



# The Compassionate Friends

Offering friendship and understanding to bereaved parents

## WHEN A BROTHER OR SISTER DIES

*"I was just an average teenager; I had my friends and school activities. My family was just my family. Then the worst nightmare imaginable happened. My sister died."*

- Jennifer, age 17

In a world suddenly gone crazy, how can you keep your balance? How can you cope with something that is shattering to you as well as to those adults most important to you?

This brochure is meant to offer you some directions and some choices in order to help you find your way in a world that perhaps seems unfair and unpredictable.

You may have the same or very few of the emotions your other family members are showing.

### PLEASE REMEMBER:

Your grief is yours, not theirs.

Your grief is unique because your relationship with that brother or sister was different.

Your way of grieving is just as important; however you choose to express it, but see that you are not being destructive. (You don't need an aftermath of guilt right now).

Remember that, before this sad experience, there may have been times when you felt jittery, hyper, or depressed, when you were nervous or worried about different situations. Grieving can be very much like those other times, but it may take longer to work through your feelings of loss or hurt.

### YOU MAY EXPERIENCE:

- Sleep disturbances;
- Tiredness or restlessness;
- Anger towards yourself, other people, God, even the one who died;
- Fear for your safety and those you care about;
- Feelings of rejection from parents, who are distracted, irritable or inattentive;
- Trouble paying attention and remembering;
- Mood swings between feeling very good and bad;
- Guilt about what you did or did not do for your brother or sister, for enjoying yourself, and even just for surviving.

You may feel emotions such as those listed above at different times, maybe even long after your brother's or sister's death. It can be frightening to suddenly think about such things. But other young people, just like you, have had a brother or sister die. They struggled through feelings very much like yours. They have survived and so can you.

*"But I feel so strange sometimes. I can't talk to my folks. I just keep my feelings to myself so I won't upset them anymore. They're so overprotective now. They probably wouldn't let me out of their sight if they knew how I felt. Mostly I just want to get away with my friends, but they aren't the same anymore either. Sometimes they pity me. I hate feeling so mixed-up."*

It is hard to talk about emotions, especially to parents. If you are concerned about upsetting either your mother or your father and feel your friends won't understand, seek out a sympathetic listener (relative, teacher, counsellor, minister, or another bereaved brother or sister). It may surprise you how much they can help you through this ordeal.

You are faced with a situation for which you have had little or no preparation. At an age when just growing up can be a struggle, this experience may make you feel like a little kid again. Don't be ashamed! Even adults need to hug and be hugged and cared for when they are hurting.

Sometimes you might think you have to fill that empty place left in your family. You don't have to be just like your sister or brother – we are all unique and have good points that are worthwhile.

**It's okay...**

To cry and feel depressed. You've lost a great deal. If the feelings get too scary or overwhelming, find a caring friend (no matter what age) to talk it out.

**It's okay...**

To want to copy some of your brother or sister's habits and interests, but be yourself, too.

**It's okay...**

To live "in the past" for a while. It is one way to keep alive the memory of your brother or sister. However, you have a life too – one that should be lived to the fullest.

**It's okay...**

To have fun and enjoy life, to laugh again.

**It's okay...**

To forgive yourself for the fights, arguments and mean things that you said or did to your brother or sister.

**It's okay...**

To go on living.

But it is NOT okay to ease your pain and hurt –

- by using drugs or alcohol. It will take longer to accept the hurt. It only can hide the pain, not heal it.
- by acting out your frustration with reckless driving or skipping school.
- by doing things out of anger to hurt others because you hurt so much yourself.
- by experimenting with sex just to get close to someone.
- by protecting your parents by not letting them know what is bothering you.
- by being the scapegoat or bad guy so you'll appear tough.
- by dropping the things that once meant so much to you.

It is rough but hang in there, at least for a reasonable length of time. Try to keep life as mellow as possible with no drastic changes. Grieving takes a lot of energy.

Commit yourself to getting through the emotional and physical work of grieving – of saying goodbye to your brother or sister. Other young people have found keeping a diary, prayer, poetry, sports, music and art as positive outlets for their feelings.

Also, share your grief experiences – if you can – with other bereaved siblings. Their stories of how they coped can give you choices to consider and hope for your own future.

You and your family are chained by all the sadness you have experienced. The strain each of you feel is common and usually decreases with time. Each family member has his own timetable for coming to terms with his feelings. Be patient with each other and these very individual needs.

Tragedies as well as successes faced daily can strengthen you for tomorrow. Allow the emotional bond you once had with your brother or sister to have a positive effect on your future. The choice is yours.

*While this brochure focuses on bereaved siblings, young people who were relatives or close friends to the one who died may also find it helpful.*

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