

## A New You with Your Siblings This Holiday Season

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

"I just dread Thanksgiving. I know I have to go home; my parents look forward to seeing their grandchildren. And, my kids love playing with their cousins whom they see only once or twice a year. But I hate it. Why? Because I have to sit in the same room with bossy, nasty-mouthed Brenda. I have had fantasies of mailing my sister an envelop with a flu virus so she'd be too sick to come. My brother, Daryl, is just annoying and condescending, but I can manage that."

There is a six year spread between Charlene, the youngest, and Brenda, the oldest. While the three of them got along as well as most squabbling siblings when children, now in their adult years, these earlier annoyances have crystallized – with sharp edges.

Charlene's complaints about Brenda: She is bossy; always telling me what I should have done, how she did something better. She's critical of everything and everyone. She's just a mean, bitter person.

Charlene's complaints about Daryl: He basically ignores everything I have to say. He shows no interest in me, and never says anything personal about himself. If he condescends to speak to me at all, it's to brag about some new project he's completed for work.

Now, you may not be surprised to hear that Brenda and Daryl have their own complaints about their siblings.

Brenda's complaints about Charlene: She's such a baby. She whines over everything. I hate how she always begs for my approval – as if I'm some god who hands out awards. I have enough trouble living my own life without trying to pat her on the back all the time.

Brenda's complaints about Daryl: He spouts these platitudes that drives me nuts. It's as if he's the holy god who condescends to join us mortals for a family meal.

Daryl's complaints about Charlene and Brenda: Charlene's such a baby, but when she Brenda go at it, I ignore them – just like I used to when we were kids. They are so caught up in themselves, they couldn't care less about my life.

Interesting, isn't it, how they see themselves so differently than how their siblings see them. (Sound familiar?)

Siblings' different views of each other usually make sense when you look back to their childhood. Today's conflicts may appear to be caused by something from their adult years, but if you had had a different childhood, you would react to your siblings differently now.

So, let's look at these three siblings from this perspective.

As children, Brenda was put in charge; their widowed mother had to work and left instructions for Brenda to get the young ones ready for school, do their homework, clean the house, and have dinner on the table when she came home. If these tasks weren't done, mother blamed Brenda. So, being a resourceful young child, she did her best to get her brother and sister to obey her. Hence, they saw her as bossy.

Charlene was the youngest; she was born just after their father died. Mother cradled her grief through cuddling her newest baby. Charlene was always "my baby." Not surprisingly, Brenda was resentful – she did the work and the baby got the attention. Younger siblings, though, long to be accepted by the older ones, so not surprisingly, Charlene always strived for her older sister's affection.

Daryl, as the only boy in a household of females, learned to stay out of the way. As soon as possible, he found a world with his friends and sports. When mother and Brenda or Brenda and Charlene would argue, he'd go to his room or, if possible, leave the house.

What these three don't understand now is that their early history actually was a bond – surviving without a father and with a too often absent mother. Yet, in adulthood, the only thing they hold on to is what they never got – from mother, father, nor each other.

When you read their complaints about each other, which sibling(s) did you feel more sympathy or connection with? Now, reread their complaints. Does it make more sense? Does it change how you feel about any of them? Does it give you an idea about your siblings?

I call this Switching Shoes: getting inside the shoes of your siblings and seeing, from their perspective, how they got to be so annoying. Chances are, your siblings weren't born hateful, bitter, manipulative, whiny, isolated, or whatever; they developed as a result of their early years, as did you.

Your problems with them today are really only grown up versions of your early hurts and resentments. By switching shoes, you can see how they developed these annoying traits. It can also illuminate how your traits inflame their behaviors that you hate. These insights can help you maneuver around the landmines when you are together.

Think about this before your next family get-together. Prepare yourself: be aware how you annoy them and how they always get under your skin. Then, get inside their shoes; by looking back to your childhood, their behavior will make more sense. And, you'll see how they hold their old image of you. **If you don't fall into what they expect, they may react differently towards you.** If you are open to it, this really can give you ideas for how to avoid the old entanglements.

If you do this well, you may be surprised at how you can actually enjoy the holidays together.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

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