

# A 14-Step Plan to Improve Your Sibling Relationships

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

So you and your sibling don't get along. You've tried talking, writing, even begging, but your sibling is not interested in what you have to say. Yet, you don't want to write off this important person in your life.

Siblings, typically, are the longest of your relationships. They are the only ones who remember you jumping rope in the living room and breaking the vase, who remember when Mom found her car keys in the freezer, who secretly shared your first cigarette when you were 8.

While you may not ever be great friends again, you may want to get back to some type of satisfying relationship. Chances are you know what she (or he) did that upset you. Are you as clear what she feels you did that upset her? Before she is willing to hear your side, she may have to feel you truly understand how you hurt her.

It is hard to hear another person's complaints about you if you don't feel your side is being heard. Unfortunately, everyone wants to feel heard first, so that means someone has to listen first. Since you are initiating this effort, you need to be prepared to hear your siblings' complaints about you first. You have a better chance of being heard if your sibling feels you have heard her, that you understand why she feels the way she does, how you have hurt or angered her.

So, here is a step-by-step plan that has a chance of breaking through the hostility, silent treatment, and/or resentment.

Preparation:

1. Make a list of all of your complaints about your brother or sister.
2. Make a list of what you imagine your brother or sister would make about you.

3. Write a letter to yourself – as if from your sibling -- about these complaints. Make sure your sibling “tells” you how angry and or hurt she or he is. Use specific examples.
4. See if you learn something new by doing this to help you understand the problems from your sibling’s perspective.
5. Now, write a letter (not to be sent) to your sibling about your complaints. Make sure you express how angry you are as well as how hurt. Use specific examples. Since it is not to be sent, you don’t have to be polite or walk around your anger; in fact, make it as vitriolic as you can.
6. Put both letters to the side – for the time being.

**Now, You are ready to approach your sibling.**

7. Write a letter not email to your sibling (even if you live in the same city) saying you are unhappy about your relationship. You would like things to be better. So, to help you understand the problem from his or her perspective, you invite a letter explaining the problem as she sees it.
8. When you get a return letter – before you react to what has been said about you -- respond to how your sibling must feel – given his or her perspective of the problem. (Even if your sibling has the story entirely wrong, only respond to the feelings. Remember, you’ll have your turn later to correct information or tell your side.)
9. Chances are you’ll get a response to your empathetic letter.
10. You may have to do several rounds of letters from your sibling’s perspective before you have a chance to tell your story.
11. You’ll know when it is the time for you to write your version, i.e. once you truly understand the problem between you two from your sibling’s perspective.
12. At that point, using your letter from above (#3), edit out the vitriolic language so it is clear you are talking about how you experienced the situation. Do not tell your sibling what he or she did wrong, only how it felt to be on your side of what happened.
13. You can continue writing back and forth, using these “I Statements.” At some point, you may want to suggest meeting to talk in person. But, don’t rush that. The

problems took a long time to evolve, so give yourself time to resolve them.

14. Consider getting together for a sibling weekend, perhaps a sibling retreat, where you can get into more depth about the causes and how to get past the problems.

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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