

I May Not Like You, but You Are My Sibling

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

You grew up with brothers and sisters. You played with them; you fought with them. They tattled on you (or you tattled on them). Mom liked you more; Dad liked them more.

You're grown up now. Do you still have the same squabbles? Can you write the conversations before they even occur? Do you get along well – except for certain topics? Do you speak to your siblings now? And, are they still alive so you can speak to them?

In 1998, Chris Evert decided to do something special. She had grown up with a brother and a sister – both of them dead long before they should have been. From being part of a set of siblings, she became an only child. Whatever her childhood experiences with her brother and sister, she took her loss and her memories and translated them into action. She started working towards a National Siblings Day.

She says, "Mother's Day and Father's Day honor the living parents." She wants a day to honor the people who grew up with you. This would be the people who shared your bedroom, your clothes, who fought over the same toys. She also wants a day to memorialize those siblings who are no longer in your life. She picked April 10, her sister's birthday.

By now, more than 2/3 thirds of the states have recognized National Siblings Day and Evert is hot on the trail of having President Bush make it a national proclamation.

Evert turned whatever her feelings about her siblings in childhood into a positive action for herself – and others. What do you do with your childhood feelings about your brothers and sisters?

"Last Tuesday, like every first Tuesday of the month for the past 12 years, I got in my red Subura and drove four hours straight north on I-95 to Denny's. Why? Because my sister Chrissy drove south on I-95 for the same four hours to meet me." Robin grins, "I wouldn't miss these Tuesdays even if the Queen of

England were coming to town. We had lunch and spent the day together, poking around shops, exploring new areas, but mostly sitting and talking.

Robin and Chrissy, mid-life married women, have arranged their work schedule so they can have this special time together every month.

"We weren't always this close. There were 30 plus years when we wouldn't go so far as our own backyards to spend time together. Mom had always wanted us to be close, but when we were little, she's 15 months older than I, we fought over everything; I always ended up crying. When we were teenagers, she was nasty when I borrowed her clothes, her make-up, or her jewelry. True, I didn't always ask first, but after all, I was a teenager!

After college, we went our own ways. We got together twice a year at our parents' home for Thanksgiving and Passover. These were the only times our kids got to see and play with each other.

But then, something changed at our mother's funeral; it was almost magical. As we stood over her casket, it was as if her hand came up and grabbed us and made us hug. That hug changed our lives."

Chrissy had never heard of National Siblings Day. "I think it's a great idea, at least now. How would I have felt before Mom died? I'm ashamed to say, but I think I would have laughed. Why would I want to celebrate a day for a person whom I didn't really care about?"

Joshua also had never heard about National Siblings Day. "I have mixed feelings. I rarely talk with my two sisters, only when they call me. Would I like to be closer? Maybe, but would I do anything to make it happen? Probably no. My brother though is another story. I don't like him. I certainly don't care if I never see him again."

I ask, "If your brother called and said he was in serious trouble, or was really sick, and needed your help...."

He finishes my sentence, "Well, that would be different. I'd be right there."

"Why, if you don't like him?"

"He's my brother." Joshua grimaces as if thinking. "I know that doesn't make sense. I'm not sure I can answer that, but we used to be real close when we were little. Well, we fought a lot. Rather, I used to beat him up. He was an annoying pest."

He stops, trying to make sense of his contradictions. "I don't know why, but I guess because he is my brother," he repeats. "I don't like who he has become now, and I don't really care about any of the three of them, but I wouldn't want anything to happen to them. That doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?"

Ninety-five percent of Americans grow up with at least one brother or sister. That's a huge statistic, yet so little attention is paid to such a significant relationship. Most adults get on with their lives, ignoring their siblings or taking their existence for granted, like Joshua, and like Chrissy and Robin before their mother's death.

Joyce, though, knows what can happen when you take a sibling for granted. "I come from a large family; there were six of us kids, and only three are left. That's a lot of people to die so young. I wasn't even close to my two younger brothers, but their deaths changed my view of my family and myself. We weren't a family of eight anymore. For holidays now, the dinner table isn't as crowded. It's little things like this that jump out and grab me, more so than the actual loss of my brothers. Instead of being a middle child, I'm the second oldest and only girl now."

In hearing about April 10 as a day to honor or memorialize siblings, Joyce says, "I love the idea. I think I'll do something special for Donny, Paul, and Gordon. Maybe I'll write them a letter telling them how I feel about them as my only living siblings – even if I don't send it. Or, maybe I'll plant a tree in my yard to remind me of my siblings, those here and those who have died. I don't know, but I certainly am going to think about it." She repeats, "I love the idea of a National Siblings Day."

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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