

## Siblings Can Fill in the Missing Pieces

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

"You want me to do WHAT!" he screamed. "Bring my sister into a therapy session? You got to be kidding."

Robert has come to therapy because, "I've got a dark block inside that is holding me back at work."

To look at Robert, he's a happily married man, father of four children with a successful career in marketing. However, inside, he feels like a failure. His marketing projects are good, but never great. He agrees with his boss; he doesn't deserve to be promoted to Vice President.

"I have these great ideas, but they can't get past this dark black wall. It's been like this as far back as I can remember."

"If you've lived with this wall all these years," I inquire, "what spurs you to get help for it now?"

"I'm beginning to feel desperate. Maybe it's because I just turned 45. In five years, I'll be 50. What have I done with my life? I just assumed things would get better; yet, somehow, a lot of years have passed. When I turned 45, it hit me like a bolt: I don't have a lot more time. If there's a chance to fix this, I'd better do it now."

There is something powerful about these middle years, when you can look back and also ahead. Like Robert, people often are motivated to deal with an on-going problem as they approach or pass a birthday marking a decade or a half decade.

I ask Robert to tell me more about his wall.

"I'm not sure how to describe it. It's like I can walk down a street, but then boink! Something keeps me from going beyond. It's dark and thick."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"Huh?" Later, he tells me he didn't understand why I asked about his sister then, but since I was the therapist, he just answered the question.

"One sister. She's two years older."

Before I can ask about the quality of their relationship, he adds, "We haven't had anything to do with each other for many years. She lives in California. I used to call her occasionally, but she's oh, um...she always has to be right."

"You know how men are always supposed to want to fix things," he continues, "well she always told me what I was doing wrong and what I should have done -- even if she didn't know anything about what I was talking about."

"What does she do with her life?" I ask.

"She's probably happily married. She stayed home and raised her three kids. I don't know what she does now that they're older."

"Do you think she has that wall, too?"

He shrugs, totally uninterested in even thinking about Rebecca.

My next question makes him sit up with a bolt. "What do you think about inviting her here to therapy with you?"

That's when he screams, "You want me to do WHAT!"

I quickly explain. "It's possible that since she knew you as a child, and she was raised by the same parents, she may have some insights that could help you understand this wall."

He continues, "We're so defensive with each other. How could that possibly be helpful?"

But before I can respond, he adds, "She'd never come, anyway."

"If you said you needed her to help you get better, to fix a serious problem, you don't think she'd come? You said she's your big sister, and she always tries to fix your problems."

He fiddles with his wedding ring. "I don't know. I suppose I could ask, but I'm sure she'll say no."

"I've discovered that you can ask siblings to come to a therapy session in a way that they'll be assured to say no...."

"Like, my therapist says you've got to come?"

We laugh. "You know," he's still smiling, "it just might work." .

Rebecca comes – with only a slight hesitation, "I'm willing to do anything to help my baby brother. I've been worried about him for a long time."

Robert is aghast. "You have?"

"Even back in high school. Don't you remember Dad telling you not to feel bad if I was smarter than you?"

"It had something to do with his older brother being smarter and his always feeling dumb, right? I knew he meant to help me not feel jealous that you were so smart, but it only made me feel like he was saying I was dumb."

"I always cringed when I heard him say that. OH!" she exclaims. "I just remembered something. I must have been in high school; I wrote myself a letter reminding me to never be smarter than you; I didn't want to make you feel bad. You were a boy, I wrote, so it was more important for you to be smart."

"Is that why you've been so resentful of me all these years?" He gets the connection.

"I bet it is."

"I thought I had forgotten Dad's comments, but maybe I hadn't. I'm remembering my first semester in college when I lied to you about getting all A's. I never got such good grades again!"

Rebecca looks shocked. "Were you trying to be less smart than me?"

He turns to me. "Oh, wow. That was when I first felt my wall! Right after I got that straight A report card." Turning back to his sister, looking as if he wants to jump up and down in his seat, "You got all A's, but one B. That's it! I built the wall around myself to let you be smarter."

She quietly confesses, "I intentionally got that B."

Oh how sad," his excitement replaced by a huge sigh. "Dad's comment was intended to be helpful, but it really set us up for ..."

She finishes his sentence, "a negative competition."

"I've wasted so many years; we both have."

In the next few months, they begin rebuilding their relationship, prodding each other to take more chances. He encourages her to go back to college for an MA in fine arts; she talks to him about his marketing ideas, pulling out of him his walled off creativity,.

Two months later, his boss is astonished at the change in Robert. He gives him a major contract. "And if it goes well," Robert reports, "he says I'll finally get that VP promotion."

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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