SIBLING BEREAVEMENT

2nd Edition

Helping Children Cope with Loss

ANN FARRANT

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by

Ann Farrant

Second Edition

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In memory of Rosamund Sarah Farrant

(31 August 1962 to 23 January 1966)

About the Author

Ann Farrant was educated at Norwich High School and trained as a journalist with the Norfolk News Company (now Archant). She is the mother of five daughters, one of whom died at the age of three, and the aftermath of whose death prompted Ann's book *Sibling Bereavement: Helping Children Cope with Loss*. While raising her family Ann worked as a free-lance reporter, feature writer and book reviewer for newspapers and magazines. After her marriage ended in 1985 she turned to television news reporting, later becoming one of the producers of BBC Look East.

For many years Ann was a fund-raiser for the Children's Research Fund which helped finance research into children's illnesses and diseases. In the 1970s she was a founder member of Cruse Bereavement Care in Norwich. She has also worked as a fund-raiser for the children's charity UNICEF.

On a lighter side, in 1973 she helped to launch a theatre newspaper Encore for the Theatre Royal in Norwich, under its celebrated general manager Dick Condon. She was honorary press officer on the steering committee which set up Norwich Puppet Theatre in 1980.

As a mature student at the University of East Anglia, from 2000 to 2002, Ann achieved an MA in Life Writing, for which her dissertation on the writer Amelia Opie (1769-1853) won two literary awards. Over the next few years, when time permitted, she continued researching her subject at libraries and galleries at home and abroad. Her biography *Amelia Opie: The Quaker Celebrity* was published in December 2014 by JJG Publishing.

About Sibling Bereavement

The emotional effect of losing a brother or sister can result in severe trauma for a child. Many children find it difficult to mourn a lost sibling, and parents can have a hard time helping their children while they themselves are mourning.

Written from personal experience, this book insists that there is no 'right' way for parents to behave towards surviving children. It looks at the many and various effects of sibling bereavement as it bears upon the whole family: the repercussions of lack of support; surviving children who act as comforters to their parents; guilt; projections of anger; unresolved conflicts; consequent family relationships; and children who can't or won't mourn.

The author uses real-life case studies to illustrate her points, and clarification of the issues involved is provided throughout by the views of an experienced psychologist who has worked with disturbed children. While remaining non-prescriptive, the book is a guide to achieving a 'healthy' mourning process, enabling individuals to move forward, even though life can never be the same again.

Introduction - Background to the book

Writing this book has been a very personal journey. It was prompted by experiences in my own family following the sudden death of my first-born child, a daughter called Rosamund, aged three years and five months. At the time of her death my second daughter was only fourteen months old and I was seven months pregnant with my third child, another daughter. The anguish of Rosamund's loss was intense. Relatives and friends did their best to comfort me, but I felt hammered into the ground by the weight of the grief. However, there was still my surviving daughter to care for and the imminent arrival of another child to take into account. Somehow I found the strength to carry on living, albeit in a state of great distress.

If I had known then what I know now, perhaps I would have tried to manage things differently. But shock and grief alter one's normal perceptions and the best that most people can do during traumas of this kind is to muddle through. A bereaved parent finds it difficult to function at all, let alone take in what is going on for other people. Lucy, my remaining daughter, appeared to be all right as far as I could tell. The new baby, Charlotte, arrived safely and life began to assume some sort of normality – whatever that means in the context of the aftermath of bereavement.

I had read somewhere of the shock experienced by children on discovering, by chance, that there had been another child in the family, a child who had died. So I made a point of talking to my four daughters – Lucy and

Charlotte were followed by Emma and Katy – about their older sister Rosamund. All this came later when, as I perceived it, they were old enough to understand. What I did not realize was that Lucy had not been given space in which to come to terms with her own bereavement at the time that it happened. The prevailing wisdom at that time, the late 1960s, was that small children were unlikely to be affected by major events such as death. I believe I thought this to be true. Or perhaps I just wanted it to be.

In my own defence, I have to say that I did not know how to begin to explain Rosamund's sudden disappearance. Lucy didn't ask; how could she? At a pre-verbal stage, it is not easy for a young child to communicate the complex thoughts and fears stirred up by being in a household plunged in gloom. I can't remember if I attempted to offer any kind of explanation even on a simple level. I rather think I said nothing and tried to appear 'normal'. But of course I was nothing of the kind. I had changed. Her father had changed. The whole family set-up had changed.

The crunch came when Lucy was fifteen. She had been admitted to hospital for the removal of an inflamed appendix and was put in an adult ward where there were some quite unpleasant cases. During Lucy's stay there – longer than expected because she developed complications – there was news of another death in the family, that of a second cousin of whom she was particularly fond, and her grandfather was taken into intensive care following a heart attack. It was a worrying time, but, even so, Lucy appeared unduly anxious, both about her own health and about what was going on for everybody else.

Soon after her return from hospital we spent a family holiday in Scotland. It was a very welcome break for us all, but Lucy still seemed very fragile emotionally. It was during this fortnight away from home that she started to communicate in a 'baby' voice. Not all the time, but every now and then, she would hold a conversation in which she assumed 'baby talk'. It was mildly amusing at first, but irritating too. Certainly, at that stage, I didn't attach any particular significance to it.

Matters came to a head one Sunday lunchtime. Lucy failed to respond to a call to join the family at lunch and when I went up to her bedroom she launched into her 'baby' talk. I lost my temper. She burst into tears. The crying was out of all proportion to my having snapped at her. She was weeping as if overwhelmed by some deep grief, the sort of anguished wailing I had succumbed to after Rosamund died. Instinctively and suddenly, I knew there must be a connection.

As soon as lunch was over and the others had been persuaded to go out for the afternoon I settled down with Lucy. I wasn't at all sure what to do, but just followed my instinct to ease her pain. She seemed so vulnerable, so defenceless and small. I held her close and started by asking her to put on her 'baby' voice. Then I asked her what the matter was. I said I was there for her, that I cared, that I knew she was in sorrow. I went on holding her and making soothing noises, very much in the way that I would try to comfort a crying baby.

It took some time before Lucy began to speak, When she did, she had somehow moved herself back in time to the

period following her sister's death. It was a remarkable and harrowing experience. Lucy became deeply distressed. She clung to me as if her life depended on it and poured out a torrent of grief and woe which seemed unending. All the while I went on holding her and reassuring her of my support. In effect, she was reliving the sheer horror of the sudden loss of the much-loved older sister who had cuddled and loved her, played silly games, made her laugh, been her first friend. Out too came enormous anxiety about what had happened, fear that somehow it might have been her fault, fear that she too would disappear, fear that Mummy and Daddy might suddenly go away. It was heart-breaking stuff, but strangely reassuring too, for I had often worried about Lucy's volatile emotional state and her dramatic reactions to minor upsets, without ever really understanding that she was suffering somewhere deep inside from the effect of losing her big sister. So many unanswered questions were suddenly made clear. So much catching up could now be done. At last there was a chance for Lucy to go through the process of mourning which had been denied her.

It was a daunting prospect and one which I knew needed expert help. Lucy started counselling sessions with a psychotherapist, an excellent woman, who was able to guide her through the complex business of coming to terms with the bereavement and its aftermath. It was a long and painful process, but very healing too. Lucy and I also had a great deal of work to do, putting together the kissing pieces, sharing our grief. It wasn't always easy, for I had moved on from that terrible time and it was distressing to stir it up again. Painful, too, to realise how unknowing I had been of my little daughter's grief at the

time of her sister's death. If only we could have mourned together at the outset. If only I had been able to fund some way of understanding her fears and reassuring her. I still don't know how this could have been achieved, given the very young age she was at the time and with so few verbal skills.

During this time I thought, too, about the death of my older brother and its impact on my life. The significant difference, comparing my experience with Lucy's, was that I was an adult when the death occurred. My brother and I were both in our twenties at the time and neither of us had been living at home with our parents for several years. The old family was already dispersed. I was part of a new family, with husband and young children, and, although I sought to comfort my stricken parents, I was not part of their day-to-day struggle to work through the bereavement. More importantly, as an adult, I was able to make choices about how I dealt with my own loss.

In our discussions Lucy and I often wondered how it must be for other children bereaved of siblings. Was their age a significant factor? Were they given space in which to grieve? How had the death affected them, both at the time it happened and in the years following? We felt it would be helpful to hear some other case histories. This book has arisen out of those discussions.

It has not been my intention to lay down any formulas about how bereaved parents should behave towards their surviving children. There is no 'right' way. Each family, each death, each survivor, is different. Rather, I have let the victims of sibling bereavement tell their own stories

and share their conclusions about the experience, in the hope that what they have to say may provide some insight into this emotional minefield.

I am very grateful to all those people who agreed to be interviewed about their often very painful memories of sibling loss and its aftermath. It was a rewarding and enriching experience to hear their stories firsthand, and I have been greatly encouraged by their interest in and support for the project. Some interviewees asked to remain anonymous; their names have been changed. In particular I should like to thank Betty Rathbone, BA, MA, MPhil, AFBPsS, a consultant clinical psychologist, who answered all my questions about the likely effects of sibling bereavement, and my four daughters, who not only encouraged me to write this book but also contributed to it.

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Preface

I began my research for Sibling Bereavement in the early 1990s. The idea of writing something about the effect on children of losing a sibling had been with me for some time. When my firstborn daughter died in 1966 it would have been helpful if there had been such a book available to explore the likely effects of her death on my second daughter and, indeed, on the daughter as yet unborn. Since the book was published in 1998 there has been some serious research into the effect of trauma to the mother on the foetus in the womb. None of this was known to me at the time of my research, nor was I aware of the childhood bereavement charity Winston's Wish, which was being set up in Gloucestershire in 1992. I believe this was the first such charity of this kind in the UK; several others – such as Nelson's Journey in Norwich – have been set up since then. This is all to the good. When I started to explore the effects of sibling bereavement I assumed – as indeed was the case – that there would be people around who had been affected by the death of a sibling and who might be willing to share their experiences with me. I believed that such 'case histories' would be relevant and helpful. The response to adverts in two national newspapers seeking people to recall such events was tremendous. Nowadays, of course, one would go onto one of the social networks with such a request!

CHAPTER 1 - Bereavement counselling

'Bereavement counselling' is a comparatively recent term. We usually read about it in the context of some headline-making tragedy. Most press coverage of the M40 mini-bus accident in November 1993, in which twelve schoolchildren died, carried the information that fellow pupils were being offered this service. In May 1994, many newspaper reports of the death in County Tyrone of a teenage girl who killed herself a few days after a close friend had committed suicide included comments from counsellors who spoke of the trauma of loss, especially for adolescents, and the need for skilled help in coming to terms with it. More recently, the murder of sixteen young children at a Dunblane school focused media attention once more on the topic of counselling bereaved youngsters.

It is good that society is recognizing that the tragic deaths of these young people will have a profound effect on their peer group, who will therefore need some expertise in helping them to deal with the aftermath. But is as much care and attention always given to children who suffer bereavement in a less public way, especially when they lose a sibling?

It has long been recognized that those who suffer the loss of someone close to them need to work through the mourning process. In these days of support groups and counselling services there are numerous sources of help for the bereaved. However, the vast majority appear to be for adults; for example, Cruse Bereavement Care for the

widowed, the Compassionate Friends for bereaved parents. But what about bereaved children? More particularly, what about children who lose a sibling? In most cases when a child dies, the parents become the main cause for concern. No matter how inadequate they feel, no matter how daunting the prospect of trying to give comfort, most friends and relatives in such a situation do their best to rally round the stricken mother and father.

There's no denying that the parents need all the help they can get, but so, too, do the remaining siblings, and their needs are very often overlooked. If they are very young, the popular assumption is that they are of an age to be 'untouched by the grief', as one well-meaning friend wrote to me of my fourteen-month-old daughter when her sister died. If they are older they may well be ignored or left to fend for themselves, as the adults around them cope with the shocking aftermath of the death of a child. In some cases they may try to take on the burden of attempting to comfort their parents, putting their own feelings on one side in the process. Or they may retreat from the whole emotionally charged atmosphere, acutely aware of the weight of sorrow, but terrified of saying or doing anything which might provoke even more distress and pain. Who can blame parents, suffering the anguish of losing a child, if their usual concerns for all their children are, albeit temporarily, completely shattered?

With hindsight, bereaved parents have spoken to me of their regrets that they 'mishandled' the situation as far as their surviving children were concerned. They have told me of how alone they felt, how inadequate. They have recalled that, on some level, they knew their offspring

needed help too, but they didn't have the emotional resources to deal with it.

Adults who lost a brother or sister many years ago have wept again as they shared with me the misery of seeing the family ripped apart by the tragedy and their sorrow that their own needs for comfort, information and reassurance were not met. They have described the long-term effects of the loss of a sibling, for the death of a child in a family alters that family's structure for ever. The missing youngster had his or her own role in the family, his or her own place. The gap can never be filled, but some surviving siblings may strive to do just that, carrying with them burdens of guilt, inadequacy and resentment.

When a brother or sister dies, the children left behind are mourning not only the loss of that siblings, but also the loss of the shape of the family. Their own position in the pecking order has changed and many find this something of an affront to their own sense of self. Coming to terms with being in a different place in the family is often extremely difficult.

Many of those bereaved of a brother or sister have managed to work through the grieving process at a later date and have found ways of coming to terms with their loss. Indeed, it would be wrong to suggest that lives are ruined by such experiences. It is never too late to start the mourning process. Betty Rathbone, a consultant clinical psychologist, who is head of a child and family centre dealing with disturbed youngsters, told me she believes that those who have endured loss in childhood and managed to work through it can develop into strong,

resilient adults, with an instinctive understanding of others' sorrows and a heightened sensitivity.

The important thing is to recognize the 'unfinished business' and to find some way of dealing with it. Ideally, of course, the business of grieving and working through its aftermath is best done at the time of the loss.