

Ghosts from Siblings' Childhood Can Cause Problems Around Parents' Death

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Some people are lucky to have loving memories of the way brothers and sisters pulled together around a parent's death. For others, instead of loving memories, they recall only fury at their siblings.

What makes the difference? Why are some siblings supportive to each other while others rage? When grief at losing a parent gets mixed with siblings' bad feelings towards each other – remnants from childhood – eruptions can occur. Whether open rage or subtle hostility, their unresolved feelings prevent them from the warmth that sharing their grief would offer.

The following story about the Shore siblings – Tamara, Saul, Ben, and Dan – on the evening of their mother's death demonstrates how devastating unresolved feelings can be.

"We always thought it would be her heart, diabetes, or even her blood pressure that would kill her," sighs Tamara.

"I know," Ben flatly responds. "Who would have thought it would be something as ordinary as pneumonia."

Hannah Shore's children, all in their 40s, are sitting in her living room the evening she died. She died quite suddenly; they look shell shocked. The funeral is tomorrow.

"Pneumonia is deadly in the elderly, though," says Dan.

"But, it wouldn't have killed her if we had a better aide, someone who knew the signs and got her to Dr. Libby sooner," says Saul who covers his veiled attack by picking up a picture of their parents that's sitting on the table next to his chair.

"Are you blaming me for that aide?" questions Tamara. "Just because I put an ad in the paper and I found her? I don't recall your offering to help me find someone for Mom."

Ben adds to the complaints, "I said we should have gone through Jewish Family Service. What's the point of being Jewish if we don't support them?"

"That's a ridiculous way to choose an agency." Tamara snaps back. But, if you recall, I did call them. I called lots of agencies, but you guys didn't want to spend the money."

"So now you're blaming me for Mom's death because I'm cheap." Saul jumps up, as if ready for a fight.

"I didn't say it, but if the shoe fits...."

WHOA! These siblings are saying horribly nasty things to each other. Do they really think one of them is to blame for their mother's death? Probably not, but by blaming someone else, they may ease any guilt they have about their relationship with her, or counter their helplessness at being able to save her.

If siblings get along well before their parent dies, they grieve together, pull together, and provide mutual support. They don't blame each other. If they need to project blame to ease their pain, they might blame the doctor for not telling them to bring their mother in for an earlier appointment; or blame the hospital nurse for not having come quicker when they rang for her.

For siblings who don't get along well in adulthood, the added stress of a parent's death can cause unresolved feelings from childhood to resurface. Hostility and accusations replace reasoned and supportive comments – as we see with the Shores.

The Shore siblings did not spend much time together once they graduated high school, went to college, got married, and settled separately around the country. Family gatherings were always marked by antagonism between Saul and Ben, with Dan friendly but distant, and Tamara feeling burdened – about everything.

Using this brief exchange between the siblings from the night Mrs. Shore died, we can speculate about the origins of the resentments they have carried for more than 40 years

Tamara, the oldest and the only girl, feels the same resentment now over having the responsibility for their mother in her old age as "I always had. Mom always turned to me, not to one of you precious boys. You were all princes, not born to clean house and cook dinner on the days Mom worked."

Her lifelong sense of being in charge, we can speculate, made it natural for her to be the one to seek an aid for their mother. She didn't ask her brothers to help; she then felt resentful they left it to her.

Continuing with our speculation, Ben's resentment of his older brother Saul for being too cheap to use Jewish Family Service goes way back. "Even as a child, you were always cheap," he chides. "I remember every Hanukkah you always got me a little nothing, never anything I wanted or could play with. It made me so angry because I used to think real hard about what exactly would please you."

Dan said seven words that night, seven neutral words: "Pneumonia is deadly in the elderly, though." He attacked no one and no one responded to him. As the youngest, perhaps, he wanted to be liked by both of his quarreling brothers; he couldn't risk taking sides so he stayed non-committal. Thus, perhaps, he grew up feeling disconnected from all of his siblings and basically being ignored by them.

Granted, there isn't enough information to do more than guess at the origin of the siblings' hostility that erupted the night of Mrs. Shore's death. However, with a parent's death, siblings' unresolved feelings towards that parent will be mixed with a myriad of unresolved feelings towards each other.

If you understand the multiple emotions at such a stressful time, you can learn to by-pass or cut through any nastiness you feel from a sibling. Like a good scout, Be Prepared: Recognize your issues with your siblings AND recognize their's with you. At the moment of a potentially bad exchange, here are three tips to help avoid an explosion.

1. Remember that grief intensifies unresolved feelings between you and your siblings.

2. Therefore, side-step any provocation. Change the subject. Since it takes two to have an argument, refuse to participate.
3. Separate the issues: acknowledge your siblings' feelings towards you and offer to discuss them at a later (be specific) time; then get back to the issue at hand. Make sure you keep your promise to talk at the pre-set time.

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