

Silent Grief: The Impact of Losing a Sibling and Pathways to Healthy Healing

Ana Mena, PsyD
Safe Baby, Safe Child Conference
October 24, 2025

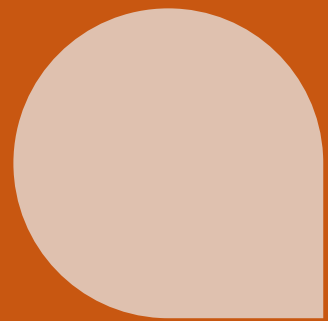


Understanding Grief and Healing

- Grief is unique for everyone; it's important to recognize that each person's feelings and experiences are valid and personal.
- Healing is a journey that requires time and support; it's essential to seek help and embrace the process of recovery.

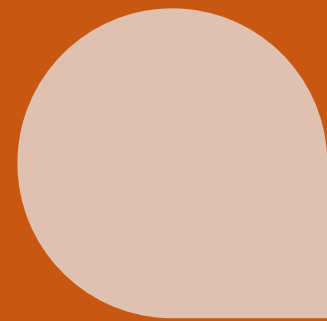


Understanding the Stages of Grief



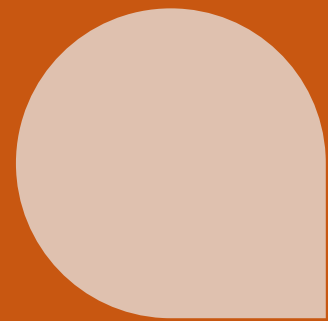
Shock and Denial

The initial response often includes **difficulty accepting** the loss.



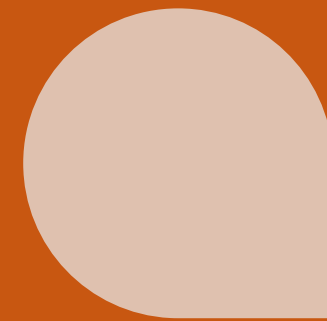
Anger

This stage may bring **feelings of frustration** and helplessness over the loss.



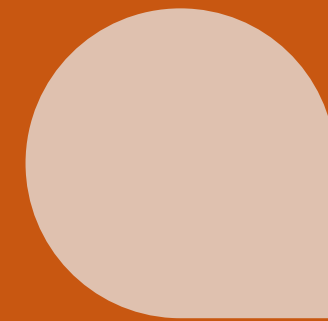
Bargaining

Individuals often seek ways to **reverse the loss** or lessen the pain.



Depression

This stage may occur when the reality of the loss sinks in, leading to sadness and withdrawal



Acceptance

This stage involves coming to terms with the loss and finding **a new normal** in life.



Understanding Grief: The Sibling Connection

- Losing a sibling can create a profound sense of **silent/invisible grief**.
- Children and adolescents may be overlooked as attention shifts to grieving parents.
- This presentation focuses on how surviving siblings process grief, risk factors for negative behaviors, and strategies to support healing.



Sibling Loss Includes:

- Neonatal & newborn deaths — children may not fully understand but sense family's pain.
- Childhood deaths — surviving siblings often feel guilt, anger, or confusion.
- Adolescent deaths — may trigger identity struggles, behavioral issues, and risk -taking.

Research shows sibling loss increases risk of:

Depression and anxiety
Academic difficulties

Risky behaviors
(substance use,
aggression)



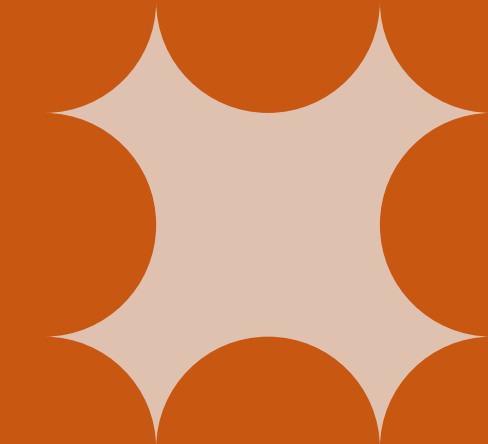
How Siblings Experience Grief:



Young Children (ages 3-7)

Magical thinking (believe they caused the death)

Regression (bedwetting, clinginess)



School -age (ages 7-12)

Sadness, anger, shame, somatic complaints

Difficulty concentrating at school

Teens (ages 13-18)

Identity disruption

Risk-taking, withdrawal, or emotional numbing

Desire to “protect parents” by hiding grief



Complicating Factors

- Lack of open communication in the family
- Parent's overwhelming grief → child feels invisible
- Cultural taboos about discussing death
- Developmental stage (younger children lack language to express feelings)



Common Expressions of Unprocessed Grief

- Behavioral problems: aggression, defiance, withdrawal
- Academic decline or perfectionism
- Risk behaviors: substance use, unsafe sexual activity
- Anxiety and somatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches)
- Survivor's guilt: "Why am I alive and they're not?"



Protective Factors

- Open and honest communication about the death
- Maintaining routines and structure
- Creating space for children's grief (rituals, memorials, memory boxes)
- Supportive adults validating emotions
- Peer connections (support groups, friends)



Strategies for Healthy Expression



1. Normalize Emotions

2. Teach children that sadness, anger, & confusion are normal .

3. Creative Outlets :

- Art, journaling, music, play therapy
- Encourage symbolic expression of grief

4. Grief -Sensitive Language :

- Avoid euphemisms (“sleeping,” “gone away”)
- Provide clear, age-appropriate explanations

5. Family Rituals :

- Involve siblings in memorial services
- Allow them to create keepsakes or letters

6. Counseling & Support Groups :

- Age-specific grief groups
- School-based counseling

Role of Adults

- Parents: balance own grief with supporting surviving children
- Educators: watch for academic/behavioral changes
- Clinicians: provide trauma -informed interventions
- Faith & Community Leaders: create safe spaces for remembrance and support



Preventing Negative Outcomes

- Early recognition of unprocessed grief
- Building resilience through:
 - Emotional literacy
 - Healthy coping strategies
 - Strengthening family bonds
- Intervention reduces risk of depression, substance abuse, and self -destructive behaviors





Case Example:

A 10-year-old boy lost his baby sister at birth . He began acting out at school, hitting classmates . After grief-focused play therapy, journaling exercises, and being included in family memorial activities, his aggression decreased, and he began expressing sadness through writing instead of acting out .

Key Takeaways:

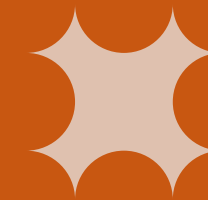
“When a sibling dies, part of the surviving child’s identity is altered. Healing begins when we acknowledge their grief and give them the tools to express it.”



Sibling loss is profound,
often overlooked trauma.

Children process grief
differently depending on
age.

Lack of expression
increases risk for negative
behaviors.



Adults play a vital role in
helping siblings find
healthy ways to grieve.



References:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. Supporting the Family After the Death of a Child (Clinical report). Pediatrics. 2023.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Sibling Death and Childhood Traumatic Grief (family handout). NCTSN.
- Brooten D, Youngblut JM, et al. Adolescents' experiences 7 and 13 months following a sibling death in the NICU/ PICU/ED. (PMC article). 2017.
- Liebertpub systematic review. A Systematic Review of Grief Experiences of Children Who... 2025. (Synthesizes recent primary research on sibling bereavement).
- Hanauer C, et al. Meta-analysis: Efficacy of psychosocial interventions for bereaved children/adolescents (2024). (Intervention effectiveness).
- Youngblut JA, Brooten D. Parents' report of child's response to sibling's death. 2013.
- Sharp, KMH. Grief and Growth in Bereaved Siblings. 2018.
- Practical family resources: CHOC Health article "Helping a child grieve the death of their sibling" (2022).



Thank You!

Q&A

ZERO TO THREE & MINDCARE
PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES PRESENTS



DC:0-5™

Clinical Training

2-Day Early Childhood Mental Health

Training by Ana Mena, PsyD



October 30, 2025
October 31, 2025



Four Points by Sheraton
5101 California Ave
Bakersfield, CA 93309



09:00am-4:00pm
09:00am-3:00pm



What You'll Learn:

- ✓ Learn developmental & culturally responsive diagnosis
- ✓ Hands-on practice with DC:0-5™
- ✓ Empirically supported system of diagnostic classification with children

Click Here to
Register Now!

ONLY \$499



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

