and later compounded by a lack of recognition by others of their grief. Feeling isolated didn't assist positive expression of grief.

I found bereaved siblings were often frightened by the intensity of the emotions they felt, increasing their desire to escape them. Sometimes they became withdrawn and felt suicidal. Unexpressed grief coloured their world, leading to depression, hostility and acting out. Life could be extremely difficult for long periods. They often dealt with this by drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or by being excessively busy.

While tears are not seen as OK in public, bereaved siblings would feel intense emotions at school or work. They would feel anger, depression, and sadness and have a need to cry intermittently for some years. Sometimes, especially at school, other people would 'knock' them for their tears. At work, people expected tears to be expressed 'privately' away from the workplace.

Nearly all the bereaved siblings I saw struggled with intense anger about the death of their brother or sister. For some it came with a certain freedom: they were able to reject people who treated them poorly while they grieved. Others were in conflict about expressing anger and some became actively suicidal. Many more expressed suicidal feelings as a wish to be with their dead sibling or to escape from life after the bereavement, especially from the emotional maelstrom they were experiencing.

Some bereaved siblings were freely able to express their emotions. Usually they had a supportive family, friends, counsellor or group around them.

Their brothers and sisters had died in many different ways, including transport accidents; suicide; drug overdose; misadventure; murder; genetic illness; AIDS; cancer or other illnesses; train and plane collisions; or had disappeared without trace. Each manner of death added extra emotions to the grief. For instance, the shock of sudden death; the intense anger associated with murder; the shame associated with suicide, AIDS, or drug overdose; the pain of watching a loved one slowly deteriorating with an illness; the fear of dying in a transport accident as their brother or sister had. Some expressed anxiety about getting a driver's licence, or fears about dying of a similar illness.

Impact on Teenagers of Facing Grief and Mortality

For teenagers, life was usually full before their sibling's death. Typically they had begun the struggle to become independent from their family; were experiencing pressures from strong peer relationships; were developing an interest in sexual relationships; and were studying for a career. At this stage teenagers are usually exploring life and moving out into the world.

The death of a sibling added the experience of grief for teenagers, usually bringing overwhelming emotions and reduced energy to engage in life. Many became isolated from their peers, especially when they were unable to express their emotions. In facing their own mortality, study seemed pointless to some. "Why bother making an effort to study or stop smoking when a car accident could happen, or I could die of some unexpected illness?"

As some teenagers dealt with their grief destructively, hiding the pain with drugs and alcohol, cynical behaviour, or acting out;

it took longer to deal with the pain of grief. Meanwhile their movement out into the world was inhibited.

Some teenagers were able to put their grief on hold so they could continue with their studies and do well at school or university. This could be followed by a resurgence of acute grief later on, which left them feeling 'off track' because of the time that had passed since the death.

Motivating Effects of Facing Mortality

After the first year or so, when their acute grief had subsided, some older bereaved siblings in their late twenties told me the death of their sibling motivated them to do things they really wanted to do. They had struggled to face the fact that they would die one day and that their life could be unexpectedly short. Some were motivated to get on with their studies; to make a desired career change; to value relationships and relate to people differently; to express love to people still alive; and to travel or take more holidays.

Physical Effects of Grief

In the early days of grief, bereaved siblings often lost weight and felt powerful emotions as physical pain in the gut. Sleeplessness and nightmares were frequently experienced when their sibling had died suddenly.

Concentration was reduced and memory poor. A lot of their energy was taken up with grieving, so they were often tired.

Relationship with the Dead Sibling

Frequently, bereaved siblings wanted their dead brother or sister's clothing and found wearing it comforting. Photographs of their dead sibling became extremely important to them, although they did not always want to display them.

Some struggled with guilt for the unresolved fights and arguments with the dead brother or sister.

Some expressed a fear of forgetting their sibling, and others had a phase early in their grief when they could not remember much about their sibling, which was very distressing to them.

If the surviving sibling was younger, reaching the age of the person who died could be quite traumatic for them. They expressed fear they would die at that age; or feel they were betraying their sibling by living longer; or feel guilty about leaving their sibling behind. When they passed that age, they made comments like, "is he still my older brother?"

Usually, dreams about the sibling who died were a mixed blessing. To dream of them was often pleasant, but waking up and remembering all over again that they were dead could be extremely painful.

When the acute grief was gone, bereaved siblings needed to deal with guilt about surviving the grief, having fun and enjoying life. They needed to laugh again and go on living. Many struggled with this, wondering if it meant they no longer loved their dead sibling.

The Question of Life after Death

Nearly all siblings began questioning life after death. Spiritual issues were mentioned in many groups. Many told of psychic

experiences they had themselves or those related by others about their dead sibling. Often these came in the form of reassuring dreams or messages.

Life Transitions

During times of transition, such as moving from school to university; changing career; moving out of home; or getting married; grief for a dead brother or sister often came back acutely. At such times of acute grief, bereaved siblings reported that time felt 'elastic'. The death could feel recent, then a few days later it could seem a very long time ago.

People who were teenagers or younger when a death occurred, experienced grief during a transition as diffuse, like a background noise. Often it took time to identify the grief as the source of unexplained depression or regression.

For older siblings, grief could come back in surprisingly overwhelming ways. I saw a bereaved brother overwhelmed with grief for several weeks because his dead sister would not be at his wedding, 10 years after her death. Experiences such as this were common.

Changes in Values

Many times, bereaved people expressed intolerance for others' trivial preoccupations. Small talk about decorating houses and curtain colours could irritate them. They had a different perspective about what mattered in life. They couldn't see the point of others becoming very heated and hostile over minor differences of opinions.

Things previously important to bereaved siblings were not valued as much. They become less materialistic. Usually relationships became valued more highly. They realised just how important relationships were when they felt the intensity of their grief for the loss of a loved one. Many spoke of the strong impulse to express love and affection to friends and family who were alive.

GROUP WORK WITH BEREAVED SIBLINGS

My Preparation for the Group

As I developed the idea for this group, I thought about the people who would come to it. For this group to be effective, I believed it was necessary that people were able to verbalise and express their feelings. I concluded that children under 14 years old would not generally have developed the necessary skills to do this, so offered the group to bereaved siblings 14 years and older.

Later I saw a young teenager get frightened by the traumatic stories and grief expression of some older siblings. I felt children younger than 14 were at greater risk of being overwhelmed in this way. When I realised this could replicate their experience with their parents, I was glad of the age restriction.

Usually I felt compassionate to the group members from the start or this emerged in the session as I allowed myself to be touched by them. My own experience of grief helped me reverse roles with them, a rare experience for most of them. However, I did not use the group to resolve my grief.

I held the belief that with adequate support from friends, teachers and maybe counsellors, participants could grow through this difficult

life changing experience and their lives could still flourish. I saw them develop wisdom and become more compassionate towards others, especially other grieving people, so I did not want to take this experience away from them. I saw grief as an expression of their love for their sibling.

Sometimes I worked with another bereaved sibling as a co-facilitator. I worked with five people for eight of the sixteen years I conducted these groups.

Description of the Group

Participants were welcome to arrive before the group and have a cup of tea or coffee in the kitchen. As the group began, we moved into the library, sat in a circle and as there were usually new people attending, I introduced myself. The group size varied, the largest was twenty-five. Usually there were three to five people. Infrequently there was one other person and myself. Some people came to the group early in their grief, others many years down the track. Some people came with friends to support them.

I did not set a particular agenda prior to the meeting. After I introduced myself, I said that in this group people talked with each other about the way the death of their sibling was affecting their life and that they usually experienced some benefit from this. Then I asked each person what had motivated them to come to the group that day, and what they wanted to gain from being there. Motivations varied from an upcoming anniversary of the sibling's death; a birthday; feeling particularly angry recently; not having expressed their grief for a while; or wanting to know what other bereaved brothers and sisters experienced.

I encouraged each person to speak about the effects of their sibling's death on their lives. I made sure each person had a chance to talk if they wished. I asked silent members what their experiences were of the various themes that arose, to give them a chance to be included. While some did not say much, others poured out their grief.

I would inquire how their brother or sister had died, leaving them free to answer broadly or in detail. As some who died had been in the news or died in unusual circumstances, intrusive questioning of the family by the press had added to their grief. I did not allow people to interrogate for details about the facts surrounding the death to satisfy their curiosity, or when their questions cut across the person who was expressing themselves.

I listened to what each person said, being in the moment with them as much as I could. The emotional intensity in the room was often palpable, as people began to express heartfelt and strong emotions. I breathed deeply and made sure I went at a slow pace in these intense moments, so people could feel I was able to be with them.

As I observed the group, I noticed people respond with a head nod, or by moving forward in the seat. I encouraged them to express their responses to each other. Usually they responded readily and bonded with each other fairly quickly. While some bereaved siblings bonded because of their ability to reverse roles with each other, others bonded through emotional fusion.

I allowed silence in the group and occasionally people sat for several minutes before they spoke. I did not usually break the silence myself, but listened to people when they spoke and responded to them.

I broke the silence if many people in the group were in the first months of grief, when words are hard to find for this confusing and difficult experience. (People are usually more articulate several months after the death). We discussed common themes and experiences as they were introduced. I brought it to their attention when they were interrupting or ignoring each other as they expressed themselves.

Differences in Expression of Grief

Each person's expression of grief is unique. This was especially noticeable when surviving siblings from the same family came to the group together. Each person's personality and their different relationships with the dead sibling were reflected in the way they grieved. These differences sometimes made it difficult for them to grieve together without conflict.

I knew some people's grief had particular aspects that made it very painful. I remember the sibling who told me of her identical twin dying. I could see there was a unique bond in that relationship, one most people never experience, that made the grief poignant.

I did not allow people to make comparative comments about whose grief was worse, or judgements about how people had died. I intervened in conversations immediately when this type of comparison began. Usually, I would let people know those comments could be destructive, that we had enough time for everyone to speak about their experiences, and they did not need to be competitive for group time.

Positive Effects of Emotional Expression

I encouraged people to be emotionally expressive. Often they would pause, tense up and hold their breath as they began to cry, which tended to stop them from expressing emotions and crying. I encouraged them to breathe deeply and keep expressing themselves. People were allowed to cry freely, express anger and talk openly about the brother or sister who had died. I found when people were able to express their grief by crying, talking openly and expressing anger, they were able to get on with their lives with less disruption than those who were unable to express this. In subsequent groups people reported that, while emotional expression was painful at the time, it helped them move through their grief, and assisted them to work and look after their children more productively. They usually became less angry as well.

I encouraged some people who seemed isolated to think of others in their lives that they could talk to about their grief, as isolation usually inhibits emotional expression. This could be a sensitive friend, someone in the extended family, a counsellor, a group of bereaved siblings, or a group on the Internet. During the early stages of grief it was usually not their parents.

Almost all of the brothers and sisters who came to the group had used alcohol and/or drugs to alleviate the pain of grief. I knew there was no point in being critical of this behaviour, or asking them to stop. Sometimes they felt the need for a brief panacea for their grief. Some expressed their emotions only while under the influence of alcohol.

I assisted bereaved siblings to put their friends' hurtful behaviour into perspective, so they did not blame themselves. I would let them know that commonly in Australia, we do not talk openly about death and do not have established ways to approach bereaved people. Usually participants had not thought about this prior to their bereavement.

I invited support people to express their own grief if they had also known the sibling who had died. I interrupted some support people if they were giving advice or if it was clear to me they did not understand the experience of the bereaved siblings. At the end of one group, a support person thanked me for asking him to stop giving advice and inviting him to listen for the rest of the group. He said he had really listened and absorbed the experience of bereaved siblings for the first time.

Occasionally, grieving people came who were not bereaved siblings. They shared some aspects of the experience of grief, but usually did not bond with the group as much as bereaved siblings did with each other.

Regular Group Members

When people came regularly to the group, there was usually an additional factor which motivated them to attend. They may have been the only remaining child; had more than one sibling die; were isolated by being a long way from home; or had not been able to relate well to their family prior to the bereavement.

Anniversaries of the sibling's death, and times of cultural celebration such as Christmas and Easter, brought people back to the group as well. These times were usually very difficult for siblings. Their grief was in stark contrast to the celebrations in the wider society. Regular members said the group offered them a safe place, where they could express themselves without being censored, cut off or criticised.

The stories we shared were not all sad. Bereaved siblings wanted to remember and talk about the good times with their brothers and sisters, without being considered morbid. Many times in the group we laughed. It took me a while to get used to this. When it first happened I wondered if I was doing the job right if people were laughing rather than crying. They wanted a place to talk about their shared history, including ' naughty' behaviour they still did not want to share with parents.

Usual Needs Met by the Group

Most bereaved siblings needed to know that their grief was legitimate, that the intense emotions they were experiencing were felt by others, and that other people could listen to them, understand them and accept how they were feeling. They were often surprised and comforted at how similar their experiences were, which helped them feel less isolated. Most did not became aware of the differences in their grief expression, unless they attended regularly.

This seemed enough for many people, who came once or twice to the group and in later feedback, said that the group had affected them greatly. One woman said "I only went the once, but that one meeting certainly put perspective on what I was feeling. It seriously saved my life."

When people mentioned creative expression of grief in listening to music, journal writing, prayer, poetry, sports and art, I encouraged them. At times of transition, such as marriage or baptism, I encouraged them to develop a ritual which was meaningful to them to mark the event. For example, lighting a candle, or including a picture of the dead siblings, so that the unexpressed grief did not haunt the occasion.

When siblings faced the dilemma of whether to let go of the grief and enjoy life again, some of them asked questions like " Does it mean I don't love my brother or sister if

I stop grieving?" I encouraged people to give themselves permission to let go of their grief and continue expressing the love for their sibling in a creative way in their life. I let them know that grief is not the only expression of love for someone who has died. I was there as living proof that it was possible to stop grieving and yet remain loving towards my brother.

When I was drawing the group to a close, I asked each member to reflect on what they had gained from being in the group. Typically, people commented that they were amazed by the affect on them of other people having had similar experiences. One 15 year-old girl had tears running down her face as she said, "I thought I was being selfish feeling this way about my brother. Now I know I'm not". She had not spoken much during the earlier part of the group.

As the group ended, I thanked people for their input, acknowledged whatever depth and honesty there had been in their sharing and sometimes commented on the impact of the group on me. I invited people to return to the group, but told them they were not under any obligation to do so. I knew grieving people did not need pressure to attend regularly. Initially I probably put people off returning to the group by being too careful to not put pressure on them. If siblings told me that parents insisted they come to the group, I was willing to contact parents and ask them not to insist. I believed it was a better experience for bereaved siblings when they freely chose to be in the group.

After the formal session was finished group members could stay to talk with each other or borrow books. I suggested that people build on the 'normalising' effect of the group by reading about grief from library books. The Compassionate Friends had carefully chosen all the library books which were about people's direct expression of grief, or accurately reflected people's experience of grief, so I could confidently recommend them. Sometimes participants exchanged addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses. I was glad to see this occur as it meant they would be less isolated in their grief. Sometimes strong friendships started this way.

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