

Siblings' Images of Each Other Become Frozen in Time

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

"I don't understand why you are so angry." Donald annoyingly sighs into the phone. "Mom's been sick for two months; I call every week, and I've flown up to visit three times so far."

"There you go again. Telling me what a great son you are, all the wonderful things you are doing for her," Mary screams. "It's always you, you, you. What about me? What about all that I do? I'm over to see her every day, juggling my husband and children, checking on the visiting nurses, taking her to doctor appointments."

Regardless how much you have matured and changed over the years, your images of each other remain frozen from childhood. These frozen images distort today's communication.

Donald, fast approaching 60, sees himself as a caring brother; that's why Mary's anger baffles him. "No matter how helpful I am, no matter what I do, Mary is nasty to me."

For Mary, "Donnie was my idol. Sure, I knew Mom thought the sun rose and set on him. But, because he treated me so special, I wasn't jealous. Once he went off to college, though, it was like he dumped me! Now, it's happening all over again. He's away leading his life, and I'm here taking care of mom -- who idolizes him."

Mary's frozen images from childhood have her brother as selfish and self-absorbed and herself playing second fiddle. Donald's frozen images have Mary as his adoring little sister and himself as the caring big brother. These childhood impressions have become crystallized in their perceptions of themselves and each other.

From the outside, it is easy to see why Mary is angry and why Donald is hurt and confused. Usually, though, you only know your perspective; you don't have the advantage of seeing your

siblings' side. And, you may not be aware the old impressions drive the conflict of your present day problems.

Melting these frozen images takes a willingness to see your history through a different lens. It also takes a desire to remove the bitterness and to establish a cleaner relationship as adults. With willingness and desire, you can reach out to forge a new relationship.

One secret to success is being open to hearing your siblings' feelings about you. Ask yourself: Could my sister feel I have hurt, abandoned, or angered her? Does my brother know I really care what he has to say? Or whatever the questions that will help you better sense how your sibling sees you.

One method for reconnecting with your siblings is through a sequence of letters. Letters reduce the likelihood of knee-jerk reactions, giving you both time and space to think about your comments and your responses.

In your initial letter, tell you siblings you miss being close, or you don't like the tension. Invite them to tell their story of the problem between you two. Ask if you have hurt them. Be honest and willing to hear what they have to say.

In your second letter, acknowledge the feelings they expressed in their return letter to you. Once they believe you have really heard them, they will be more ready to listen to your feelings. Express your hope that understanding each other's view point leads to a stronger relationship.

If you are still having trouble, you may want to consult a counselor who specializes in working with adult siblings.

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.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis
DrKarenGailLewis.com
drkgl@Drkarengaillewis.com
301-585-5814

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