

THE LOSS OF A CHILD AND HOW IT EFFECTS A FAMILY

By

ABIGAIL IANNOTTI

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Dr. Cynthia Clark

And approved by

Dr. Cynthia Clark

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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By ABIGAIL IANNOTTI

Capstone Director:

Dr. Cynthia Clark

The death of a child can be one of the hardest things an individual will have to endure in their lifetime. Many parents and siblings struggle to understand why or how this type of tragedy occurs. Family dynamics play a big role in how the family mourns the loss of the child. The way the family copes depends on how they all communicate with one another. Every relationship is different and depending on the relationship is how an individual will feel after the loss of their child or the loss of their sibling. There is a constant push and pull for family members to understand one another and how they are feeling in these types of situations. It is up to the family in order to balance out their life to create a new normal without the child that has passed.

Introduction

The morning of June 11th, 2015 in Bennington, Vermont had begun as just a normal day. My father woke up about an hour before me to head to work. I woke up around 7:30 am because I had to be to work at 9:00 am. I went on a run before I got in the shower around 8:00 am. I dreaded going to work, it was one of those summer jobs that I was forced by my parents to have. It was the summer before my junior year of college and I couldn't wait to get back on campus in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I played colligate basketball and I was working really hard that summer to get in the best shape of my life.

I arrived at work that morning and the first thing I always did before my boss came in was check Facebook on my work computer. I remember scrolling through the Facebook feed and seeing a girl's post that I went to high school with. It said, "we (the town of Bennington) lost a beautiful soul today, may he rest in peace". I was eager to see who the individual was but there were no names on the post. I quickly forgot about the post when my boss barged in the door very frantically. I remembered that it was only going to be myself and him in the office that day. The other two women that worked in our office had a class field trip with their children. Being that my boss had no idea what he was doing (he just owned the insurance company), I knew it was going to be a long day.

Around 11:00 am, my stomach began to rumble and I was ready for lunch. I remember my boss saying that his wife was going to bring in lunch for the two of us at 11:30 am and she always brought the best food, so I was very excited. At around 11:35

am she came to the office with two bags of food and it smelt very good. At that point, I was on the phone with a customer and couldn't quite eat yet. She took the food upstairs and my boss quickly followed her. I had just hung up the phone with the customer when my cell phone began to vibrate. I did not have the number saved but I quickly recognized the number. It was my ex-boyfriend from high school and I was very confused as to why he would be calling me. We had not spoken for about 4 years prior to this. I did not answer the call but sent him a text message after saying "Hey, did you mean to call?" A minute later, my phone began to vibrate again, it was my ex-boyfriend. I answered quietly because we were not supposed to be on our personal phones during the workday. I asked what was going on. There was a pause. Then I heard sniffing on the other end. He then tried to get out the words "Are you ok?" I was confused as to why he would be asking me this. I replied with "yes I'm ok. Why wouldn't I be ok?" He followed with, "you haven't heard?" I said, "heard what?" There was another pause. He then said "There was an accident, it was your brother. It was Owen. I can't be the one to tell you." I was so confused. It was very hard to understand him because he was hysterical so I thought I didn't hear him correctly. I asked him to repeat himself and he said "he is gone Abby. Owen is gone." My heart began to race and I forcefully hung up the phone. So many thoughts were racing through my head. Was that Facebook post about my brother? Is he dead? How could this have happened?

I ran upstairs to my boss and his wife to tell them that something had happened to my brother and I had to leave. They were very understanding and supportive and told me to go. I quickly grabbed all of my belongings and ran to my car. Once I was in my car I began to drive while trying to get ahold of my father. My father was not answering so I

then started to call my brother's best friend/ roommate who had texted me earlier that morning asking for my father's number. He was not answering his phone either. I did not know where to go or what to do at this point. My phone finally started to vibrate and it was my father. I answered the phone with "dad, what is going on, where is Owen?" All I could hear on the other line was sobbing. Once he could form words he said "Abby, pull over." I was passing the Rite Aid pharmacy parking lot so I parked in there. I thought I was ready for him to tell me what was going on. It turns out I could have never been ready for the news I was about to receive. He said, "he is gone, Owen is gone. He is dead. He was in a car accident." Then my dad let out a howl. I could hear my aunt in the background trying to comfort him. They worked in the same office at the time. I did not know what to do or what to say. He told me to stay put and he would meet me wherever I was parked. The next thought that I had was my little sister. She was a freshman in high school and I did not want her to find out from someone in school or over social media. I told him that I would drive to my sister's school, which was about one mile away from where I was parked, and break the news to her.

This was the hardest thing that I ever had to do. My dad had called the school to warn them that I was coming and what I was coming to do. Our town is a very small town so all of the administrative staff was also hysterical when I arrived. They knew my brother very well. I met my sister in the counseling office where she was waiting with one of the school counselors. She had no idea what was going on or why I was there. I had her sit down and I explained that Owen, our older brother, who was only 23 years old had been involved in a car accident and has passed away from injuries that he had sustained in the accident. Watching my little sister fall to the ground in tears was

definitely very difficult. I am her older sister and I am supposed to be the one that protects her but there I was, the one breaking her heart with the news of our brother's death.

My parents met my sister and I at the high school where we all embraced one another. My parents at this point had been divorced for about 5 years and it was not a civil situation. In this situation, however, they came together to be there for my sister and I as well for each other. This was an extremely difficult concept for my parents to grasp because Owen was their first-born child. My brother was at the age of just 23 when he was involved in the tragic car accident that took his life. I was only 21 years old when this happened and my sister was only 16. After his accident, I had to watch my family mourn and suffer from the loss of Owen. Even today, four years later, my family and I have a very hard time accepting my brother's death. Our main goal is to do all that we can to keep his memory alive. We do this through different sporting events and create scholarships that are in his name but we still do not feel as if it is enough. We as a family want the younger generation to realize how fragile this life can be and if we can stop something as tragic as my brother's accident from happening to another family then we feel as if we have done our job.

Every day, ordinary people are faced with challenges that change their life. Some are being big challenges and some are being small challenges. No matter the challenge they have to adapt and overcome all obstacles to move forward in their life. If they do not take the right steps this might damage their life in one way or another. One of these challenges that people deal with differently is death. This paper will focus on how family dynamic affects how a family works through and copes after the death of a child. There

will be specific questions that this paper will focus on and the first one is “what is the role of family dynamics in coping with the loss of a child?” The second question will be “what is the role of communication in the process of mourning the loss of a child?” The last question that this paper will focus on is “do relationships strengthen or weaken after the loss of a child?” All of these questions will reflect how family dynamic affect how a family works though and copes after the death of a child.

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics are "the patterns of relating, or interactions, between family members. Each family system and its dynamics are unique, although there are some common patterns" (Jesuit Social Services, 2009). There are helpful and unhelpful dynamics. This means that some dynamics can aid in a family’s unity and in some cases, some dynamics, can be damaging to a family’s unity. There are also situations where there can be abusive dynamics and that is when one or more individuals in the family are harming the rest of the family either physically or mentally. This can become very damaging especially if there are young children involved. A lot of our characteristics as individuals develop when we are children and adolescents. If one's childhood is influenced by abuse, that can affect the rest of his or her life (Jesuit Social Services, 2009).

There are different theories that try to explain and understand family dynamics. Many theories focus on how a problem is caused by an event. These theories are seen as being linear. That is because there are one or more events that cause a problem or chain of problems. The background of that problem is then investigated and from there, a solution is then created based on the person’s needs. One specific theory is the family

systems theory. The family systems theory was created by Dr. Murray Bowen who was a psychiatrist. The family systems theory is a little different than other theories in the sense that it is looked at as being more circular. This is because the problem and cause of the problem are seen as influencing one another and when one is affected so is the other and it is a never-ending cycle.

There are eight different concepts in the family systems theory. The first concept is triangles. The triangle is the first concept because it represents a relationship involving three people. The triangle is known as the “building block” for larger family systems. This is because a relationship that only involves two people will not last long before a third person is needed to ease the tension when a problem arises. The triangle involves two people who have a closer bond and they are known as the insiders and then the third person is known as the outsider. The outsider often feels left out and uncomfortable in the relationship. When the insiders have an argument, the insider that is the most uncomfortable will tend to gravitate towards the outsider making the outsider become an insider and the previous insider an outsider. This is a continuous cycle and the insider and outsider positions are interchangeable which often is what causes tensions to rise (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The second concept is the differentiation of self. This refers to how well someone knows and understands themselves. The more developed one’s self is, the less they are dependent on others. An individual’s self is developed during their childhood and adolescence. Once someone has found their self, it often plateaus and does not develop any further unless they make a very strong and dedicated effort to do so later in life. Individuals that have a poorly developed self, often have a hard time with their own self-

esteem, they are always searching for the approval of others and have a high anxiety level. These types of people either conform to how others want them to be or make others conform to how they want them to be in a very aggressive manner. Individuals that have a well-developed self are not looking for other people's approval and can make decisions based on their needs and the needs of the group. They are confident and know that they can make decisions with a clear head even during times of high stress (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The third component is the nuclear family emotional process. This process describes four different relationship patterns. These patterns explain where family problems develop. The first pattern is marital conflict. This is when stress within the family begins to rise and the couple's anxiety also begins to rise. They often reflect their anxiety externally, showing what all is wrong with their partner and not themselves. They try to control one another and that results in them resisting one another. The second pattern is dysfunction in one spouse. This is when one partner tries to control and dictate how the other acts and thinks. The other partner gives into the pressure and often loses much self-control. If family tensions get to be too high, this can result in the subordinate partner developing different clinical issues such as depression. The third pattern is the impairment of one or more children. This is when the parents of a child place all of their anxieties on one or multiple children. The reason why these parents do this is because they can believe that there is something wrong with their child when in most cases there is not. The more the parents do this, the more the child becomes aware of the parents and their own anxieties and fears. The children might begin to feel as if something is also wrong with them but they are just conforming to their parent's behavior. This can result

in the child acting up more than the other children because the child is then more responsive to the parent's needs, wants, and personalities. This all causes a rise in the child's anxieties and it can reflect in the classroom as well in other social relationships. Lastly, the fourth pattern is emotional distance. This is when an individual distances themselves from the group or another individual in order to weaken the relationship-linked anxieties. If the individual distances themselves too much, then that can often result in becoming too isolated which can then result in them becoming an outsider and feel uncomfortable (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The fourth concept is the family projection process. This process explains how parents can pass their emotional issues to their children. Children can gain both their parent's strengths and weaknesses through their interactions and relationship. The weaknesses that the children tend to acquire from their parents are emotional. These emotional weaknesses can include "heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty dealing with expectations, the tendency to blame oneself or others, feeling responsible for the happiness of others or that others are responsible for one's own happiness, and acting impulsively to relieve the anxiety of the moment rather than tolerating anxiety and acting thoughtfully" (Eight Concepts, 2018). There are three steps that are involved in the projection process. These three steps are as follows:

1. "The parent focuses on the child out of fear that something is wrong with the child.
 2. The parent interprets the child's behavior as confirming the fear.
 3. The parent treats the child as if something is really wrong with the child"
- (Eight Concepts, 2018).

These steps begin when the children are very young and continue into adulthood. The parent's fears and anxieties affect their children who are a focus of parental energy and attention; these children then begin to have the same fears and anxieties their parents had. Such sons or daughters become very dependent on other people, which can make them very unmotivated. The siblings that have less attention directed towards them often grow up to be more independent, confident, and goal-oriented people because they are used to more independence while their parents focused concern on other siblings (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The fifth concept is the multigenerational transmission process, a process that takes time and there may not be a noticeable change for many generations. This process explains how families go through small changes in differentiation over many years and eventually those small changes will be reflected as an actual set differentiation. This process “not only programs the levels of “self” people develop, but it also influences how people interact with others, potentially affecting one’s choice of a spouse” (Eight Concepts, 2018). This implies that a person is going to find someone that compliments their own characteristics. An example of this would be a person who depends on people (with a poorly developed differentiated self), will find themselves attracted to a person who takes care of others and fills the leadership role (a well developed differentiated self).

The sixth concept is emotional cutoff. This is when individuals distance themselves from other family members such as parents and siblings because they have unresolved emotional issues. They can reduce their interactions or totally cut off all emotional contact. This process can become very complicated because as time goes on it may seem as if the relationship is better, but in reality, the issue was not resolved and the

problems are still there. This can become dangerous because the person that is cutting the emotional ties, might put too much pressure on their other relationships. This individual could look to their other relationships to fill this void and that can create too much pressure for some people. People who emotionally cutoff their family usually look forward to returning to them because they feel as if the problems will be better and everything within their family will be good. This is usually false because the problems will eventually resurface and the tensions of the relationship will reappear (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The seventh concept is the sibling position. Sibling position is what order an individual was born within their family. This refers to, the oldest sibling, the youngest sibling and depending on how many children there are, the middle sibling. When Bowen was doing his research on sibling position he found that Walter Toman, a psychologist, had very similar conclusions as him. They both found that older siblings were more direct and leaders. They tend to thrive in leadership positions and like to take charge. The younger siblings tend to take more of a follower position. They found that older siblings work better with younger siblings of another family. This is especially true in the work environment and in intimate relationships (Eight Concepts, 2018). An example of this would be if an older sister married a younger brother; their relationship has a better chance of thriving. On the other hand, if an older sister married an older brother, there might be issues with leadership roles and the two may butt heads.

It is known to be true that people of the same sibling position usually have many of the same characteristics in regard to leadership and follower roles. This, however, can become tampered with when a child is constantly focused on by their parents. As stated

before, that child will usually be more dependent on other people later in life. This meaning that if that child was the oldest child, their younger sibling, who did not have much attention focused on them, might fulfill that leadership role and go against the sibling position theory (Eight Concepts, 2018).

The eighth and final concept is the societal emotional process. This is how our emotional processes reflect on a societal level. This process explains how we as individuals interact with one another and how that affects how society either has a state of progression or regression. In society, we often tell our children one thing and then we do not hold our ground when it comes down to it. This is when a state of regression occurs. We give into the anxiety and focus on fixing the short term situation but fail to take into consideration the long-term issues (Eight Concepts, 2018). An example of this would be telling our children that they have to finish their dinner before they get dessert. When the child does not finish their dinner but cries because they are not getting their dessert the parent will often give the child the dessert anyway in order for their child to stop crying. This is affecting the situation for the moment but causes a long-term issue since the child has learned that they just need to cry in order to get what they want.

The family systems theory is very complicated but all of the eight concepts are interconnected in one way or another. This is why family dynamics can be so complicated to understand, especially because every family's dynamic is unique in their own way.

Death

The definition of death in the Merriam Webster Dictionary is "a permanent cessation of all vital functions: the end of life". A reality of life is that everyone will

eventually perish but it is something that we are never prepared for. Humans feel and they feel hard, so when a loved one passes away, survivors are left with an empty hole in their heart. Every family deals with death differently; this is because every family's dynamic is different.

Death can be sudden or it can be anticipated. There are also many different causes of death. Some of the most common causes are illness, accidents, natural causes, and other unexpected tragedies. Even though there are different causes of death, the end outcome is that the person is gone forever and will only live through a survivor's memory.

When a death is sudden, it may be harder for an individual that had a relationship with that person to cope. This is because the survivors would most likely not have gotten a chance to say goodbye or process that they will never see this person again. A death that is prolonged and expected gives time for their loved ones to say goodbye and to start to process the expected passing. However, even though it gives the loved one time to process things in advance, the individual about to die may be suffering from their diagnosis, worsening their personal situation. Sometimes it is looked at as being a more peaceful death when someone dies suddenly. Either way, death is not an easy thing to deal with.

The average life expectancy for a human being is around the age of 79 years old. This age has increased over time but is still looked at as being young for this day and age. Modern medicine has come a long way in the past 100 years and we have found more and more cures for what was known as terminal illnesses in the past. The reason why the average life expectancy is lower than what most people would imagine is that other

factors have to be considered. Many people die at a very young age. This could be due to illness or accidents. In today's world, we, unfortunately, have to deal with drug overdose. The drug epidemic is a real problem that we have to face and many times people don't know how to do that and that causes them not to talk about it. This is something that we need to talk about because it affects our everyday lives especially the lives of the younger generations.

In our society today, it is looked at as normal when an elderly person dies. However, if a young individual dies, it is seen as a tragedy and may have an impact on family members' reactions. Younger family members may feel as if we are untouchable and nothing can hurt us. This is not the case. At any moment in time, something can end the life of anyone, no matter their age or health condition. Life is very fragile but people usually do not start to appreciate the gift of life until their later years.

Death of a child

A challenge that is looked at as one of the worst tragedies known to mankind is the death of a child. This not only affects the family as a whole but also could affect the whole community. As stated previously, when a young person dies, it affects people much differently than when an older person dies. This could be because it puts things into reality for others and they then have a whole new perspective on life. Humans are not invincible, no matter their age.

There are many different types of families in the world and they all have a different dynamic. There are mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, step-parents and step-siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins. The type of family that this paper will focus on is the traditional nuclear family. This includes a biological mother and

father and biological siblings. The reason this paper will solely focus on this type of family is, first, because my family described at the onset originated as such a family, and second, this type of family is the main topic of the relevant body of research.

Effects on a Parent

The parents are the first component of a family that will be discussed. The death of a child is especially hard for the parents of that child. A child is often looked at as a miracle in many people's eyes. Not everyone is able to conceive a child. There are many different health conditions that can affect the pregnancy process and some can be very detrimental. When a child is conceived, that child then becomes a piece of the parents. In a healthy family, the parents love and nurture their child so they grow to be strong and healthy individuals. They care for them and make sure that their child is on the right path to succeed in life. Many parents will do anything for their children and will stop at nothing to make sure that they are safe and protected. This is a natural instinct that most mammals have. Even wild animals share these same instincts. An example of this would be a mother bear nurtures their cub until they are able to fend for themselves in the wild. If the cub is threatened, the mother will intervene and protect their cub. These are the same instincts we have as human beings.

This relates to the family systems theory, as discussed above, because a parent may be overprotective of their child and have certain anxieties when it comes to their child. They may focus inordinate attention on their child which could make their relationship have more tension than their other relationships. This can cause the child to develop a poorly differentiated self and depend on their parents more than they should.

It is possible for parents, especially if they are young, to not have had to deal with death in their earlier life. If their first experience with death is the death of their child, they may not know how to understand their death. If a parent has dealt with death before, for example, the death of a parent or grandparent, they may know how to work through death a little better. Admittedly parents are unlikely to be experts in how to mourn but prior deaths may familiarize them with how pain and hurt feels.

A parent never expects to outlive their child. Luis E. Oliver, a professor at the University of Ottawa in Canada, explains in an article that in our culture, it is a social norm that the parents are supposed to pass away before their children. When a parent does outlive their child, it is a shock to them and their loved ones (Oliver,1999). When a child passes away, the parent feels as if they have failed their child and they lose a sense of their identity. Being a parent is such a big role to fill and when a child dies, all of that responsibility disappears and they are left feeling alone and empty (Oliver,1999). The responsibilities that they once had have now vanished and they are left with nothing if they do not have other surviving children. This may cause their anxieties and fears to become greater and reinforce their underdeveloped differentiated self.

When a parent has more than one child it forces the parent to still fulfill the parental responsibilities. Their relationship may grow stronger because the parent knows what it is like to lose a child and the sibling knows what it is like to lose a loved one. The parent may feel a certain type of comfort when in the presence of their other children (Oliver,1999). Parents that do not have other children will often feel very alone, especially if they are too old to conceive another child.

On the other hand, having other children can in some ways be a hard thing for a parent. Those other children can be a constant reminder of the child that they had lost. This is especially true with biological siblings because they often share many of the same characteristics. This can cause resentment towards the other children and their relationship may change in a negative way (Oliver, 1999). This may put a certain type of pressure on the other children because they feel as if they have to conform in some ways to their sibling that has passed. This reflects the family systems theory because it explains how when one relationship dies or is cut off, an individual (in this case being the parents) may put too much pressure on their other relationships (with their surviving children) and cause tensions and anxieties to rise. The children may not be able to deal with this kind of pressure and it could create other emotional issues within themselves.

Parents who lose a child can feel many different types of emotion. Oliver states “Depression is common and often involves a barrage of intense negative feelings, including sadness, despair, helplessness, loneliness, abandonment, and a desire to die (Rando, 1986; Sanders, 1989). Bereaved parents often describe their intense pain in physical terms, often feeling like they have been physically mutilated” (Oliver, 1999). It is interesting that emotional pain can actually transform into a physical pain without another outside force intervening. This is not an easy concept to understand if you have not gone through this type of loss.

Parents may also have a hard time sleeping because they cannot stop their mind from racing with thoughts relating to their child’s death. This is especially true with parents that have a poorly developed differentiated self. If they already suffered from unnecessary fears and anxieties prior to their child passing, this is only going to escalate

their emotions. In other cases, they may sleep too much to try to avoid the pain of losing their child. They believe if they are unconscious, they will forget that their child is gone and they can be at peace for a while. Parents will often report that they see their child in their dreams and that brings comfort to them. Some say that they would rather see them in their sleep than to not see them at all. The issue with this is that sleeping too much may just delay the parent waking up to face the harsh reality of their child being gone.

Many times, parents ask the question of "why" or "why my child". There is never an answer to that question but sometimes that is a way the parent can cope and work through the loss. They will often self-reflect on their lives and look at the loss as a punishment for something they had done. This can result in the parents begging for their child back in exchange for their own life. Parents, in some cases, may try to hurt themselves or punish themselves to try and take away the pain of losing their child. There have been many cases of the parents trying to attempt suicide or successfully commit suicide. They will do anything to be with their child again and some parents think the only way for that to happen is for them to die as well. Many parents believe that no matter the cause of their child's death and no matter the age of their child, their child did not deserve to die. This is because they see them as being so innocent. Even though the individual who dies could be in their adult years, the parents still see them as their child or "baby". An example of this would be in cases of a drug overdose, the parents are in denial of the actual cause of death. Many do not want to believe that their child took too much of the drug. They will often blame the drug dealer or doctor who prescribed the drug when in reality, most times their child is the one who took the drug.

A parent can also feel an intense rage when their child dies. This is a quick onset of anger that a parent will express and it many times does not have a trigger. Parents will often find other people to blame for the death of their child. Oliver states "This can be experienced as intense rage, or as chronic irritation and frustration. It can be directed at God or the universe, doctors, nurses, the spouse or family, or even at the dead child" (Oliver, 1999). This can place a toll on the people that the parents are in contact with. This is because they are usually the ones being blamed for something they may have had no involvement with. In cases of young adults or teenagers dying in accidents, many times the parents blame the individual's friends because they feel as if they had some type of involvement in the accident or could have stopped it. In some cases, the parents may even blame one another for the death of their child. This reflects the family systems theory because, in the concept of the nuclear family emotional process, it is explained that in relationships people will focus their anger and emotions externally and not internally. This meaning that some people will not hesitate in pointing out problems that the other person possesses and blaming them for their issue or issues at hand.

Effects on a Sibling

If the child that passes has surviving siblings, his or her death can also impact their lives. A biological sibling is someone that shares the same genetic make-up. The siblings have the same mother and father, often times have a lot of the same characteristics. There are some biological siblings that only share one parent but in this case, we are only going to look at siblings that have both the same mother and father. Depending on many different factors siblings usually have a very strong bond. They tend

to relate with one another being that they come from the same genetics. However, this is not always the case because some siblings can have a large age gap or were not raised in the same household at the same time. There are many different factors that can come into play as to why siblings are different from one another. Just because siblings come from the same parents, that does not mean that they share the same interests. One sibling may be into sports and the other may be into acting. This would make it hard to relate to one another all the time (Krell and Rabkin, 1979).

The age of the sibling plays an important role when discussing how they are affected by the loss of their sibling. If a sibling is too young to understand what death is and the emotional toll it plays, they most likely will not have to face the severe effects from their siblings passing. Young children's mental capacities are not the same as a young adult. Yes, they may notice an absence of their sibling and wonder where they went but eventually, if very young, they will forget about their sibling. If shown a picture of their sibling later on they will most likely recognize who they are but there will be little meaning behind that connection. When shown the picture, they will not remember the pain and hurt that their parents will remember going through during the time of their siblings passing.

In the case of a child being born stillborn or if their mother has a miscarriage, this is often a situation where the surviving siblings do not feel as much pain as the parents. This is because the sibling had not met the baby yet and they do not have a strong connection. Yes, they may feel a disappointment or some type of sadness but it is often hard to make a connection with something or someone you have not met yet. The reason

the parents may feel a different way is because they both worked to make and create that offspring; therefore, the stillborn child is an actual part of them dying (Krell, Rabkin, 1979). This is especially hard for the mother because that offspring is physically growing inside of her so she already has made a connection with the child. The mother can actually feel the child inside her and feel their first movements. This is a very special bond that the mother and child are able to experience before any other family member.

When someone dies, the thought process of their survivors can be very difficult. As stated previously, death is very complex and complicated especially depending on how the person dies. An individual that has an emotional connection with someone who dies is not going to be able to just forget about their death and move on the same day. It may take a while for them to process their death and begin to feel their pain but it is usually unheard of for a person that has a connection with someone to not feel the hurt from their passing. This is especially true for siblings that are old enough to understand what is going on. This is because they have to watch their parents mourn the death of one of their children and that can be very difficult to witness. If the sibling is living in the same household as their parents, the hurt and pain will be in their environment constantly and it will be very difficult for them to avoid what is happening. In many studies, it has been proven that this experience makes the siblings stronger people as adults. They are forced to mature at a much faster rate than their peers (Krell and Rabkin, 1979).

This death of a sibling relates to the family systems theory because of the concept of the sibling position. It is explained that sibling order matters in regard to family dynamics. As already mentioned, the oldest child usually ends up thriving in leadership

positions where the youngest child does better in follower positions. This again does not make one sibling position better than the other, it just helps families work in unity. This can become complicated when a sibling dies, especially if the oldest child dies. This is because the younger sibling may feel as if they now have to fill that leadership position and that can go against their differentiated self. This can put a lot of pressure on the surviving sibling and can cause their anxieties to rise.

Teenagers especially have a very hard time with the death of a sibling. This is because their emotions are at an all-time high due to the fact that they are going through the life stage of puberty. Puberty is known for heightened emotion and heightened reactions. During the teenage years, an individual is in the process of trying to find themselves and figure out who they are as an individual. This is when their differentiated self is finishing developing. A factor in figuring out who one is as an individual is their family dynamics. A sibling plays a huge role in this process and if a sibling passes during it, that teenager may feel as if they have lost themselves and that they are not whom they thought they were. This can really affect a teenager in a negative way. They may lose interest in things they had previously enjoyed. These different activities could be their involvement with sports, music, theater, and other extracurricular activities.

Teenagers that have lost a sibling may also take longer to process that their sibling is actually gone. It is common to feel numb to what is going on during this tragic time. A common reaction that teenagers have when a sibling passes is to withdraw from their world and want to be left alone (Krell and Rabkin, 1979). Many teenagers already go through this stage in life where all they want to do is be left alone in their room and do

the things they want to do and the loss of a sibling can many times only enforce that behavior.

There have been cases where the siblings have been so close that the surviving sibling feels as if they cannot go on in life without their other half. This is when cases of suicidal thoughts, attempt, and actions occur. Their sibling could have been the only one that really understood them on a deeper level and it is hard to see past that sometimes. There will also be cases where the surviving sibling may ask the question of "why them?", "why not me?" Surviving siblings may also feel a sense of guilt when being around their parents and other siblings if they have any. They may also feel as if they let their sibling down, especially if the sibling that passed away was younger than them. A big brother or sister often feels as if they are responsible for their younger siblings and they are very protective of them especially if they have a well-developed differentiated self. If something happens to them they can feel a strong sense of guilt and anger (Krell, Rabkin, 1979).

There have been cases where one twin passes and the other one is left without them. This can become very complicated because they have been together since in the womb. This is a bond that is very hard to understand if not a twin. When a twin dies, the other twin may feel lost and feel as if an actual part of them dies too. It is possible that they have never had to do anything in life without each other and each other's support which can be very traumatic when they have to eventually do it alone.

Depending on the situation, there will be a lot of commotion in regard to family and friends sending their condolences and funeral planning (depending on religious

beliefs). No matter how thoughtful peoples love and prayers may be, it is still difficult for a family to acknowledge that during this time. When a child passes, it is common for the family to want to be left alone so that they can deal with their own feelings and emotions but then they also understand that their community and other relatives could be severely hurt as well. This is especially true when a child dies that is an age where they have strong relationships with friends. This may be the first time that their friends have ever had to deal with this type of situation and that can be very heartbreaking. This is when siblings often begin to feel as if their sibling is actually gone. When people are constantly reminding them of their loss, it begins to bring them to reality.

Changes in Relationships and Communication

The majority of couples feel as if their relationship strengthened when they lost a child. This is because they go through something so tragic together and no one else knows what they are feeling except for one another. This bond makes them appreciate one another more because they see how much hurt they are both enduring. In the study done by Atle and Kari Dyregrov in 2015, they look at married couples who have lost children and analyze their relationship through open-ended questions and in-depth interviews. Atle and Kari said that some couples felt as if their relationship definitely strengthened after their child had passed. They state “A majority of the parents (53%) experienced a strengthening of their relationship. The parents emphasized that the relationship became special because they had shared something terrible together that could not totally be shared with others. They felt that only the partner they had experienced this with could understand. Only this person knew the child well enough,

knew exactly what happened, and could fully understand the longing for him or her. Through dealing with the grief together, a new, special, deep, and strong tie was established” (Dyregrov, 2015). An issue may arise when a couple feels as if they are the only ones that understand each other. This issue is that they may have trouble becoming close with others such as friends or family. If they truly feel as if no one understands them other than their partner, they will have a hard time trusting others. This could even get to a point where they do not trust their other children even though their children are going through the same loss. Many parents feel as if the loss of a child is even more intense than the loss of a sibling. This idea can put up a strong divide in the family which is unhealthy for the remaining children in the household (Dyregrov, 2015). This relates to the family systems theory because the basic triangle of the family may become inflexible, meaning that the outsiders (being the surviving children) may never feel wanted or comfortable in their family dynamic.

Many couples also expressed that their relationship strengthened because they were able to explore different sides of one another. They were able to open up pieces of themselves that they had never let out before. Since they had never experienced anything as tragic as the loss of a child they could now explore each other on a much deeper level. Atle and Kari explain “through conversations, they learned how much pain their partner experienced and they could respond by being more caring. Knowing how their partner was feeling, they could also be more straightforward with each other when that was necessary. They cared even more for each other because they felt sorry for the other. The strengthening of the relationship also involved the parents actively trying to understand each other, even when they disagreed. They made efforts to read how the other was

feeling, showing consideration and respect for each other's reactions and coping efforts. In addition, they strived to avoid the tragedy ruining their family, especially shielding their remaining children from more distress" (Dyregrov 2015). Listening to one another and really trying to understand where one another is coming from definitely helps relationships flourish. Couples that have gone through a child passing and can get through it, now know what their relationship is able to withstand and they believe that they can get through anything life throws at them as long as there is communication.

However, the loss of a child can cause relationship problems between parents that are still married as well. Married couples do split and get a divorce because their pain and agony is too much to bear. When something as tragic as a loss of a child occurs, people deal with the loss in different ways. Women and men especially handle loss differently. Recent studies have shown that women need to talk about their feelings more and need to express how they are feeling. It hurts them more when they keep their emotions bottled up inside of them. The way they work through their emotions best is through talking about them (Oliver, 1999).

Men, on the other hand, react differently to their emotions. Men usually do not like to talk about how they are feeling like women like to do. They work through their emotions more internally whereas women do so externally (Oliver, 1999). This is where couples can run into issues. In the study done by Atle and Kari Dyregrov, they explain how some men feel as if in a conversation or argument they are always going to lose the battle anyway so they just agree with their wife and move on from the argument. The women then see this as the husband not caring about the situation and that leads into a

larger issue. One male in their study explained in an interview that “I always lose the discussions we have in a way. It is as if she is much better in discussing and talking than I am and then it always ends, even though I had good cards on my hands in the beginning. I will lose the discussion, and that leads to me being less verbal as I will lose anyway. it was to pull away and quickly end the conversation; we started to discuss something else that did not lead anywhere, or we became angry at each other” (Dyregrov, 2015).

For many couples, it takes time for their relationship to get back to a good place after the loss of a child. It takes a while for them to understand how one another is feeling and how they are coping. In some cases, some couples feel as if the grieving period becomes a competition. This competition begins with who is more upset and who is more hurt by the loss of the child. Even though both parents are fighting for the same thing, it can eventually tear them apart. In an interview done by Atle and Kari Dyregrov, one mother explained "It was a bit as if we wanted to have the grief for ourselves. I felt as if we robbed each other. I think you felt I took over when you told how much it hurt and I felt I never got to tell you how much I hurt because you always claimed to hurt more than me” (Dyregrov, 2015). Surviving children that the parents have can often help this process because the couple then feels as if they have to come together and unite in order to be there for them. They do not want the pain to become even more intense for their children from their constant arguing and not seeing eye to eye. In the study done by Atle and Kari Dyregrov, they asked the couple the question: what helped the couple's relationship become closer? The overall responses that they got were "talking and caring for each other, the love between the partners, respect and understanding from the partner, using time together, openness, and sharing feelings. Such qualities were deemed

important for not growing apart in grief, as illustrated by this quote: "Resume daily activities. Do things together. Talk about the death if one or both need it. Allow oneself to laugh and have "fun" even though life is horrible in periods. Support each other on difficult days" (Dyregrov, 2015).

Other couples can have the opposite effect happen to them. Their relationship can feel as if has strengthened shortly after the child passes because the couple desperately needs each other's love and support. During this time, they can still be in shock and not fully believe what had happened. As time goes on, the couple begins to process what had really happened and that their child is gone forever. This is when the love and support may begin to vanish and the couple's true colors begin to shine through. As stated before, some partners may even blame the other for the death of their child especially in cases of a miscarriage or a stillborn child. In situations like these, it is common to see the father blame the mother for not being able to carry their child full term (Dyregrov, 2015). This can be very sad and heartbreaking because the mother sometimes also blames herself for the death of their child when in reality there was most likely nothing she could have done. In an article written by Robert Krell a professor at the University of British Columbia in Canada and Leslie Rabkin a professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine in the state of Washington, they explain how it used to be a normal occurrence when a child died shortly after birth. They state "The early postnatal death of a child was, until well into this century, a common family occurrence, as was maternal death related to childbirth. In the Western world of today, our expectation is that children who are born, even those several months premature, will survive and reach adulthood" (Krell, Rabkin, 1979). This just goes to show how far medicine has come and because of

that, it almost puts more of a pressure on the mother to have a safe and successful pregnancy and birth. This can be very hard for a mother that has a poorly differentiated self. They may not feel comfortable in this “leadership” role and their anxieties could alone cause pregnancy issues.

Parents definitely have a very hard and long road to overcome when it comes to the death and mourning of their child. With the love and support of each other, it is possible to overcome this tragedy but there needs to be communication on both sides. The parents need to listen to the needs of one another and support them through whatever coping method that they choose. If the parents of the child that passes have surviving children, they need to work hard to make the situation as pain-free as possible so that the surviving children can learn to mourn with the parents and get through the loss of their sibling.

Case Study

The case study that I have chosen to use is that of my own. This is because, for me, the passing of my brother Owen was the hardest thing that I have been through in my 24 years of life. I still have a hard time believing that he is really gone and sharing my story often helps me work through the hurt.

Since the accident, my family’s whole dynamic has changed. The way we act and interact around one another has become much more empathetic. Since my parents were divorced before my brother’s passing not much has changed in regard to their relationship. However, my parents can be civil around one another to an extent. This may

be due to their sympathy for one another or because more time has gone by since the divorce. Either way, it has somewhat lifted a burden off my sister and I.

There have been some changes, however, in my family dynamic. I have noticed that my mother has tried to buy my sister and I more and more. She will offer to pay for things that she would not have in the past and that we are more than capable of paying for ourselves. This may be because she wants to one-up my father in order for us to spend more time with her. When my sister and I are home from college we stay at our father's house full time. This is because our father's home is the house we grew up in and that is the house that we know as home. It is also because my father is single and lives alone, my mother is married and lives with our step-father. My parents live about ten minutes away from one another so we see our mother almost every day when we are home but for her, that is not enough even though we were staying at my father's even before my brother's accident occurred. Personally, I feel a strange comfort when I am home because it's almost like I can feel my brother around me. I now live in his room at home and that has helped me cope and get through the tragedy.

After my brother's accident, my sister struggled a little more than I did. She was still in high school and only 16 years old when the accident happened. She was home and had to deal first hand with the pain from my parents and the community every day. The pressure for her to replace our brother was high and it took a toll on her. That being said, she began to do poorly in her classes and athletics. She withdrew socially from her friends and really did not feel like doing anything that she used to love. At one point, she even had thoughts of suicide. The pain was too much to bear and she was reminded every day of the accident and how much of a loss it was to our family. People in the community

would constantly approach her and express how sorry they were when all my sister wanted to do was forget the pain for a little while. This was different for me because I was able to escape the hurt and pain that our town and community was feeling. After the summer, I was able to return to Philadelphia for school and live a normal life. My sister was stuck in Vermont. We both saw a therapist every week which definitely helped but it still did not take away the pain of losing our brother. When my sister would express to me the hurt she was feeling I then began to feel very guilty because I was not there for her. Since I am her older sister, I do feel a responsibility to always protect and be there for her. I however, never had felt this type of pressure before because my brother, being that he was the oldest, always filled the leadership role between the three of us and was always the one that was there to protect my sister and I. I knew that she was strong and we could get through it together but the guilt of not physically being there for her ate away at me every single day.

It took months for our lives to get back to normal and to get back to a schedule. It still hurts today just as much as it did on June 11th, 2015 but we have all found ways to deal with the hurt. My specific coping method is through exercise and sport. I exercise for about two hours each day and for those two hours, I am able to clear my head and take time for myself. During that time, I cut off emotional ties and focus on myself. Even though that does not take away the overall issue, it helps me relieve some of my stresses and anxieties for a little bit of time every day. This reflects the concept of emotional cutoff in the family systems theory.

My parents have a different way of coping. My mother still to this day will take most of her anger out on my father. She will often blame him for the accident when in

reality he had nothing to do with it. She decides to focus her energy externally instead of internally. She needs answers and by blaming my father, that gives her some clarity. At first, it would really hurt my father that she would say such horrific things, but he came to realize that it was just her way of working through the pain and now he just ignores her hurtful words. My mother's actions, reflect the nuclear family emotional process concept within the family systems theory.

My father, on the other hand, copes by putting all of his time and effort into my sister and I. My father works very hard to support my sister and I and be there for us in every aspect of life. There is not a basketball game that I remember that my father was not at or watching online. He would make the drive from Vermont to Philadelphia almost every week to support me at my games. In a way, I believe that this was his way of keeping his mind off the hurt and his way of making sure what happened to Owen does not happen to my sister and I. This reflects the emotional cutoff concept within the family systems theory.

My family has become so close in its own unique way and overall, I do believe that it has made us all stronger. Of course, we would do anything to get my brother back but since that is not possible we do everything in our power to have his name live on.

Conclusion

Family dynamics definitely play a very big role in how a family copes after the loss of a child. Whether a family's relationship strengthens or weakens, there is no doubt that the child is still an essential part of that family. After doing all of the research, it seems as if communication is the reoccurring theme that keeps appearing. How a family communicates and works together determines how they will move on from the death of

the child. If a family member does not express how they feel, then the other members will not know how to help them and understand them. It is ok to have different emotions when dealing with the loss of a child or sibling but you can't expect to get help or support if you do not express what it is you are feeling. Some individuals may be strong enough to deal with the issues they are having alone and that is ok too. Many times, however, just because an individual personally does not need help or support, maybe one of their family members desperately do. Family members need to listen to one another and learn to help each other in the time of need. It is a long and hurtful road but there is a light at the end of the tunnel and that that child who has passed away is the one shining that light to guide their surviving family through the pain of their death.

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