

Problems with a Younger Sister May have Old Roots

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Is your younger sister angry at you and you don't know why? Does it feel irrational? Like, she always has some complaint, but they make no real sense. Maybe, she doesn't even have a complaint; maybe she's just mean and nasty to you.

Sally adored her older sister. (This could be the story of two brothers or a brother and sister.) There was a 4 year gap between them, but Marietta was always respectful towards her. When she was little, Marietta played with her, let her win with cards, joined in childish doll house games. When Marietta got into high school, she let Sally tag along when she went out with friends – not all the time, but enough so that Sally felt a part of Marietta's life.

But, when Sally was just starting high school herself, Marietta went away to college. True, she was only an hour away, but it made no difference if across the country. Sally lost her big sister.

Here's how she describe it. "I knew she was going away, but I had no idea what a gap that left in my heart. Mom and dad went on as if no problem, but I felt totally abandoned. I couldn't come home and ask her how to handle a problem with a teacher or friend. I couldn't get her opinion of how an outfit looked when I went on my first date. Sure, I could ask my mother, but ...she's a mother!

"But, I tried to calm myself by reminding me Marietta would be home for Thanksgiving. She had already said she was going to her roommate's home for Columbus Day weekend, so I put a lot of stock in seeing her at the end of Thanksgiving. I actually counted the days. And, when she got home that Tuesday night, I was sitting by the door waiting for her. She ran in, patted me on the head – what was I, a dog? Dropped her bags in her bedroom, then raced out again, yelling she was off to Brenda's, 'Don't wait up for me, Mom, I'll probably be home real late.'

"Mom! What about me? She didn't even mention me. It was like you felt taken for granted, as if 'Good ole Sally.' I'd always be there, so she just took advantage of having me around. But, I felt like she totally forgot about me. I saw so little of her over that weekend. And, Christmas was worse.

"I got to expect her not to be there for me."

But, years later, Sally has little awareness of the repercussions of how she adjusted – by not expecting Marietta to be there for her. Now, in their 40s, Marietta can not understand why Sally is so distant.

According to Sally, "We don't really live that far away. We have kids not too different in ages. When I suggest we get together, she always has excuses. It feels like she is just avoiding me. Yet, when I ask her if there's a problem, she brushes me off. I feel real hurt; I love her and want to be close, but she seems to be avoiding me."

Actually, Marietta is probably luckier than other older sisters, because Sally just brushes her off. So many women talk about their younger sister being mean, starting fights with them, complaining about everything they do, or saying nothing they do is good enough.

When this happens, the older sister is probably getting repercussions from so many years ago. What makes it more even complicated is that neither the older nor the younger is aware of any connection between back then and now. Most youngers don't actively recall feeling pushed aside or neglected, yet they carry within them scabs that bleed out decades later. And, most olders have no idea how much their growing up and moving on with their life, what is developmentally appropriate, hurt their younger sister.

Is there any hope for repairing the relationship? Is it fixable? Yes, especially if the siblings used to be close in their early years. But, it's not easy and may not be a quick fix. Each needs to understand – from the other's perspective – what happened way back when – that has tendrils poking up today, seeing each

other through the lens childhood. Then, with that understand, the issues that plague you today, are easier to mend.

Actually, it is because situations like this for Sally and Marietta, and many other situations between adult siblings in conflict, that I established Unique Retreats for Siblings.

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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