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IDEAS

My brother died and people acted as if I shouldn't be so sad

Society's grief hierarchy leaves out so many loved ones, even siblings.

By **Anne Pinkerton** Updated April 11, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



The author and her brother David at a cyclocross race in Rhode Island in 2006. ANNE PINKERTON

When he was 47 years old, my oldest brother David died suddenly while hiking in

Colorado — he made a misstep and fell 200 feet from the top of a 14,000-foot peak.

I got a call late on one of those still-summery September nights telling me he'd gone missing in the mountains. My family and I spent an unbearably long night and day praying Search and Rescue would find him alive. I remember my brother Tommy musing that surely David must be stranded somewhere with two broken legs, but ultimately, he'd be fine. David was always fine, until then.

Friends and colleagues sent cards and flowers in the immediate aftermath of the accident and memorial service. Most of them had never met David and didn't know much about him. My friends, meaning well, asked questions like "Was he married?" and "Did he have kids?" or "How is your mom?"

As I was asked these questions over and over, I found myself bristling: *Are you more worried about an unknown wife and kids or our mom than the person standing right in front of you?* I know these questions were only natural, but I still resented them. Hardly anyone asked how I was holding up. It was as if my grief wasn't as great as that of a wife, daughter, or mother. We are often inept at [talking about death](#), and I learned that dealing with the death of a sibling was untrodden territory for many.

And yet I found myself wanting to talk about him.

David was a successful doctor, for starters, and an accomplished athlete who had traveled the globe to compete in mountain biking races, ultramarathons, cyclo-cross (a type of bike racing that mixes terrains), and adventure racing. He loved to be outdoors in wild places, trekking and orienteering, both solo and with teammates. An armchair adventurer myself, I merely cheered from the sidelines. I wanted to tell the whole world how amazing he was.

Over the first few weeks, the most personal query I received was "Were you close?" which made me feel less invisible but provoked larger, more complicated answers. We

lived far away from each other and didn't talk that much. That alone made me feel unjustified in my persistent sadness. I was overwhelmed with the sense that I had to act as if I was fine, that I was not allowed to continue to break down, that continuing to suffer over my brother's death was somehow unwarranted.

The shelves of the bookstores I frequented in my town were laden with stories about the deaths of parents, spouses, and children, but there were none about sibling loss. Clerks scratched their heads. Online I found only two books that addressed the experience of losing a brother or sister: "[The Empty Room](#)," by Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn, and "[Surviving the Death of a Sibling](#)," by T.J. Wray.

Both books included the term "disenfranchised grief," coined by counselor, author, and grief expert Kenneth Doka. Defined as a loss that lacks public acknowledgment, disenfranchised grief leaves us as the "forgotten mourners." We are socialized to believe that parents, children, and spouses are the most important figures in our lives and that their deaths, especially when unexpected or premature, are horrible. Miscarriages and abortions, friends, pets, grandparents, and even siblings simply don't make the cut.

Wray writes, "Within days of my brother's death, I . . . learned that no matter how paralyzed with grief and sorrow I might have felt, society does not recognize the death of an adult brother or sister as a major loss." I'm still confused by how society can treat the death of someone I've known since I was born as anything other than what it is: devastating.

When a brother or sister dies, the surviving siblings lose important parts our collective past as well as our future — we had expected to grow old with our sibling, outliving our parents together. That fact alone means a sibling's death is not incidental grief, regardless of how "close" we were.

I'll never "get over" David's shocking death in his prime. Though I know I'll survive, I'll

never *not* miss him. I assumed he'd be around to help as Mom got older, to know me as I aged, to be part of my life for decades to come.

So we should remember to extend our condolences to those who have lost brothers and sisters. For that matter, we should never presume to know others' relationships, and therefore the depth of their grief. Parents, spouses, and children aren't the only ones who leave lasting marks on our lives.

Anne Pinkerton is an essayist and poet based in Western Massachusetts. She is the author of "[Were You Close? A Sister's Quest to Know the Brother She Lost.](#)"

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