

**Problems with Your Siblings?
Change Comes from Changing Yourself
Or
What I learned from two 90 year old siblings
Dr. Karen Gail Lewis**

A new year offers new opportunities and new adventures. It offers a chance to be thankful for what is going well in your life and a chance to improve what is not. And, it offers a chance to think about your relationships, assessing what you can improve and what is beyond your control.

This distinction is crucial. Usually, you have more success in changing yourself than in trying to change others. Here's a gem of a story that demonstrates this point.

Clare, an only child in her late 40s telephoned me. "I understand you're a specialist in siblings. My mother and aunt are so cruel to each other, it breaks my heart. You've got to help me," she pleaded.

She explained she has always been close with her mother and her mother's only sibling, Aunt Helen, who has no children. She loves them both, yet the sisters have bitterly argued with each other their entire lives. Whatever one says, the other challenges; they criticize each other, make nasty and snide remarks.

Yet, six years ago, when Aunt Helen was 85 and needed Assisted Living, Clare's mother, then 84, moved with her. For the first few years, they lived down the hall from each other, but the staff were so concerned about their bickering they moved Aunt Helen to an apartment on the other side of the building.

I asked Clare, "Why are you so upset now if they've always been like this?"

"They won't live forever, and I can't stand the thought of one of them dying while they are so angry at each other. Some days, they're so vicious, I hate visiting them."

I agreed to see if I could help, but I was apprehensive. Sure, I'm an expert in adult siblings, but what did I know about being 90 years old? I'm past a half century, but how could I really understand what it means to be at the end of your life, when time is measured in months or days not years? Would I miss the full impact of what it means to be the last two remaining family members of their original family?

Clare arranged for me to meet the three of them at her mother's apartment. When I arrived, she introduced me, reminding them I was there to help them get along better.

Just mentioning that started them squabbling as to who started the arguments. Their accusations covered nine decades, most coming from their childhood, with variations of "Mom loved you more."

Clare gave me a helpless gesture. When I tried to interrupt the sisters, whether to ask a question or make a statement, they talked right over me. After several attempts, it suddenly became clear: their squabbling was important to them. It had been part of their life for 90 years. Whatever it used to mean, it had shifted, and now the fighting was all that was left from their childhood. It was a way to keep their mother, dead for over 30 years, alive. While arguing, they were still 9 and 10 years old with a whole life ahead of them.

With this flash of insight, I knew exactly how to help. As the sisters' voices rose, I turned to Clare and spoke in a loud enough voice for them, if they chose, to hear. "Their squabbling is important to them. Why would you want to take it away? However, you have to protect yourself from getting so upset by it."

Without lowering their voices in argument at each other, the sisters looked at me as I spoke and nodded.

Clare exclaimed, "But, I can't stand to hear them go at each other like that."

"What would help you, then," I asked?

"Huh? For them to stop fighting," she repeated.

"That's trying to change something in them that they don't want changed. But, you can make changes that will protect you from having to hear them. For instance, you could tell them when you visit that if they start arguing, either they can stop or you will leave. That gives them the choice if they would rather see you at that time or have their argument. It might help, Clare, to remember the squabbling is their way of staying connected. As odd as it seems to us, it is their hopeful statement of, 'we are still alive and here.'"

Three months later, I got a call from Clare thanking me profusely. "They are still at it, but some of the times when I speak up, they smile at each other and stop squabbling. Other times they don't even hear me, and I quietly leave. I feel so much freer. I thought I had to help them, but in fact I had to help me. That shift made it easier because I can do something about my problem."

As the new year begins, look carefully at what you can do differently in your relationships rather than wait for others to change. You'll be surprised at the changes you may actually get.)

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