Siblings:

The Ghosts of Childhood That Haunt Your Love and Work

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Introduction

Just mention the word "sibling" and everyone has a story to share. It might be a happy story or a miserable one, but they want to tell it. And with at least 80% of Americans having a sibling, that's a lot of stories.

Siblings have played a crucial role in the Bible, fairy tales, mythology and cartoons. You can hardly pick up a novel or watch a movie without seeing some reference to siblings, whether a love story, mystery, or adventure, whether the siblings like each other or not.

The sibling relationship is important, even powerful. But the influence brothers and sisters have on each other's lives goes far beyond their own interactions. Understanding the quality and emotional tone of your childhood relationships provides a rich source of information about and explanations of who you are today and, perhaps equally important, the personal, work, and love issues you have bumped into over the years. In addition, how you related with your siblings in your early years can shape your children's relationships with each other.

"Oh, come off it," you may say. "I haven't seen my sister in years." Or, "Who are you kidding? We don't even like each other." What I hope you also say is, "Prove it. Show me why my relationships with people I am not fond of have any connection to who I am in my life now just because we share DNA." That's exactly what I will do in the following pages.

First, let's take a look at the three examples of the impact of sibling relationships below.

Stu and Janet, high-school sweethearts, had been married for 18 years and had two children. They were both successful professionally and clearly committed to their marriage. But to hear them tell it, it was an awful marriage; they argued constantly. They'd begun therapy with me and dropped out several times over the years, never improving their relationship nor separating.

Carol was an attorney in commercial real estate for 15 years. She told me, "I'm a good real-estate attorney for most buyers. But, when the high-powered big buyers come in, I cower. My voice shakes; I let them push me around. Why? I lose a lot of potential big deals. This doesn't make any sense."

Carl and Stephanie, parents of teenage sons, were having marital problems. She was angry that Carl was not trying hard enough to get another job after his real-estate company went out of business two years ago. He said he really did want to work, but he managed to sabotage all of his efforts at job hunting.

What do these adults have in common? There is a good chance that each of their problems is related to unresolved issues from childhood -- with their siblings. Without being aware of it, the way they are feeling and handling their situations may be a result of how they felt about a brother or sister when they were elementary-school age or younger. You will learn more about each of these people in later chapters.

We are a psychologically astute society. We are no longer skeptical when we hear a man "married" his mother or a woman chose a husband "just like her father." We know that means a person responds to the spouse as she or he did with a parent. The person re-experiences some of the same feelings and behavior patterns in the marriage as she had with a parent. This is called a *parental transference*. It causes problems for many marriages, which often end up with what some therapists refer to as "divorcing the wrong person." They try to solve the problem without addressing the core issues about the parent.

However, if aware their problems are connected to their parents, many couples can work through their unresolved parent issues in their relationship with their spouse. The result is a better marriage and possibly resolved issues with parents.

Less well known than parental transference is *sibling transference*. This occurs when feelings you had toward one or more siblings in childhood get transferred in adulthood to people you are close to, such as lovers and husbands, bosses and co-workers, even friends. The old feelings are invisible, like ghosts, but they stay with you through life, showing up in transformed shapes. These invisible ghosts haunt you when you least expect them. And because you are not conscious of their presence, you may be responding to people in your current life as you had to your siblings way back when.

Ghosts have at least three components: frozen images, crystallized roles, and unhealthy loyalty. How you felt about a sibling in early childhood can become frozen and reflect how you see them today, regardless how much each of you has changed. If a brother scared you back then, you may find yourself feeling scared of him now when he talks loudly, argues with you, frowns at something you have done or said, even though you know he will not hurt you. These are frozen images. You may recognize that they are present when you overreact to something he has said or done. Frozen images with siblings can be transferred onto other adults in your life.

In all families, parents tend to label their children, assigning roles that shape part of their behavior. Look at your own family and you can tell who is the Comic, the Smart One, the Troublemaker, the Irresponsible One, the Loner, etc. Sometimes, the roles are in place within the first few months of life. As parents talk about their children, they may say, "Even as a newborn, he has always been inquisitive/cranky/sweet." Once assigned a role, children tend to live it out. In adulthood, the role may no longer fit, but it is crystallized into their identity – affecting their personal and work lives.

The unhealthy loyalty issue is even more subtle because the internal pressure to protect or care for a sibling may hold you back. If the child deemed the Smart One in adulthood is having trouble professionally, and the Goof Off has just been promoted – again – the Goof Off may flub up, feeling she is being disloyal to her sister. Conversely, the Smart One may become an underachiever out of an

unconscious loyalty to her Goof Off sibling, letting the latter *finally* be the more successful one.

What makes all of this so complex is that these behaviors are unconscious; the ghosts live within everyone, but they haunt inconsistently. If they were always present, we could get used to them, get a handle on them, and work around then. But their being invisible *and* inconsistent makes it hard to even identify their existence. They quietly ride along in your adult life until a spouse/lover, someone at work, or a friend makes a comment or facial expression that leaves you feeling as you had with a sibling when you were little. Then, *whoosh;* up pops your sleeping sibling ghosts, taunting you, depending on you, adoring you, betraying you, expecting something from you.

In addition to these childhood sibling ghosts being transferred onto others, they also erupt in your dealings with your siblings in your adult life. You may wonder why, in the middle of an ordinary conversation, your sibling suddenly shouts at you or acts as if you have hurt or humiliated her, or are taking advantage of her, when you are only stating your position or making a simple comment. This transference is especially common when siblings are in the presence of their parents or when they are trying to work together to take care of their aging parents.

Perhaps you do not want to improve your relationship with your siblings. That is your choice. However, it is hard to make a clear choice about relationships when the invisible ghosts still haunt you, causing you to react in ways that don't always make sense. It is hard to make a choice when you are really fighting with a ghost.

You need to understand how these ghosts silently and inconsistently permeate so many parts of your life, causing problems in ways you may never have considered. Once the invisible becomes visible, you have more choices. It's like the difference between driving in a fog where little is visible

and driving on a sunny day where you can see the road and trees clearly far into the distance.

Chapter One

The Ghosts You Live With

No matter how close or distant your relationship with your siblings is now, they are a part of who you are. You grew up together; they have known you longer than anyone else in your life. You have a shared history unlike that with anyone else. For these very reasons, as an adult you have *two* sets of siblings: The first, your original siblings, are made of flesh and blood; they are the ones with whom you grew up and who have changed and aged as you have.

The second set of siblings is the creation of your childhood perceptions, feelings, hurts, and resentments about your original siblings. These siblings, like ghosts, are not visible, and they never age. You carry them within you, and they haunt you. Your sister, for example, compliments you on a sweater you are wearing and you tense up; you are not consciously aware of your old feelings of rage toward your teenage sister when she used to wear your clothes without permission. Or let's say a brother gives you a gift, but instead of responding with pleasure you feel anxiety, unaware that it's linked to the time as a kid when you opened a present from the same brother and a lizard jumped out. Whether or not you are aware of these old feelings, you may bring them to any current situation with your siblings.

These memories and feelings from the past live in you throughout your life. While most of the time they lie dormant, sometimes they jump into action, distorting how you relate to your siblings now. The feelings can also infiltrate your current emotional life (see Chapter Two) and your relationships with spouses and lovers, people at work, and friends (see Chapter Three).

Before you can understand how old feelings about your siblings infiltrate so many parts of your life, you need to understand the aspects of your ghosts that are at play--*frozen images* and *crystallized roles*--and how they can lead to an *unhealthy loyalty* in your adult years.

Frozen Images

Frozen images are the childhood perceptions brothers and sisters had of one another that you carry into adulthood, regardless of how old you are or how much you and they have changed over the years. These images develop through your interactions with each other in childhood and/or through your parents' attitudes and behaviors toward the siblings. Your frozen images can be positive or negative, but if you are not aware of them, they can distort your interactions with your siblings today.

For instance, if a sibling taunted you when you were little, you may carry a negative frozen image of that sibling into adulthood. Even typical childhood taunts can become internalized, and long after the scars have healed, the memories and emotions attached to them remain.

Idealized frozen images can be just as destructive as negative ones. They can prevent siblings from seeing each other as you really are, both loving and flawed; when a sibling is on a pedestal, there is only one way to go -- down. Further, keeping a sibling on a pedestal prevents you from being fully yourself in the relationship because you are always looking up, relating to an image.

The early hurts or distorted perceptions become an integral part of how you and your siblings see each other now, whether they are idealized or negative. They become frozen in your mind, and if they aren't examined for accuracy, even a look, hand gesture, or innocent words from a sibling can trigger old feelings despite your chronological age. The power is so strong that at that point, you are not relating to your adult sibling, but to their ghosts from the past. This is especially evident when a family is under stress, such as at holiday gatherings or with an aging parent.

The relationship between Donald and Hannah, under the stress of their mother's ill health, illustrates the power of frozen images. Donald, 51, telephoned his only sibling, Hannah, 11 years his junior, to talk about their mother's medical problems. What he intended as a friendly conversation blew up on him.

Donald cheerfully greeted his sister. "Hi, Hannah. Mom called asking me to look up this new doctor you found for her. I checked with the AMA directory and asked a doctor friend of mine if…."

"How dare you! Don't you think I know how to pick a good doctor for her? You don't even ask about me before you offer your pearls of wisdom! You don't do a friggin' thing, except look up a doctor, and you think you're something special."

"Hey, what's wrong?" Donald felt ambushed. "Why are so angry at me? Mom's been sick for two months. I call every week, and I've flown up to visit her three times." His voice begins to rise. "What more do you want from me?"

"You are so full of yourself," Hannah shouted. "It's always you, you, you. What about all that I do? I'm over to see her every day. So what if I have three teenagers who need my attention and a husband who is crumbling under the stock market drop? So what if I have to deal with the conflicting doctors' orders, the visiting nurse who forgot to come, the medication that makes mom sick?"

Her voice lowered into scathing sarcasm. "As long as you call every seven days and visit when it's convenient, you're still the golden-haired son who can do no wrong. No matter what you say or do, Mom thinks the sun rises and sets on you."

Donald was floored. "What in the world are you talking about, and what does that have to do with anything now?"

Hannah screamed in a wash of tears, "I could never trust you! And, now here you are, letting me do all the work and make all the hard decisions, and Mom turns to *you* for approval on *my* decisions. I'm so angry, I can't even talk. I'm hanging up."

Variations of this kind of interchange among adult siblings happen all the time. You may call it miscommunication, or say Donald's being insensitive or

Hannah's just hostile or they both are overreacting. All of that may be true, but it doesn't get to the core of what's going on. Without understanding what lies behind Hannah's rage, frozen images will continue to interfere with their mother's needs.

Hannah was caught in a frozen image of her brother that prevented her from having a calm discussion with Donald. While she may have had reason to feel he was discounting her, her extreme reaction suggests she was being haunted by a frozen image of Donald from her past.

How did Hannah's frozen image of Donald as selfish get formed? What led to her bitterness toward him and distrust of him? In working with them in therapy, I learned that the turning point in Hannah's relationship with Donald occurred the summer before he left for college, when she was 7-years-old. Based on what she described, I can recreate what she might have been thinking about her brother at that time.

"I adore Donnie! He is so handsome, and he pays attention to me; he likes me. He lets me go with him and his friends when they drive around after school; they just hang out or whistle at girls. He's not embarrassed having me tag along. I feel so grown up with them. I'm going to miss him a lot when he goes to college in September.

"Mom adores Donnie too. When he walks into the room, her face lights up. She calls him 'the sunshine of my life.' I'm quieter; Mom and Dad don't pay much attention to me. I don't mind, because Donnie treats me like I'm special."

Hannah said she had missed Donnie very much when he left for college, but focused on how happy she'd be when he came back for Thanksgiving. Her eager anticipation, though, led to heartbreak. The result drastically changed her thinking about Donnie and laid the foundation for a shift in her frozen image of him.

"I hate him! I was counting the days for him to come home. Mom let me wait up late until he arrived. He always used to let me jump into his arms and

then he'd twirl me around and tickle me, but this time he barely noticed me. I thought, maybe he wanted to make Mom and Dad feel good first. But he barely noticed me that evening. The next morning he skipped breakfast and raced out to meet his friends *without me*! I hardly saw him all weekend, and when he was home, he didn't say anything special to me. He thinks he's such a big shot!"

Hannah's idealized image of her brother was shattered, replaced by feelings of betrayal and distrust. Then, as an adult, she was not aware why she was so angry at him.

Older siblings may not be aware of their importance to a younger brother or sister. An older, who typically develops emotionally and physically before the younger ones, is ready to move forward, unaware of the impact on the younger. Therefore, when entering a new developmental stage, such as adolescence or post-high school, the older may begin pulling away from the family in order to forge a place in his peer world. The younger sibling may be resentful and even feeling abandoned at being left behind. Another way to think of this is that siblings look ahead (whether to emulate or be different); for the younger ones, ahead is an older sibling, for the older, ahead is away from family.

From what Hannah described, we can assume Donald loved her; he enjoyed playing with her and was tolerant of her wanting to hang out with him. However, once in college, his attention was directed to his new life.

Donald had his chance with me to describe what was going on in his life that Thanksgiving weekend. His story was very different than his sister's.

"I can't wait to go home for Thanksgiving so I can see my buddies. I have to be careful, though, because Mom will want me to spend all my time with her. I love being away from home. At first, I was homesick, but I've made some cool friends here.

"There's a lot of pressure being the oldest son, but I always know what to do to make my family proud: get good grades, don't get in trouble, be polite, and do what I'm told. On my college application I had to write about my good qualities. I still remember how proud I felt to write that I am a caring son and grandson — a caring person."

His world was figuring out how to integrate his high school and college lives and how to continue being the perfect son, meeting his parents' expectations. Donnie hadn't thought about how excited Hannah would be to see him. He hadn't ignored her; he was just focused on reconnecting with his friends, swapping roommate stories, talking about college girls. While Hannah anxiously waited for him to relate to her the way she expected, he was off with his friends. At the end of the holiday, Donald returned to college feeling good.

However, since Donnie had been Hannah's world, the holiday ended for her with rage, resentment, and a betrayal that would affect their relationship in adulthood.

Recognizing Frozen Images

One way to get to the core issue of current hostility or tension with a sibling is to recognize the clues indicating the presence of frozen images. If you know what to look for they often are easy to spot. Donald sounded cheerful at the start of the call. He thought he was being helpful by doing what their mother asked him to do.

Hannah's immediate fury was intense and *out of the blue*, a good clue she was responding out of a childhood image of Donald. Using *childhood descriptions* of him by accusing him of being their mother's golden-haired son was another clue of her negative frozen image of her brother.

Donald's initial response, asking "Hey, what's wrong?" might have broken through Hannah's frozen image, but he didn't wait for her answer. Instead, he

became defensive and raised his voice. Since he was used to being appreciated for his efforts, he was angry at being yelled at when he was trying to be helpful. His anger increased hers. At this point, both were now caught in emotions totally out of line with the issue at hand. Such *escalating antagonism* is another clue that frozen images are at play in a sibling interaction.

The *absolute words*, "always" and "never," that peppered Hannah's comments are more clues to frozen images from the past. For example, "I could never trust you," or "It's always you" indicate Hannah has held on to her old image of his betrayal, discounting the many times in adulthood that he may have been there for her.

Thinking back on their phone call, and now knowing more about that pivotal moment in Hannah's childhood, you can understand how their old ghosts haunted their conversation.

By catching the clues when a conversation slides into the past, you can stop responding from your frozen images and deal with the anger that is related directly to the current situation. In a later chapter, we'll talk about how to do this.

Crystallized Roles

The second type of sibling ghost shows up in crystallized roles. While all parents label their children, such as the gifted one or the athlete, the roles often become fixed, defining the child.

Crystallized roles can start as early as infancy. When standing over the cradle, a parent may say, "Look at how intensely she looks at everyone. You can tell she'll be a real thinker." An innocent comment may evolve into a rigidly held image of a child.

Parents do not intentionally create roles; they may only be aware of directing a child in areas they perceive as the child's interest, talent, or personality. Yet, too often, an unconscious intent is that by having different

roles, they are protecting their children from competition and rivalry, So, if one child is better in sports, another who is not as good, may be praised for his musical ability or encouraged in being "the family comic."

The message children get, then, is that competition between siblings is unacceptable and unloving. This unfortunately feeds into the culturally gendered message that competition is not feminine, that girls should not be competitive. This may be especially true for mothers who, being female, were raised with that same message.

In itself, there is nothing wrong with parents assigning roles based on what they think fits their children. Problems arise if the role becomes a rigid part of a child's identity – especially if internally it doesn't fit the self-identity

When competition is not openly allowed it can go underground. This is seen most dramatically among sisters who may silently vie to weigh the least, which can result in anorexia or bulimia.

Another unintended result of avoiding competition can be the creation of polar-opposite roles. An example of this is when one child is an over-achiever and another is identified as the under-achiever or as weak or inadequate. Other examples of opposite roles are the responsible/the irresponsible, the goody-two-shoes/the ne'er-do-well, the generous/the selfish the comic/the nerd, the neatnik/the slob.

Sometimes, when siblings have opposite roles, they take extreme positions as a way of *indirectly* expressing competition. Each sibling becomes more extreme in out-doing the other in their differences. It's as if one says, "If you increase the pressure to be good, I will increase the pressure to be even more bad." This concept of escalation of opposites often explains the extremes that exist in some siblings' behaviors, such as one sibling achieving a position of great power and respect and another becoming an under-achiever, an addict, or whatever will embarrass the family. Unfortunately, these sharply defined differences can harm each of them the individual as well as their relationship.

Some children have an innate awareness that they are being squeezed into a role that doesn't fit and recognize that this is their parents' need. These children wear their assigned roles as a coat, knowing it has nothing to do with who they are inside. If they have enough support from others or life experience they may be able to break free from the role, while still a child or once they become an adult.

The Effect of Crystallized Roles in Adulthood

No matter how much the siblings have changed and shucked off these early roles, all they have to do is be with their parents and siblings for a weekend, day, even an hour, and the old roles pop up again as if they had never left. Parents often reinforce these crystallized roles with their adult children, unwittingly pitting siblings against each other.

For instance, when parents, even with the best intentions, share their concerns with the "sensitive" child about "the problem" one, they are reinforcing the assigned roles. The problem one may feel violated, having mother talk about her issues with a sibling. This could contribute to her resentment – not at mother but at the sibling. Whatever mother passes along from one to another has the potential for siblings reacting negatively to each other. Of course, continuing to practice parental favoritism is also harmful to adult sibling relationships.

By staying locked in rigid roles as adults, siblings limit their potential and expression of the full breadth of who they can be. They also limit the potential of their relationships with one another.

Marshall and his brother Ben had severe relationship problems. When Marshall told me his story, we both saw how the crystallized roles not only misdirected the brothers as children, but also interfered with their relationship as adults.

"I grew up knowing that my grandfather, who loved all types of sports, was disappointed in my father's lack of coordination. I suspect that's why Dad

was dismissive of my athletic ability. I excelled in all sports as a kid, but instead of being proud of me, my father used to say, 'If you were more like your brother Benny and spent more time working on your math, you might make something of yourself one day.'

"Instead of being proud of me, he ridiculed me for the one thing I did perfectly. It's as if he felt badly that he disappointed his father by not being athletic, so he made me feel bad because I was.

"He pushed Benny into being a math maven, which I can now see was awful. Ben never liked math, but he wanted to please our father. So he became Dad's favorite, which he used to hold over me. And, to maintain that role, he had to push me away since that's what he saw father do. It's easy to understand now why there are bad feelings between us."

Over time, Marshall and Ben were able to recognize how their sibling ghosts from the past limited the possibilities for their current relationships. With that, they were both freed from crystallized roles.

(See Chapter Five for how crystallized roles can be passed down through generations of siblings.)

Unhealthy Loyalty to Your Ghosts

In addition to understanding how your frozen images and crystallized roles infuse your perception of your siblings today, it's crucial to recognize how they can lead to an unconscious loyalty to your siblings, a loyalty that inhibits your potential in some area of your life.

Loyalty, especially within a family, is like an invisible web of unwritten rules that weaves your family together. The rules and expectations for the family were established by your parents, often passed down by their parents before them. Loyalty to the family and its rules can be healthy, enriching family

members with a sense of connection and support. On the other hand, unhealthy loyalty can be a shackle you drag along throughout life.

When crystallized roles exist in a family, one of the unwritten rules of loyalty is that you accept the roles your parents created. For instance, suppose the crystallized roles were that your older brother be the brain and you be the cute one. Because of an unhealthy loyalty, now, as an adult, you want to break out of your role, but you keep sabotaging yourself professionally. By not allowing yourself to risk being more successful than your brother, you maintain the unhealthy loyalty to your family rules and to the crystalized role assigned to you both.

Thus, an unhealthy loyalty to these unwritten rules in adulthood can result in self-sabotage and affect your love as well as your sibling relationships. For example, Kent came to see me when his four-month relationship with his girlfriend ended. He was crushed. "I don't know if I'm more distressed or embarrassed by her leaving. I'm 33, and this was my first long-term relationship--and it wasn't all that long."

Several times, he described himself as having been shy all his life. Wondering if was locked into a crystallized role, I asked about his siblings. With a huge smile, he told me about Claudine, the sister just above him in age.

"Claudine has always been funny. In fact, we started calling her CC, for Carol Channing." He recounted with great humor some of her antics.

When I commented on his humor, he looked down and his voice became quiet. In fact, his whole body seemed smaller. Testing the possibility that his loyalty to his sister's role as the comic was creating problems, I probed, "You seemed very different while talking about Claudine. In fact, you were quite funny in describing her to me. Are you aware of your own good sense of humor?"

"That's not true," he insisted. "Claudine is the funny one. Everyone knows I'm shy. I've always been shy."

"That may be true, but I wonder what it would be like for you to let out the funny part of yourself. In fact, I wonder if your shyness actually helps you avoid the humorous part of yourself."

"You don't understand! CC's the comedian in our family."

Clearly I had touched on a sensitive spot. I asked as gently as I could, "How would CC feel if she saw this side of you?"

"You don't get it, that's who *she* is. I can't …," he hesitated as if struggling for the right word.

I filled in, "intrude on her role?"

"Yes, that's just it. There's not room for two comedians in our family." He looked shocked and after a moment's silence, said, "Where in the world did that come from?"

This led to a discussion about how roles got assigned in his family and how everyone would react if Kent owned his humorous part that he kept hidden under his shyness.

"I wonder whether this has something to do with why I can't keep a relationship. I mean, maybe I've been hiding myself, so it's hard for a woman to see me."

Kent decided to experiment expressing his own humor with his family and with the women he dated. His shyness gradually began to dissolve. Far from being upset, CC was delighted to share humor with him.

Seeing aspects of yourself you've denied can be disconcerting; it may take time to integrate them into your way of being. Similarly, seeing your siblings as they are, without your frozen images and the crystallized roles, may leave you feeling disloyal -- as if you have abandoned the siblings of your childhood. On the other hand, it will leave you feeling freer and better about yourself and them. (For more about Unhealthy Loyalty with siblings, see Chapter Three).

Chapter Two

Ghosts Invading Your Inner Life

Now that you understand how ghosts from the past can affect your adult sibling relationships, we'll look at the power they have to unconsciously develop an emotional or a behavioral problem. I stress that the connection between your problem and sibling ghosts is unconscious. No one wakes up one day and thinks, "Today I will develop an emotional problem in order to express anger at my sister." That said, it's is extremely helpful to discover that a connection may exist between a personal problem and one or more of your siblings. Your problem may be as specific as agoraphobia or bulimia, or as general as depression or anxiety.

As unlikely as this may seem at first, in fact it can make sense. A problem can serve the unconscious purpose of healing a relationship, releasing a frozen image, shifting a crystallized role, or escaping an unhealthy loyalty. It can also be a way to shift childhood anger at your parents onto your siblings. Whatever the purpose, these old ghosts hang onto unresolved issues from childhood that then haunt you as an adult, sometimes through the development of a problem. (Obviously, not all emotional and behavioral problems serve an unconscious purpose of resolving family issues.)

When you are unaware of, or don't acknowledge, the unconscious purpose of your problem, you are powerless to take responsibility for your feelings. And, because the message to a sibling is indirect, your sibling doesn't get it. Thus, your purpose does not succeed. This leaves you at the mercy of your sibling ghosts and unable to resolve the past *and* to heal your current personal problem.

Emotional problems related to you siblings usually fall under one of four categories. While I will describe them separately, they often overlap, as a later example demonstrates.

Connecting

You may want more or a different type of contact with a sibling. You may have been rebuffed from trying to connect or you may be unsure how to connect now. This creates the condition for you to unconsciously develop a problem that will bring you together.

Whether an illness, an emotional difficulty, a marriage crisis, or any other type of difficulty, it is not imaginary problem; it is real. You may be unaware of its underlying purpose, but you are sincere in facing and having to cope with it.

For instance, if there is a big age difference between you and your siblings, or you were never close, as an adult you may long for a relationship with them. Or, perhaps you were close with your siblings when you were young, but your lives went in different directions, and you became critical of each other over the years. Or it might be that your crystallized roles from childhood, such as the "overachiever" and the "neer-do-well", caused a rift between you.

In these situations, you may develop an emotional, behavioral, or relational problem in order to have contact. For example, your sibling may do nothing more than call to see how you are doing or may spend hours talking about your problem. It doesn't matter, because you are in touch again; the distance has been bridged.

Sometimes a problem helps connect you with siblings by removing differences. For example, if, as a child, you stood out from the others—say you were the favorite, or you had better social skills—you may have been the target of sibling jealousy. Developing an emotional problem as an adult equalizes you.

Let's say your problem was activated because as an adult, you feel disloyal for once again being more successful, happier, doing better financially, than your siblings. Developing a problem unconsciously can tarnish your specialness, sending the message that you are no longer different from them.

In a variation of the connecting purpose, you develop a problem as a way to bring a sibling back into the family fold. By your family pulling together to help you, they have an opportunity to re-establish contact with each other and to repair old grievances.

Getting even

Frozen images and crystallized roles from childhood may cause unacknowledged or unexpressed jealousy or anger. With no outlet in childhood, they may stay suppressed. Sometimes, in adulthood they are able to be indirectly expressed through your developing an emotional, behavioral, or relational problem that brings a sibling to your aid. This is a powerful way to fight with siblings without their knowing you are angry. It is a way of saying, "Finally, I get to pay you back."

For instance, let's say when you were little one of your siblings was a troublesome child and parents were always chiding him or going to school meetings. Or in a very different scenario, your sibling was seriously ill that require much of your parents' attention. Even if you understood why parents were not able to meet your needs, given the more serious ones of your sibling, you still may have (unconsciously) felt anger or resentment. Today, especially if your sibling is doing well, your problem now may be an indirect way to avenge your old grievance.

Protecting

You may develop a problem with the unconscious intent of protecting either a sibling or a parent.

In protecting a sibling, your intent may be to spare your brother or sister from unwanted parental scrutiny. For instance, you may worry that if your parents knew about your sister's troubled marriage, they might try to help in unwanted ways. By deflecting their attention, you unconsciously hope to give your sister the freedom to solve her own issues.

On the other hand, you may develop a problem to protect your parents from being overwhelmed or disappointed about what's happening in your sibling's life. For instance, if your brother with the assigned role of most likely to succeed is not succeeding, your problem may serve to protect your parents from disappointment or to provide them with an issue that is less overwhelming. Another way you might protect your parents is by having a problem that diverts them from facing their own marital issues.

Separating

The unconscious function of a problem can work in the other direction too. Instead of protecting or bringing family members together, your problem may develop as a way to separate yourself emotionally from them.

For example, if your childhood role was caretaker and your aging parents need attention or a sibling has a life-time disability, you may be the one expected to take charge. If you don't have the internal strength to set boundaries with your family or be honest about your needs, your problem can be a ticket out of your role. It allows you to say you need a break. Even if you are aware of your role, you may have no inkling how your personal problem serves the purpose of extricating yourself.

Since crystallized roles are a part of one's identity, you may unknowingly be reluctant to be released. In fact, you may tell yourself you have to take care of your parents or sibling because no one else is willing or able to. Therefore, if you develop panic attacks, for instance, or can't leave the house, you have a legitimate, albeit unconscious, excuse for why you

can't help. By having your own problem, you get a "vacation"; you can remain within your family yet maintain emotional distance. They can't rely on you to take care of them because now you have your own issues.

When there is more than one purpose

I've described the purposes separately, but in fact, they often exist in combination with one another. While it is hard to see how your problem may serve a purpose or a message to a sibling, it is even more complex to recognize when it sends more than one to a sibling. In the following example a woman divulges her bulimia. As they talk, the two sisters discover the connection between the eating disorder and their relationship back in high school.

Alice was 29 years old and had been secretly bulimic many years when she came to me for professional help. She and Sue, who was 2 years older, had been very close as children but grew apart during their high school years, when the bulimia started. On a hunch about the timing of the onset, I suggested she invite Sue to a therapy session, hoping for new insights into why Alice binged and purged.

In the session, Sue voiced surprise in hearing about her sister's bulimia. In talking about those years, she told Alice she regretted having been a bad example for her little sister. She explained to me that Alice had had a beautiful figure and was very popular, while she described herself as having been short and fat, with few friends.

Turning to Alice, Sue said, "You were so pretty and your life looked easy. Not me – I was so insecure I ate all the time, and kept getting fatter."

Alice looked shocked hearing her sister had been jealous of her.

I wondered out loud, "Even though you kept it a secret, Alice, could your bulimia have been a way of telling Sue you weren't so different from

her, that you really didn't have it all together? That, in fact, you even had her problem, her obsession with food?"

When Alice nodded, Sue asked, "Did you know I stayed up late, not just to study but to binge when everyone was sleeping?"

Alice looked down and whispered, "I knew, but I never said anything."

I returned to the link between their problems. "Alice, you said your bulimia started during your sophomore year and got worse in junior year. It's as if you took Sue's binging problem and went even further. You finally had a problem worse than hers."

Sue asked, "How was it worse?"

Without hesitation, Alice explained. "I threw up and that's just gross!" She began to cry. "When you went off to college, my world fell apart. I had relied on having you around. I never showed it, but I really admired you. You were smart and deep. You understood stuff. Yes, I was the popular one, but I wanted to be like you. And I wasn't."

"So you found another way to be just like her?" I prodded.

"I guess I did. The bulimia, or at least the binging, felt like a way of holding on to you. It also was proof that I wasn't so perfect, even though I may have looked that way on the outside."

Alice had been stuck in her crystallized role as the perfect girl who had it all, including society's image of the physical ideals--blond, blue eyes, and sweet smile. But, her affection for Sue led her to close the vast difference between them with bulimia (equalizing). It also allowed her to remain tied to her sister when Sue left her for college (connection).

There are no silver bullets, and Alice's bulimia did not magically disappear after this session. However, the sisters stayed in close touch, with Sue offering support. Not much later, Alice asked if she could invite Sue to another session to talk about weight. "I know it's silly, and I know what

she'll say, but I need to ask how she'll feel if I continue to be thinner than she."

Recognizing the Unconscious Purpose

I continue to find it remarkable that when I propose to a client that there may be a sibling connection to the problem, the person usually responds with some variation of, "I never thought about it before, but it makes sense." Sometimes, simply asking about a client's sibling allows the person to connect the dots. However, in some situations, the client resists seeing a connection.

For instance, Tatiana came to see me because she has having trouble advancing in her profession. After some discussion, I asked, "What do your siblings do for a living?"

"Three are doing fine," she answered, "but the oldest is having a hard time finding himself. He's almost 40, and I'm embarrassed that I make more money than he, even though I make so little."

"And, if he had a good paying job?" I asked.

"Then I wouldn't feel so bad if I made more money myself."

She didn't see the significance of what she said until I repeated it back to her. Then the light dawned. From there she worked on her unhealthy loyalty and how that has affected her at work.

There are times, though, when a client's need to maintain the status quo with her sibling is so strong she resists even considering a sibling involvement in her problem.

I met with Dana only once. She came to me after having worked with numerous therapists over the years because of her depression. Now her symptoms were interfering with her job and her marriage. Her previous therapists had not considered the impact of her siblings on her problem, so during the intake I asked if she had any brothers or sisters. She was

surprised at my question but replied she had one older sister she adored but who was mildly retarded.

On a hunch, I asked, "Is your life turning out like Marcia's?"

Dana looked shocked but quickly recovered and responded that it wasn't fair that she was able to finish college, get married, and have a job when Marcia couldn't do any of those things.

I gently asked, "Would walking on bent knees make Marcia any taller?"

Dana snapped right back, "No, but she wouldn't feel so short."

The session ended shortly after that with Dana defensively stating I had not been of any help. This was a woman so bound by a need to equalize her situation with her sister's that she chose to remain depressed and unable to work rather than recognize her sibling ghosts.

When the unconscious purpose develops

Not all problems that have a purpose related to a sibling start out that way. The sibling link can start at one of three times: at the *onset* of a problem, while you are working on fixing the problem, or as you are resolving it.

For instance, when the sibling link is at the *onset* of the problem, there's a direct connection, even if you don't recognize it. It might be your sister has just gotten engaged or is diagnosed with a serious illness; your brother has a bad argument with your parents and is told to never come back home; the brother assigned the "good" role is fired from his job just after the "trouble-maker" sibling landed a very prestigious one.

If your problem is already in place when you recognize that it is connected to your sibling, there is now a benefit for *continuing* the problem. For instance, a man's depression becomes such a worry to his family that his mother urges a brother with whom he doesn't get along to call and check in

with him weekly. Or, a woman recognizes her anxiety and sleep problems have caused her caustic sister to be kinder to her.

Sometimes, the sibling link becomes a factor when you are in the process of *resolving* your problem. Here, the original issues have been addressed, and the problem no longer exists. But, as treatment comes close to ending, you get in touch with fears about the effects your recovery will have on one or more of your siblings.

For instance, a man realizes if he gives up alcohol, he will be the only dry adult in three generations of his family. Or, as a woman whose marital therapy was successfully ending said, "My sister is getting divorced, and I feel I'm letting her down. She's the one with the 'perfect' husband; no one thought my marriage would last. Over the years, complaining about our husbands has been a major bond for us."

Putting It All Together: An Example

The story below illustrates how a personal problem — in this story, an eating disorder -- can be traced back to sibling ghosts. Because this woman did not have a sister, her problem was not related to competition, and unlike many anorexics, she was not focused on her weight.

As you read the example, notice that the onset of her problem was indirectly related to her brothers; it continued when it became a benefit (or a secondary gain) for her whole family. Notice too that as she was recovering, the impact of her brothers' behaviors pulled her back into the anorexia. See if you can identify the different purposes of her anorexia.

Julia was referred to me by her physician who diagnosed her with anorexia. She was a stay-at-home single mother with two young children.

In the first session, Julia explained that she wasn't trying to lose weight, but she just never felt like eating. When I asked about her family, I learned

she lived next door to her aging mother, and her two older brothers, both married with children, lived two blocks away.

In response to my question, Julia described her typical day as beginning by getting her children off to school. Then, she made breakfast and lunch for her mother, who, Julia reported, wouldn't eat "unless I put it in front of her." Julia sat with her but didn't eat. She did the house and yard work for herself and her mom. She also took her mother to doctors' appointments and did other chores for her. The only time she took just for herself was her 1-hour walk to and from her aerobics class. She said, "I like this because I'm not responsible for anyone."

When I asked how she understood her losing so much weight, she responded, "I'm too tired to eat." Given the description of her day, I asked if she felt overwhelmed and angry at her siblings for leaving her with so much responsibility for their mother. She acknowledged she felt overwhelmed, but her brothers were very busy with their lives; she denied feeling any anger. "I'm glad I can help everyone."

From what she told me, I realized her anorexia was atypical; that led me to suspect that there might have been a purpose to her eating disorder related to her siblings. I suggested she bring her brothers to a therapy session, and to my surprise, she agreed.

In our joint session, I told them Julia's diagnosis (they had not noticed her significant weight loss) and her situation. They were alarmed and agreed to make sure Julia ate. With Julia's permission, they set up a schedule to rotate calling her before each meal to encourage her to eat. They also suggested she limit her exercise, to which she agreed, and they took over much of the house and yard work for her and their mother.

Four weeks later, Julia's weight was up and her recovery was in process. However, at this point, her brothers began slacking off, leaving her again with full responsibility for their mother. She lost weight quickly.

In another sibling session, the brothers re-instituted their schedule for making sure Julie did less work and ate more. This time, however, Julie told at her brothers she was angry at them for "treating me like a child" by their scheduling her life. Yet, she insisted she was not angry that they had slacked off their responsibility for their mother.

In subsequent individual sessions, she explored her feelings of anger. "I've never been aware of it before," she said, "but now it's like I've turned on a faucet!" Once she owned her feelings, she realized how angry she has been at her brothers for not paying attention when she told them their mother wasn't eating or taking her medicine, and was failing medically. After some practice in my office, Julia had another session with her brothers. She confronted them, saying, "You need to carry your weight with Mom." They agreed to share the responsibility for their mother; more importantly, though, they finally acknowledged their mother's medical condition.

The several purposes that Julia's anorexia served developed at different points. First, the anorexia developed as a way of silently expressing anger at her brothers for denying their mother's health issues and leaving her full responsibility for taking care of their mother. The anorexia also served as a connector, as a red flag to get her brother's attention to their mother. Ultimately, the anorexia served a separating purpose; when Julia became too ill to continue doing all the work, her brothers had to take on the responsibility for their mother.

Treatment was successful and Julia began to recover -- until her brothers slipped back, again taking her for granted. It was only when she was able to verbally express her anger at them and they resumed their responsibility for their mother that she no longer needed the indirect means of expressing her feelings and resumed normal eating.

Anorexia usually is far more complicated to treat than in this case. If I had not inquired about Julia's siblings, I doubt she would have returned to a normal eating pattern so quickly.

Any emotional, relational, or behavioral problem, especially if it seems entrenched, may serve an unconscious purpose, or send a message, related to one or more siblings. By looking at your problem in terms of your sibling relationships you may discover a solution. As in these examples, sibling ghosts can lead you to develop a problem that affects your inner life. In the next chapter, we'll see how they affect your marriage, work and friendship.

Chapter Three
Ghosts Follow You in Love, Work, and Friendships

Even if you have no desire to repair your current sibling relationships, understanding your frozen images and childhood crystallized roles can resolve many entrenched relationship issues in your life today.

Because sibling ghosts are unconscious, you may not recognize when you are transferring old reactions to your siblings onto people in your current life. Although you may want to break free of the old patterns, you may not be willing to let go of the ghosts – after all, they are familiar. Thus, you might find yourself frequently disappointed by people or betrayed, discounted, taken advantage of, or even emotionally or physically abused. This is often caused by what I refer to as sibling transference.

Sibling Transference

Your early relationship with siblings can be seen as a laboratory for all subsequent relationships. In early childhood you learned (or didn't learn) to start, resolve, and avoid fights. This is when you learned (or didn't learn) to compete, save face, negotiate, cooperate. You learned (or didn't learn) to move between loving and fighting and back to loving again, when to exert your power and when to withdraw. And, if you had less physical power, you learned (or didn't learn) to draw upon other skills -- such as humor, manipulation, blackmail, tattling, or bartering.

Your frozen images and crystallized roles can worm their way into your adult identity, causing you at times to react to your partner, colleagues or friends now as if you were still caught in the old sibling web; this is sibling transference.

Your sibling transference can get triggered by just a look or facial expression. A woman might experience an expression in her boss as

affectionate, reminding her of her warm feelings with a sibling when they were younger. To show how erroneous these transferences can be, what she sees as affection may be his stifling a gas pain. Or, if she had a negative relationship with a sibling, she might react to his look (still from his gas pain) by feeling stupid or intimidated.

Most people are aware of the dynamic of parental transference, even if they don't know the term. This occurs when your feelings and behavior patterns toward your parents when you were a child get recreated in your marriage. We all know couples about whom we think, "she married her father" or "he married his mother."

Sibling transference is similar; you recreate your feelings towards important adults in your life that you had towards your childhood siblings. Situations that evoked strong negative emotions, usually experienced for the first time before the age of 10, set the cycle in motion. Then, as adults, you repeatedly get into or stay in situations that evoke those bad or negative feelings because they are familiar; you know what to expect; there are no surprises. For example a woman stays in a marriage or job where she is regularly criticized; she stays because she is used to her older sister's criticizing her throughout their childhood. Someone without that life experience might leave or demand to be treated better.

Another reason people recreate their history is an unconscious wish that *this time* you can "fix" the problem. Using the above example, the desire is that this time you can do something so the spouse or boss will stop being critical. However, even if you could give the current situation a better resolution, it does not fix the original problem. And, even if you could, the new solution would no longer feel familiar.

In this chapter we'll look first at how your frozen images and your crystalized roles get transferred onto others and haunt your relationships with lovers. Then we'll look at how they follow you to work and intrude in your friendships.

Did You Marry Your Sibling?

Your relationship with your siblings, in some ways, is like a "first marriage." By that, they provided your first experiences of living intimately with people of your same generation. Back then, you shared not only toothpaste, but maybe bedrooms, toys, and then later, friends, and possibly clothes.

When you think about what you learned or didn't learn back in your first living-together peer relationship, you may be surprised that how you felt in some problematic situations with siblings in your "first marriage," are similar to how you sometimes feel in your current marriage or love relationship.

For example, your frozen image of your sister in her crystallized role as the helpless one is transferred onto your partner whom you see as needing your help physically, emotionally, financially, or even organizationally. Or, you maintain your own crystallized role as the messy/fun-loving one by choosing a partner with a polar opposite role -- super neat/competent/serious.

While sibling transferences are not always present in marriage, they occur enough that you should be alert to the clues when your frozen images of siblings are replaying themselves with lovers or spouses. If you recognize the pattern, you can break it. If you don't recognize it, you most likely will keep repeating the pattern, making it very difficult to repair marital problems.

Remember Hannah and Donald from Chapter One? Hannah adored her big brother, but her image of him was crushed when he didn't spend time with her during his college Thanksgiving break. Let's look at how her frozen, idealized image of her brother who then betrayed her gets transferred onto her husband. Also notice how her crystallized role as the quiet, unnoticeable one shows up in her marriage.

Married to Maury for 29 years, Hannah adored him, looking up to him with full assurance she was safe, he would never let her down. Maury was outgoing and an initiator; Hannah was quietly agreeable to whatever he wanted. Basically, Hannah and Maury had a good marriage. As often happens though, when parents have had a trauma or bad experience as a child, when their own child reaches the age they

had been, it triggers a crisis. So it was with Hannah when her daughter turned seven, Hannah's age that fateful Thanksgiving.

At that point, minor issues with Maury began to bother her, and he began to slip from her pedestal; she saw him as selfish, thinking of himself first, not caring what she wanted, not helping out around the house or with the kids. She complained he did not appreciate all she did for him and their daughters.

The timing and intensity of her complaints suggested she was transferring feelings about her adored-turned-betrayer brother onto her husband. Once again she felt devastated, then outraged; she constantly criticized Maury, to the point he contemplated divorce. Fortunately, he first suggested couples therapy.

If she had not been caught in her crystallized role of the quiet, unnoticeable one, and if her frozen image of her brother had not been transferred to Maury, she might have spoken up more forcefully right from the beginning of their marriage, insisting Maury get more involved in the home. She might have been more direct about what she wanted from him.

Until Hannah faces her ghosts and breaks the sibling transference, she will keep repeating the pain of betrayal. (Later in this chapter we'll see how she put her employer on a pedestal, recreating her feeling of betrayal.)

Both Partners Caught in Sibling Transferences

Many times, both partners are caught in a disastrous transference, each one fueling the other.

Stu and Janet, whom we met in the Introduction, were high school sweethearts. They had been married for 18 years and said they were committed to their marriage; yet, they were constantly angry at each other. Janet complained Stu was a workaholic, and even when home, he was wedded to his computer. Stu complained Janet was always criticizing him, especially his parenting. Finally they came to me for therapy and immediately voiced their complaints and counter-complaints about each other. When I asked why they stayed together if they were so

unhappy, they assured me they loved each other. We talked about actions they each could take to reduce tension, but they both continued sabotaging the other's efforts.

Finally, I suggested we look at their sibling history to see if it would help us understand how they got so stuck.

Stu had been a gifted child and good athlete with a winning personality. His role in the family was the charming, talented one who could do no wrong; his parents turned a blind eye when he misbehaved in middle school, getting in with a rough drinking crowd. His older sister, whom the family laughingly called Little Mama, knew how disappointed his parents would be if they saw the real Stu, and became protective of them and him.

He beamed when he explained, "Sis was always there to bail me out; she never turned her back on me."

When we looked at Janet's history, we saw her family role fed into Stu's. She had been the peacemaker to her warring parents, the one who tried to hold the family together. Her parents finally divorced when she was 13, but that didn't stop them from bickering. In addition to parental hostility, Janet had to cope with having a developmentally disabled younger brother. As a child, she was constantly told, "He will never change; you will have to take care of him." Thus, she came to expect that bad situations don't change: her parents will always fight and her brother will always need her. Her job was to be there for them all, expecting nothing in return.

Stu and Janet, stuck in their crystallized roles, had transferred their frozen images of their siblings onto one another in their marriage. Stu expected a sibling to bail him out and excuse his messes because he was charming; Janet expected to take care of her weaker sibling and her dysfunctional parents, with no hope of change. Their individual histories fit smoothly together to keep them stuck as a couple.

Unless they learned to recognize the ghosts they each brought to their marriage and let them go, they would keep repeating their history.

Transference of Sibling Abuse to a Marriage

Everyone is aware of adult abuse of children and the harm it can do to the victim's adult relationships. As a society, we are less aware of the prevalence and seriousness of physical, emotional and sexual childhood abuse by a sibling. Just as people abused by parents often marry abusive spouses, the unconscious transference of sibling ghosts may lead people abused by a sibling to marry an abuser.

For instance, Kara's first husband was verbally and emotionally abusive for 16 years before she divorced him. When her children were grown, she met and married Zak, the "man of my dreams." After only two months she divorced him. She consulted me to figure out why she had entered two abusive marriages.

"I can't believe it," she said in our first session. "He was so loving while we dated, but the minute we were married, he literally said, 'I don't have to be nice to you now.' How did I miss the clues? I know that children from abusive parents sometimes marry abusers, but my father never abused me; he was just a quiet alcoholic."

I asked about her siblings. She told me that George, one of three older brothers, used to beat her up, once even breaking her arm. "My Mom said I should just avoid him. I think she was scared of him, too."

In talking about Zak, she noted the similar positive traits with her brother. "They were both fun-loving. When I was little, I loved and feared George; when he wasn't hurting me, we laughed together a lot. And one of the things I loved about Zak was how much we laughed together."

Kara's transference of her frozen image of her sibling attracted her to men who recreated for her both the love and fear she had experienced with her brother. In the same way her mother, 40 years before, had been unable to protect her daughter from George, Kara had been unable to protect herself from her first husband. But with Zak, "I was able to stop the transference quickly. I realize I couldn't leave my first marriage

because of the children. So, I'm proud that I got away from Zak as soon as I saw the abuse," she told me. "Still, I'm sorry it took me a second marriage to see my pattern."

In a later session, Kara expressed concern about her adult daughters. "I shudder when I think that I allowed my older daughter to be mean to her sister when they were little. I said the same thoughtless things that my mother had: basically, 'siblings fight; no big deal.' But it was a big deal, and I can see shades of abuse being repeated in their relationships with men now." She became teary, "How many generations will it take to stop this?"

Taking Your Sibling Ghosts To Work

Not only can ghosts and sibling transferences harm a marriage, they can intrude in your work world, affecting your productiveness, satisfaction, and success. If you find yourself unhappy in your job or underachieving, if you see patterns of self-sabotage, or if nothing you have tried improves your work situation, you may be packing your old sibling issues in the lunchbox as you head to the office.

If in childhood, you had a negative frozen image of a sibling, as an adult, you may transfer that feeling to someone in your workplace. For instance, as a child, if you felt intimidated by an antagonistic sibling, now, a coworker's behavior may trigger those old feelings, leaving you intimidated and cowed. Another person, whose sibling issues are not triggered, may find that co-worker quite agreeable. This may explain why some people find a co-worker cruel but others do not. It would also explain why one person may believe a boss is fair, but another reacts defensively as if being picked on.

Frozen Images and Crystallized Roles at Work

To understand this better, let's go back to Hannah, from above. For the first year that she worked in a women's clothing store, she adored her boss, Mrs. Caldwell, who, she thought, could do no wrong. Then something happened, and after that, Hannah was furious with everything Mrs. Caldwell did.

"I do all the work, but Mrs. Caldwell gets all the glory from the store owner. I can't ever trust her; she is so selfish."

Sound familiar? These are the same words Hannah used when talking about Donald after that Thanksgiving.

Hannah was unhappy on the job, but she did not quit. The betrayal felt familiar. So, despite her unhappiness, she stayed, recreating her history.

Hannah did not see her pattern. However, in the story below, once Carol recognized her sibling transference to one of her clients, she changed her behaviors that led to her getting a promotion.

Carol had been a shy child, but eventually grew out of it and became a successful commercial real estate attorney. She contacted me after being passed over for a promotion at work.

"I'm really good with most of the people I work with," she told me. "But a few months ago, a high-powered, big buyer came in and I cowered; my voice shook. I let him push me around. This was not the first time this happened; I've lost a couple of big deals because of it. It just doesn't make any sense."

When I hear the juxtaposition of a successful adult cowering at work, I check out the possibility of sibling ghosts.

I asked Carol, "How old did you feel with that buyer?

Without hesitation she blurted, "Ten."

I ask what she recalled from when she was 10 years old.

She became teary. "One day, my younger brother Petey and I were playing tag in the backyard. Sometimes he was mean and scared me, but, this day we were having fun. Then, when I tagged him, he glared at me in a way that terrified me. He didn't yell; he just stared at me with pure hatred."

After she made the connection, she could see that over the years, a stern, harsh facial expression, "on anyone, not just Petey," made her feel like that shy, fearful child.

"How is it possible to still be triggered by my old fear of him, when we are such good friends now?" she asked.

It's possible because old feelings of sibling transference are kept tucked away until they are triggered and brought into consciousness.

Gradually Carol learned to identify the feelings before they surfaced with a client. "I silently tell myself I am an adult; I'm a competent woman; I am not shy, and the buyer is not my eight-year-old scary brother. 'Ghost,' I say to myself, 'you can go away now.'"

Her understanding of the origin of her fear changed her interactions at work so much that shortly afterwards her boss asked her to head up the new office they were opening. (In Chapter Four, we'll see a therapy session where Carol and Petey, and their older brother Tom, work out their frozen images that interfered with their taking care of their aged parents.)

Unhealthy Sibling Loyalty at Work and in Marriage

Not only do sibling frozen images and crystallized roles transfer to one's marriage and work, but so do unhealthy sibling loyalties -- with similar damage. Adults are rarely aware that their unconscious loyalty to a brother or sister may be causing their problems at work. There are many possible explanations. For instance, an unhealthy loyalty may derive from an unconscious desire to protect a sibling from feeling badly about being less successful than oneself. Or, the underachievement may result from avoiding a career in a field that is understood to belong to a sibling.

In another example, the favored child or the smart one may not work to his full potential. The unconscious internal dialogue goes something like, "I got

so much praise when we were little, I'll give my brother a chance to get some praise/success/money now."

Since this type of loyalty is not conscious, it is hard to identify its connection to problems at work or marriage. Stephanie and her husband, Carl, mentioned in the Introduction, illustrate this dynamic.

In their 40s, with two teenage sons, they called me for help with their relationship. Carl became depressed several years ago after losing his job as a realtor during the housing slump. When the market recovered, he didn't. Now the marriage was deteriorating.

Stephanie, a stay-at-home mother, had gone back to work to support the family. Initially she was supportive of Carl, but after two years, her sympathy had been replaced by anger and resentment. She was furious that Carl had given up looking for work. When he'd tell her there were no jobs available, she'd scream, "After more than two years? Well, get something! Pump gas, I don't care, just do something."

Carl had no idea why he couldn't motivate himself to job hunt. He told me, "I tried for a while and then gave up. I hated hearing, 'Sorry, but we don't have anything.'" He was disgusted with himself. "I want to work. I'm a hard worker; I've been a good provider for my family. Ok, I had a bad two years, but I should be able to get back on my feet. I don't know why I can't."

Stephanie had no idea why she was so enraged at her husband. "I know he's tried to find a job, and I know he feels awful that he isn't working. Lots of people are out of work now. I know I'm over-reacting."

They were stuck: Carl in not being able to job hunt; Stephanie with anger being her only reaction to his unemployment. As I often do when couples are stuck, I asked about their siblings.

Carl had six brothers and one sister; he was the only one to leave their rural Kentucky hone and go to college. Even with his unemployment now, he was financially more successful than his siblings.

Stephanie was the oldest of five children. Her father had died when she was eight years old. "My mother had to work to support us. We girls are all nurses now, just like Mom. My two brothers, though, are 'thumb-twiddlers;' I don't think they have ever held a job for more than a few months."

It became clear to me that Stephanie would not be free from her rage at Carl until she understood how she transferred her old images of her lazy brothers onto her husband. They were thumb-twiddlers; Carl was a victim of the economy.

Carl was unaware of a connection between his siblings and his lack of motivation to job hunt. At one point, he said, "I used to be embarrassed going home to visit my family. I'd drive up in my used car that was still in much better condition than my brothers' broken-down trucks. I was so aware how much better dressed my kids were than my nieces and nephews. No one ever said anything; I don't know if they were resentful, but I felt awkward. Like, what right did I have to be so much better off than they?" Later, still not making the connection, he admitted, "This sounds crazy, but I actually feel better visiting them now than I ever have."

Carl had not been bothered by being more professionally successful than his brothers until he hit a crisis. It was like an unconscious awakening that he had violated his family's rule by being a better provider than his brothers were for their wives and kids. Until he recognized this misplaced loyalty to his brothers, he was prevented from seriously job hunting. It didn't matter whether his brothers resented the financial inequity; it was his own guilt that handicapped him.

In order for him to enjoy his competence and to have a healthy relationship with his siblings, Carl needed to realize that his love for his brothers *was good enough,* even if he had a high-paying job.

As a couple, Stephanie's and Carl's individual histories ensnared them in a vicious cycle: she saw Carl as lazy, which was reinforced by his unconscious

loyalty to his brothers preventing him from job hunting. Until they understood this dynamic, they had no resources to break out of that cycle and work together.

Stephanie and Carl illustrate that not wanting your success to hurt your sibling is the first step in deconstructing unhealthy loyalty.

Avoiding unhealthy loyalty

Not everyone gets so caught in their crystallized roles that their unconscious sibling loyalty interferes with their love relationships or their work. The effect of such loyalty may show up in other areas of life or in a general sense of self.

Jane grew up believing she was irresponsible. As an adult, she came to me to work on her low self-esteem. In the second session, she told me stories from childhood of her parents calling her irresponsible and negatively comparing her to her older sister, Michelle, who did everything right.

"I lived down to their judgment throughout my teens and early twenties," she confessed. "It took a long time for me to realize that on our team at work, I was the one keeping us on track; people kept turning to me as if I was the responsible one!

"But, while I don't have trouble at work, I still have that little voice telling me I'm irresponsible. And when I visit my parents for Christmas, I always forget something important or do something that makes us late. It's like I am my responsible self in my home and work world, but put me back with my parents and siblings, and I slip into the same role I had growing up."

Since it is rare for two siblings to fill the same role at the same time, even as adults, I asked whether Jane's becoming a responsible adult had any effect on Michelle.

"Funny you should ask that; I do worry about her. She has been divorced twice and can't seem to hold a job. She's a mess."

Jane had let go of the crystallized role that no longer fit her at home and work, but with her childhood family, she so easily slipped back into that role. That was what we worked on in her therapy. It is impressive that, even though she felt sorry for her sister, she did not let an unhealthy loyalty to Michelle interfere with her successful life.

Abuse at Work

Abuse in the workplace is a reality and can range from persistent harsh criticism, to shaming and humiliation, to sexual harassment, and even to hitting.

If you did not experience abuse from your parents or siblings as a child, you probably can recognize when a boss (or environment) is abusive and either ask for a transfer or change jobs. If you can ignore or avoid the boss or co-worker, you might choose to stay on the job, possibly reporting the problem to the appropriate person.

On the other hand, if you suffered abuse from a parent or a sibling in childhood, abuse at work will feel familiar, so much so that you may not even recognize it. If someone points it out, you may find yourself making excuses for the boss, perhaps claiming that he doesn't mean it, or she's just tired. Even if you don't like the way you are being treated, you probably have taught yourself to feel proud to withstand the abuse.

One day, in therapy, Evie again complained about her awful boss. When she commented that she was afraid of being fired, because it was her fifth job in nine years, she caught herself and looked agape. "Oh my! I think I see what I've been doing."

Then, she laid the pattern out clearly: in each position, she would love her job, admire her boss, and think they had a good relationship; when the boss would verbally or emotionally mistreat her and then fire her, Evie would blame herself. Each time the pattern ended with her not knowing what she had done wrong but assuming it had been her fault.

As that session was ending, I asked Evie if she knew anything in her history that could explain her choosing to remain in a job with people who abused her. She said she'd think about it.

I knew that Evie often had dreams that helped her understand her issues, so I wasn't surprised when she came in the following week reporting a dream about a sister, three years older than she. She had always admired Irene, even though her sister had ignored Evie when they were growing up.

In describing the dream, she was trembling. "Irene and her friends made her undress in front of them." Evie paused, then whispered, "It wasn't a dream; it really happened."

By the end of the session, Evie recognized the parallel between the two abusive situations. She said that she had always wanted Irene's approval while denying what Irene had done to her, "just as I do with my bosses."

As she acknowledged her anger at Irene, Evie changed her behavior toward her current boss. Because she didn't want to change jobs again, she trained herself to tell him to stop or threaten to go to his supervisor. He left her alone (switching his abuse to another employee). The confidence she gained from standing up to her boss gave Evie the courage to ask Irene to join her in a therapy session. Irene agreed.

Sibling Ghosts Show Up in Friendships

As with marriage and work, you may also transfer frozen sibling images and crystalized roles onto your friends. While it is possible to have good friendships even while maintaining your ghosts, if you are having repetitive problems with a friend, you may be recreating your sibling history.

For example, if as a child you followed your sibling around and felt inferior, as an adult, you may choose friends whom you let make all the decisions and to whom you feel inferior. Or, perhaps as a child you used to be the one to take charge with your siblings. Now, as an adult, you may choose

friends you can lead, yet not understand why you can't turn to them when you need emotional support.

The reverse can happen, too, when siblings switch roles in adulthood. If, in childhood, you were the outgoing one and your sibling was shy, as adults you may choose friends who reverse that balance, so you become shy, and you choose friends who are outgoing. There's no clear explanation for why the siblings switch roles, but perhaps it is part of maintaining their polar opposite position as well as their unhealthy loyalty – so neither gets stuck forever in one role.

Sibling Transference and Unhealthy Loyalty in Friendships

People do not usually come to therapy because they are having problems with their friends; more often they identify troubles within themselves, at work, or in love relationships. But I always listen for possible issues with friends, the same as I do with siblings, because there may be a connection that could offer a short cut to resolving their problem.

Walking from my waiting room to my office for her first session, Georgia wore a huge smile, looking like a happy woman. Yet, once seated, she told me, "I'm not my happy self. I don't know what's wrong; it's like I've lost me." She explained that she was engaged to be married, had good friends and a decent job. "You'd think I had the world by its tail. I always thought I did."

She had grown up in the south, and was expected to become a gracious hostess, "even when I'm not entertaining." Her brothers were expected to be smart and go to college; she was supposed to get married.

"I was not a good student, but I talked my way into a great job without a college degree. I always choose friends who are smart. Even so, I still feel dumb."

Georgia was caught in her crystallized role as the sociable-but–not-smart sibling. However, when I listened to what she had done with her life, I was

impressed; this was one bright woman who couldn't see it for herself. Being locked in a role that didn't fit eventually left her feeling she had lost herself.

Since she mentioned her brothers, I asked about them. Both are doing well, making a lot of money. Then she laughed, "Our parents always worried about my oldest brother; he squeaked through high school and college."

"I thought you said he was smart."

"Well," she looked sheepishly, "as long as I kept my grades just below Eugene's, he looked smart."

It was remarkable that Georgia had no awareness of the significance of her comment. When I pointed it out, her immediate response was, "No, he really is smart." She reflected, "I do rely on my friends to be the smart ones, like I do with my brothers."

Gently I prodded, "Is it possible that you're getting tired of letting others be the smart ones? Maybe there's a smart part of you that is screaming to come out." Georgia saw that as a possibility, and we went on to discuss it more.

Georgia's crystallized role no longer fit, but she was unaware of it. She just knew she was unhappy. Her unhealthy loyalty to Eugene had inhibited her from recognizing her intelligence; she had transferred that loyalty to her friends, letting them be the smart ones, which left her hiding from herself.

I wondered if Georgia would be able to tolerate all the changes that would occur if she let go of her outdated role and unhealthy sibling loyalty. Eugene might not like his little sister suddenly appearing smart. Or, her fiancé might be uncomfortable with an openly competent woman. Or, her friends, used to being smarter than she, might feel threatened. On the other hand, her brother, her fiancé, and her friends might be relieved to have an equal peer.

When I discussed these risks with her, she said, "Thinking of myself as smart is scary, but I hate this feeling of being lost."

Sibling Abuse Transferred to Friends

In recent years, much attention has been paid to "toxic friends." These are friends who are snide, insulting, overly critical, or sarcastic; they speak to you or treat you in ways that leave you feeling bad about yourself. A survey conducted by TODAY.com and *SELF Magazine*, found that "84 percent of women and 75 percent of men said they'd had a toxic friend at some point in their lives; one in three admitted to a toxic best friend."

There are a number of reasons, for such widespread experience of toxic friends. One that should be considered is the impact of childhood sibling abuse. If you were abused emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually by a sibling when you were little, you may unconsciously be drawn to the familiar pattern with a toxic friend. If you were helpless to stop your sibling -- your earliest peer -- from being mean, humiliating or shaming you, you may transfer that experience to your friends, expecting to be mistreated and feeling helpless in the face of it.

Gert was in therapy for help rebuilding her life since her husband's death. When we talked about her friends, now the core of her world, she told me about Eunice, with whom she had been friends for more than 45 years. They had raised their kids together, socialized together, and were there for each other in the proverbial good times and bad. But Gert said she always had a feeling Eunice didn't like her, even though she couldn't explain why.

I suggested she make a list of the things Eunice said or did that made Gert feel bad about herself. She responded, "That's impossible; it's hard to know if something was an insult since it wasn't obvious. It could have been a facial expression, a gesture, innuendo, or even just a sigh that I interpreted as she was annoyed at me or thought I was dumb."

When I asked Gert why she had stayed friends with Eunice, she mentioned their long history together, and added, as if an aside, "Eunice reminds me of my older sister. I was always chasing Rose, wanting her to like me."

She was silent a moment, lost in her childhood memories. "Hmm, it is sort of the same feeling. I needed Rose in my life – she's my sister after all, in the same way I feel I need Eunice."

With such a long history, Gert was not willing to let go of the friendship, but she did start speaking up, and she stopped seeking Eunice's approval. This didn't change Eunice's behavior, but at least, Gert told me one day, "It makes me feel like I have a backbone, so I'm not willingly being mistreated."

The important issue is not whom you choose as friends; it's being able to recognize when your ghosts lead you into friendships that do not maximize the best of who you are. By being aware, you can shift your behaviors, like Gert, and still maintain your friendship.

So far we have looked at how your childhood ghosts haunt you in your personal life, your love and friendship relationships, and at work. Now we will turn to how they show up directly with your siblings in times of family crisis, specifically as it relates to your aging or ill parents.

Chapter Four

Ghosts Appear in Times of Crisis

It's Tuesday morning, 11:30. I'm in my office, chatting with my colleague Gail between appointments. The phone rings. My hand absentmindedly goes to the receiver.

It's my brother Steve. "Hi there," I say with pleasure and surprise; he rarely calls me. "What's up?"

His voice is flat. "Dad and Mom have just been admitted to the hospital."

I can barely force out the three words. "Both of them?"

He tells me that Mom was taking Dad to the emergency room because of piercing pains, the first symptom of his myeloma cancer. While they were doing his intake, a nurse noted Mom looked awful and had her checked out; she was admitted for fluid on the lungs.

Whatever your relationship with your siblings, when one or both parents are ill or failing, you may be forced into contact as you plan to take care of them. Ideally, sibling issues should be put aside while you are tending to your parents; unfortunately, too often, that doesn't happen. Those ghosts haunt you; you see and hear your younger selves squabbling over something that back then was really trivial.

I am numb but calmly tell Steve, "It's a three hour drive; I'll leave now, go pack, and I should be there by dinner time. When will you get in?"

"I've got work to do here. I'll be down early Friday evening. I spoke to Doug, and he'll be there much later on Friday."

Bam! While calmly arranging to meet at the hospital on Friday, I am screaming inside, "I'm always left out. You and Doug make the decisions and just expect me to come along, always the little sister. I hate that."

This silent scream careens around another silent one: "I've got work, too." There are more shouts rattling inside, "Why do you automatically assume I'll be the one to disrupt my week? Because I'm the girl? Your work is more important than mine?"

Then a sadder thought pushes to the fore. "You both felt Mom and Dad favored me because I was the youngest and only girl. Now I have to do more to make up for my guilt."

I say none of this. When I hang up, Gail offers to cancel my appointments for the week. An hour later, I was on the road; I had plenty of time to feel my anger at their just assuming I'd disrupt my life and take charge so they wouldn't have to disrupt theirs.

I also had time to recall my loving memories of them. Doug, Steve and I are only four years apart. My scrapbooks are filled with pictures of two cute little boys with their baby sister squeezed close to be near them -- proof that we used to be close.

From my point of view, I have good reason to be angry at my brothers. But, everyone has their own perspective. My brothers had their view about why they didn't come down right away. I didn't ask, so I didn't know what they were thinking. Might they have come if I had said they needed to be there? Or, that I needed their emotional support? I have two brothers; they might have had different reasons for not coming down right away. I didn't ask, so I never knew.

During the next nine years, before both of our parents had died, our anger and jealousy towards each other periodically exploded. We stabbed each other with nasty accusations about not caring enough for our parents. We laughed and

shared the of moments; we cried together. We were more vicious than even in our worst childhood fights but also closer than ever before.

Each of you has your own story with different details. Taking care of your parents in this stressful time can be disastrous. Simultaneously you must cope with your feelings about their illness and eventual death, you must cope with each other in the present, *and* you must cope with old ghosts.

Which First – Deal with Your Siblings or Your Parent?

When you are young and live with your parents, your sibling relationship is prominent in your life. When you become an adult, this relationship takes a backseat and is replaced by new ones with your spouse, children, and friends. Now, clashes with your siblings may be troublesome, but they do not necessarily consume the same energy that you invest in clashes with your nuclear family, in-laws, and other current adult relationships.

When you do have conflicts, it is easier to understand the origin when there is no parental crisis. You have time to digest and think about how you want to react to a sibling. It's more difficult to do this, though, when you are unaware of your ghosts *and* saddled with three emotions being simultaneously discharged. There is *fear* about the unknown; what will happen to my parent right now? Accompanied by *helplessness* that you can't fix the problem. Now blend in reaction to the potential death of your parents – *grief***.**

All this contributes to how the complex, often frustrating task of taking care of parents can become volatile; memories of each other from childhood, quietly or violently, intrude on your efforts to help parents, regardless of how much you each have changed over the years. Your ghosts from the past, those frozen images and crystallized roles, are mixed in with your intense feelings about your ill parent today. The situation is potentially explosive.

So, what do you address first -- the immediate needs of your parents or the problems with your siblings? In reality, it's impossible to separate the two. For when you try to make decisions together, old phrases echo from childhood: "There you go again, always bossing me around." "Mom always let you get away with murder." "I'd better do what he says, or he'll hurt me/won't like me."

The following exchanges among the Kopple siblings are fairly typical of how impossible it is to separate the two issues. (We met Carol in the last chapter when she was talking about her younger brother Petey.)

Tom, Carol, and Peter sat in a local cafe, having come together to discuss what to do about their parents who can no longer live by themselves in their home. Tom, the oldest, put his coffee cup down and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"I've got a list of the three assisted living places here in town. I'll call them and get information. Carol, why don't you get information on how to find a live-in woman?

"It could also be a couple," Carol offered.

Annoyed, Tom sighed, "OK, or a couple. You know what I mean, someone or *ones*," he emphasized, "so they can continue living at home."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was just trying to make sure we have all the options."

Peter, the youngest, held out his right hand. "Can I see that list of places?"

Tom handed it to him, and Peter quickly glanced down the page. "There's another one I heard about that's not here. It's a little further away, but I have a friend whose father is there, and my friend says it's really the best. He spent months doing research before making that decision."

Tom responded in a take-charge voice. "We'll start with the three on the list, and if none of them pans out, then we'll follow up on that one."

Peter's face flushed red. "Wait a minute! Who's making these decisions here? I thought we were doing this together." His deep voice got louder. "You always have to

have things your way. And," he turned to his sister, "'whimpering Carol, over the barrel,' as usual, you'll do anything to pacify him."

Carol's head jerked slightly, as if she had just been hit.

Looking for the clues

The Kopple siblings are three middle aged, intelligent people, yet they are not having a productive conversation. If asked, they would say they are disagreeing about how to find a new living situation for their parents. Yet, clearly, that's not the entire story. They have been joined by uninvited guests — their ghosts of each other.

Most people aren't aware when your frozen images and crystallized roles infuse themselves into your conversations, dictating your interactions. And, if you are unaware of them, you can't know to look for the clues telling you when they are intruding.

There always are clues. Let's go back to the coffee house with the Kopple siblings and look for them.

Tom spoke, "Grow up, Peter. For g-d sakes, you're 50 years old now. You've always complained about my getting my way. And when you can't get to me, you go after her."

Carol attempted to defuse the explosion that usually occurred between her brothers. "Tom, why not have Peter look into a fourth place if he wants? In the meantime, let's get on with what we already have. I'll look in the newspaper for hiring aides."

"No," commanded Tom, used to being the one setting the rules. "We need to go through an agency that hires trained people for us."

Carol countered, "Going through an agency is much more expensive."

"Damn it! We just have to make one little decision. If we get caught on every detail, we'll never get this done. I have to get home; Lorraine and I have plans this evening."

"Oh well, then," sneered Peter, "if Tom has to get home, then we'd better hurry up and do what he says."

"Oh, just quit goading me, Peter. You haven't stopped since you got here. You never change, do you? Always trying to make me look bad."

"If you weren't so damn controlling, we could do this in half the time," Peter retorted. "But every time we have to make a decision, big brother always has to get his way."

"Come on, guys," pleaded Carol. "We haven't made any decisions yet. But we do have to figure out what we're doing next. Can't we get back on track?"

Did you find some clues? The easiest ones are the absolutes of "always," "never," and "as usual." Then, there are the sighs, whispers, flushing red from anger, pleading, commands, sarcasm, raised voice, head jerking, swearing. A blatant one is any time a conversation abruptly takes a bad turn, as if out of the blue.

Peter blasted Tom for being controlling — how he saw him when they were little. Peter just wanted Tom to listen to his ideas — something he hadn't felt happened back then since he was "the baby." Tom thought Peter was sabotaging the task by goading him — as he had when they were little. Peter was frustrated with Carol's obsequiousness to Tom, so he mocked her. Carol was fearful of Peter, as she had been when little.

The Past, Present, and Future Merge

Perhaps you and your siblings have been sitting in a coffee shop, like the Kopples, or around a hospital bed, or sprawled out in your parents' living room, trying to make life-altering decisions for them. You each have your own ideas of how to deal with the situation, but like the Kopples, you keep getting derailed by old furies.

There you are, a successful adult getting whipped back to childhood, yet having to deal as an adult with emotionally charged issues. You try to stay focused on the immediate needs of your parents. It's impossible, though, because you believe a sibling is trying to run the show or skip out without doing his part – just like when you were little. And, if that weren't bad enough, how

do you focus on your parents' needs while struggling with your grief and fears about their impending death?

It is a mistake to assume you can stay only in the present when you are being hit with so many simultaneous feelings: a mixture of *present* issues about your parents, your *future* feelings about losing them and your own aging, together with your unresolved *past* feelings towards your parents. To make it even more complex, add in the uninvited sibling ghosts.

The more anxious you are about your parents, the more you are faced with grief of the future — their aging and eventual death. But grief isn't a neat package. It is muddied with love, guilt, resentment, warm memories, affection you wanted but never got from them. You most likely have a variety of feelings competing with each other, and the thought of having to confront them all becomes overwhelming. Your siblings have their own variety of feelings -- which makes the endeavor fraught with potential conflict.

Inevitably, you will bump into your past — those frozen images you and your siblings have of each other, all of your crystallized roles, the rivalry your parents instigated, and may still be doing. Therefore, it's important to understand the past. Even then, the present is going to be complicated, but you may have a better sense of how to avoid the landmines.

With Donald and Hannah, whom we met in Chapter One, she is the primary caretaker of their mother, making all the daily decisions. Donald, who lives out of state, calls to be supportive, and Hannah hits him from left field with "How dare you."

If Donald had thought about the cause of the attack, had he noticed the clues, he would have understood his sister's anger that mother wanted him to pass judgment on Hannah's decisions. He might have realized this was a repeat of the pain she experienced throughout her childhood – he was the golden-haired-son and she felt overlooked. He could have recognized how their mother set the stage for the tension between them – back then and *again now*

as when she asked Donald for advice about what Hannah had already been doing.

With any of this awareness, he could have avoided becoming defensive, and the whole conversation with Hannah, right from the start, would have been different. And, before this conversation with Hannah, when mother asked him to check on the doctor, he could have said, "Let me get the information from Hannah first, Mom; then I'll get back to you." He could have responded by telling his mother Hannah was very competent, and he didn't need to get involved.

Or, he could have called his sister, saying, "Mom asked me to check on Dr. Whosit. Do you trust him? Have you met him? Do you want me to do any research on him? Can I help in some way? If you're ok with him, I'll just tell Mom you made a good decision."

If he had made any of these comments, letting his sister know he wanted to *assist* her, Hannah would not have felt discounted. She would not have felt blind-sided by her mother. And, she would have felt supported and respected by Donald.

Hannah's outburst may have resulted from her mixture of helplessness in making her mother better, fear and grief of what may lie ahead. Together these feelings are a smoldering landmine waiting for any little kindling to trigger the explosion. And, Donald's insensitivity was that kindling for her.

Arguing with Siblings Diverts Your Feelings

Grief comes in many shades; for instance, you may love your parent, but also be glad she's dead because she was mean or in crippling pain. Since people have a myriad of mixed emotions about their parent, often bouncing between extremes, it's impossible to tie them all together in a neat package.

You and your siblings may have different feelings about your parents' pending death. When you are all together, the room may be filled with dozens

of conflicting, raw emotions. Take a step in any direction and you are likely to bump into some feeling that is just waiting to erupt. If you have the same emotion, there's no problem. You cry together, rage together, laugh together. But, if you are feeling guilty for not having done enough, and one sibling is thrust into fears of his own mortality, while another is caught up in her jealousy of you, there could be a nasty collusion.

Without understanding this, concrete tasks can become explosive. The explosion is a valve release; it's easier to argue about the type of casket, your parent's move to an assisted living, or the decision between another surgery or increasing the morphine pump. You are focused on the argument; you are focused on your sibling being stubborn or stupid, or just plain wrong.

It's easier to avoid focusing on what it means to you that your parent is going into a casket, regardless of whether it is steel or solid oak. Or that your parent is no longer robust as you still imagine her. Arguing with siblings allows all of you to avoid the boiling emotions underneath. It's as if you have an unspoken pact: let's fight with each other, as we did when children, so we don't have to feel our pain about what is happening right now.

It's easier to focus on the familiar – squabbling with a sibling. Yet, the squabbles actually carry a variety of meanings:

Getting what you need. "I want Mom to finally take my side (recognize my competence, see who I really am, tell me she loves me). I will be furious at you if I think you are getting in my way."

Quarreling is familiar. "Screaming at each other is what we do when we have to face tough issues. It is familiar and thus comforting."

Don't remove my denial. "I had a great father. Don't make me see things I don't want to see. As long as we fight, I won't have to look more realistically at what he may have done or been like to you, Mom, or even me."

I don't want to think about my own mortality. "I'd rather fight with you, my brother, than think about this being me lying here 20, 30, 40 years from now. That is too scary, so I'm glad to have the diversion."

If we fight like children, our parents are still alive. "If I remain a child, my parents must still be young and alive. I will not have to switch roles where I am the adult and have to make decisions for them. So I will keep arguing with you siblings and wait for our parents to step in and take charge."

Squabbling over something as minor as finding a live-in companion, as the Kopple siblings were doing, diverts you from all those complex emotions. The familiar battles rescue you from the more gripping feelings about your parents' pending deaths. Frozen images and old resentments come flooding to the fore as you dicker over each other's suggestions. If the Kopple siblings had shared their grief first, the rest of their conversation at that coffee shop might have been very different.

Gender Differences Make a Difference

Siblings may express their grief differently, based on gender differences. This is one of the rarely discussed causes for sibling conflict in parental caretaking and grieving.

While not always true, females are more comfortable openly crying and talking about their sadness while males tend to handle their grief by taking action, doing something. They may feel just as much pain but are less likely to talk about it. (Sometimes, the typical gender roles reverse; what is important here, is the different agendas of the siblings.)

Sisters, then, may see their brother as domineering and uncaring. Yet, brothers may feel manipulated and ambushed by the outpouring of their sister's grief. They may feel their sister is wallowing in emotions and out of control, which makes them more intent on taking control by making decisions, which

circles back to sisters resenting their brothers being domineering and uncaring. Understanding gender style of grieving can avoid this cycle.

Brothers and sisters both feel grief and both need to take action; it's just that the order they do it, and the way in which they do it, is different. And, the language they use may further complicate matters.

Research shows that that while women, in general, can be direct in expressing their grief, they tend to be indirect in saying what they want or need. So, men may miss vague cues from their sisters. Men may be direct and specific in stating their needs, but less direct in showing their grief, so sisters may assume they are uncaring.

After Lenore, told her brother she'd be out of town for a week and her mother would be lonely without their daily phone calls, she was furious upon returning to learn Clayton had only called their mom once. Clayton's response was, "How was I to read your mind that you wanted me to call her more often. If you had asked me to, of course I would have."

To Lenore, it seemed obvious that's what she meant, but she did not explicitly say, "Would you call Mom every day or at least every other day?" Clayton needed her to be more direct, not make him guess what she really wanted and then criticize him for guessing wrong.

Different gender styles can lead to resentment and conflict in problem solving and decision making. Sisters tend to focus on the process of reaching a decision, wanting input from all involved. Brothers focus on the result, which usually means to narrow down the input.

For example, sisters are more likely to want to include parents in visiting various assisted living homes while brothers are more likely to want to give parents one choice; if they don't like that one, then give them another.

Another gender difference is how often brothers and sisters keep in touch with their ailing parent. Since the purpose of communication for females is connection, daughters may call to just chat with their parent. While for men,

the purpose of communication is goal-focused, to see how the parent feels, to exchange information or resolve a problem so their conversations may be more concrete. A common stereotypical example is a son asking specific questions about the parent's health and finances, while the daughter inquires about what television show a housebound parent likes best.

Let's listen to Lenore and Clayton again.

Lenore struggled with understanding why Clayton seemed uninterested in their aging mother. "I have no doubt you love Mom, but it sure looks like you don't. Mom is lonely and never goes out now that dad is dead and her friends are dead or ill. I call her every evening just to chat, to break up her boring day. It doesn't matter what we talk about, she just likes to feel she's still involved in my life. You, though, call once a week, ask how she is, and hang up."

Clayton explained, "I call Mom weekly. No way would I want to call more often. I wouldn't know what to talk about. I don't call anyone that often."

Without understanding these gender differences about the purpose of conversation, Lenore was resentful that Clayton was not showing enough interest in their mother, and he felt she was being unreasonable.

If you are already unaware of conflicts caused by your ghosts, *and* you are unaware that conflicts may be caused by gender style differences not a desire to obstruct each other, the arguments can become bitter even vicious.

Who's in Charge?

Sibling ghosts often show up when there is no clarity about who is in charge. Sometimes, several siblings vie for taking control; sometimes some siblings act independently, oblivious to what the others are doing. And, sometimes some siblings want no involvement.

While each sibling chooses the path that makes the most sense given their relationship to the parent, the other siblings may feel as if it's a direct attack on

them. If your reasons for wanting to take charge, or not wanting to be involved, are not clearly stated (or maybe not even conscious), your siblings will interpret your behavior within their frozen image of you.

Sibling taking control: This sibling believes he knows what is best; this person may be the oldest, the one with a medical profession, the most financially successful, the one who lives nearby or is emotionally the closest to the parent.

Sometimes, a sibling insists on taking charge as a way to appease her own guilt for not having been close to the parent, for her anger at the parent, or to atone for never having shown responsibility before.

Conflict arises when several siblings want to be in charge, each with their own unspoken agendas.

Sibling acting independently: This sibling takes action without considering what her brothers or sisters are doing. Her focus is not to take control *from* them, but to fill her own need; her siblings are irrelevant. When there is more than one person in this position, their reasons may be totally different: the sister's behaviors may come from her unresolved issues with the parent, while her brother is fulfilling his crystallized role as the responsible son.

In one family, the mother was on a morphine pump for pain. The doctor gave permission to increase it as necessary. When the son visited and saw mother was in pain, he raised the dose. "She shouldn't have to suffer." When the daughter visited, she lowered the dose believing, "The higher dose is speeding Mom's death."

They were both correct; there was no right or wrong about the morphine dose. The problem was their decisions were based on their own issues. It wasn't as if they ignored the other; they didn't even consider the other. She was the prodigal daughter returning home, not wanting mother to die until she had made her peace with her. The brother, raised with the crystallized role as the "obedient one," was doing what the visiting nurse had directed.

Unfortunately, even though they both were trying to be helpful, they were subjecting their mother to an erratic morphine schedule by not knowing what the other was doing,

Sibling not wanting to help: There are many reasons a sibling refuses to get involved in helping an ailing parent. It can run the gamut from anger at the parent from childhood, resentment of the siblings, fear of being criticized in doing something wrong, need to deny parent's illness, or even not having the emotional energy since his own life is in turmoil. Without his speaking up, the other siblings will attribute their own explanations for the absent brother or sister – often based on their frozen images from childhood.

In some families, none of the siblings want to take charge of the parent. If they have conferred with each other, agreeing to stay away, they are united as siblings. Then, they can decide if they want to hire someone to take care of the parent or to contact the local social services, or just do nothing.

However, if they just fade away from the parent *and each other*, they won't know what the others have done. Their guilt at having abandoned their parent may create a barrier among them in the future – given they don't know they all did the same thing. Plus, they lose the validation of their decision to let someone else take care of their parent.

Identify a Primary Caretaker

Research shows that caretaking works best when there is one identified person. The primary caretaker (PC) is the front person. This sibling has hands-on information from everyone involved in your parent's care and is responsible for passing information on to the others on a regular basis and making many of the routine decisions.

While the PC is the public voice and the daily organizer, there are a multitude of tasks required in taking care of elderly or sick parents that can be divided up according to each sibling's time, ability, and interest. Even siblings

who only want minimal involvement might be willing to get information about the new medication, go grocery shopping, or monitor the finances.

However, the past and the present can become entangled in the selection and role of the PC. Even if the other siblings agree who should be the PC, when that person makes a decision or asks for their help, old ghosts may rebel against her as they did when they were little, such as, she's bossy or she's trying to manipulate me.

The PC herself may be so stuck in her crystalized role of caretaker or responsible one that she would feel weak or irresponsible asking the others for help.

Without the ghosts, siblings could agree on the best person for the job of PC, knowing they all have roles that fit the degree of involvement they want. At minimum, they could emotionally support the PC by calling to give her encouragement, sharing in her frustrations, and reinforcing what a good job she is doing. They could offer concrete assistance like staying with their parents for a few hours or weekend to give the PC a break, or even (for the most reluctant sibling to get involved) once a month mowing the lawn.

Speaking the Unspeakable: Inheritance and Money

Let's be honest. Some siblings *are* out for their parents' money. However, often when siblings argue about money, it sounds like greed but is really about control: control of siblings or control over the helplessness of the situation with your parents.

Complaining to your parent that one of your siblings is trying to grab the inheritance can be like tattling, as you did in childhood; now your parent can finally see how bad that brother or sister is, or see how good you really are.

Another possibility for arguing about the inheritance may be related to loss. Bickering about money, property, or furnishings may help avoid your grief,

or resentment of what you didn't get from your parent, or the fear (and reality) of your own mortality.

However, it is *not* unloving to think about the money and what you will do with it. Often, when one sibling plans how to use the money or wants the best investment so there will be more, the others interpret that as her being greedy, especially if it fits her crystallized role. In fact, though, planning what you'll do with the money after a parent dies can help with your grief, as we see with Wanda and Frederick.

Wanda explained, "I do think about Mom's money; it will make a difference. We'll sell her house; then, with my share, I won't have to worry about my children's college tuition. Plus, having her money frees me financially so I can start up the business she and I used to dream about. By using her money, I'll be taking her with me into my new venture.

Frederick summed it up like this. "Thinking about Dad's money distracts me from the gapping hole I feel when I imagine life without him. That's something I can control – how I'll spend or invest it. It's like a commercial break from the grief that wracks me each day I sit with him. I feel so helpless in the face of his suffering."

Ideally, fights could be avoided if siblings were able to openly talk about what the money means to them. Unfortunately, between the old ghosts and their current mixture of feelings – and society's discomfort in talking about money in general – this does not often happen.

Tips for Good Team Work

We've talked about the disasters that arise when the past and the present get entangled. Now let's talk about how to work as a good team.

If you were solely in charge, the concrete tasks would be simple. "Ah," you dream, "If only I didn't have siblings." Things *are* easier if you are the only person making decisions. On the other hand, only children sigh, "Ah, if only I

had a brother or sister; I wouldn't have to carry the full weight and responsibility for my parents."

The grass is always greener. But, if you work this right, you may be able to get the benefit of not having to carry the full load, while also not having to fight a sibling.

Here are some steps to help avoid the disasters.

1. *Recognize your frozen images and crystallized roles*
   Learn to identify and then melt your frozen images of your siblings. (See Chapter Five) Assess whether the crystallized roles you have of your siblings still fit. When conflict occurs, look for clues to the old ghosts *before* reacting. You may be able to do this on your own, or you may need professional help.
2. Accept that m*any roads lead to the same goal*
   Respect your sibling's decision about how to handle a situation, even if different than yours. It's easy to let the old ghosts assume your sibling is not going to do as good a job as you. Arguments often are more about who wants to be right than which approach is better, even when either approach would be fine.
3. *Clarify who does what*
   Have you and your siblings compile a list of tasks. Let everyone choose the ones they want. Draw straws to divide up the ones no one wants. This is not a foolproof plan, but it will eliminate many of the "in-the-moment" conflicts. Writing down everyone's tasks has the potential of eliminating later misunderstandings.
4. *Listen, get more information, before reacting*
   When you disagree (or are angry) about a decision/action your sibling took, ask questions and get more information before

reacting. Most often, your sibling is doing what he thinks is best – given his perspective of the situation and given who he is. Whether or not you agree with his perspective, chances are he is not trying to intentionally hurt your parents -- or you. By getting more information, you might discover he was reacting to something the doctor had told him – which was different than what the doctor had told you. Given that, his action might now make sense.

5. *Be reasonable but speak up*

   If you question something your sibling has done, don't sit quietly then later blame your sibling for doing the wrong thing. Speak up directly -- but not aggressively. Ask questions. Talking from an "I" position, without attacking or blaming your sibling, reduces the chance of a defensive counter-attack.

6. *Be aware of parental splitting*

   Look for indications that your parents are playing one of you against the other. Call your parent on it, and alert your siblings that it is happening so you can figure how to work around the split.

7. *Ask don't assume*

   Don't make decisions for your siblings, even if you think you are sparing them the trouble. Let them speak for themselves.

8. V*isit separately if you can't get along,*

   If you want to see your parents but don't want to see your siblings, arrange your visits so you don't overlap. Then, when you need to communicate, use technology to your benefit.

By using these eight tips, plus understanding gender differences, when your sibling does something that upsets you, you can Q-TIP: *quit taking it personally*.

Siblings Post-Parents

Parents often serve as the hub of your birth family even when you are all adults; mothers in particular become the switchboard operator who keeps each of you up-to-date about the others. As mother passes along information about each of you, she may be fueling old fires. This obviously complicates siblings' relationships. However, if you don't see how she is pitting you against each other (even unintentionally), you continue to blame your sibling for why you don't get along.

For instance, a parent innocently tells child #1 that child #2 calls more often. The unmistakable message to child #1 is that the parent likes the other child better. We saw an example of parental pitting when Donald and Hannah's mother asked Donald's opinion about Hannah's decisions.

Once your parents have died, though, you get to actively decide the type of relationship you want.

Chrissy and Robin were typical of many siblings who had a tense yet superficial rapport when they had to join the family for holidays. Notice that in their story below, the death of their last parent made them rethink what it meant to be siblings.

"Last Wednesday, like every Wednesday for the past 12 years, I got in my red Subaru and drove four hours straight north on I-95 to Denny's. Why?" Robin grinned. "Because my sister, Chrissy, drove south on I-95 for the same four hours to meet me at Denny's. I wouldn't miss these Wednesdays 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 was describing her relationship with her only sibling who is 13 months older. Her impish smile emitted the delight she feels when talking about Chrissy. "But," she assured me, "it wasn't always this way. There were 30 plus

years when we wouldn't go so far as our bedroom door to spend time together. Mom had always wanted us to be close when we were young, but Chrissy was mean, and I always ended up crying. When we were teenagers, she was nasty when I borrowed her clothes. True, I didn't always ask first, but after all," she again gives that delightful smile, "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. And that was more than enough. We pasted smiles on our faces to get through the few days. During these visits, we might argue over ridiculous stuff, like which of us Mom showed first her new outfit. It was such a relief to go back home with my husband and kids.

"When our father died, nothing significantly changed between us. But, eight years later, as we stood over our mother's casket, it was as if her hand came up and grabbed us and made us hug. That hug changed our lives."

Thus, without your parents' stirring the jealousies, you and your siblings have a chance to clear up old resentments and create a new relationship. And, if you were close when you were little, there's a good chance you can reclaim a sibling. In fact, research shows that 90 percent of siblings want a better relationship with one or more of their brothers and sisters, and once siblings reach old age, only 3% have no contact with each other.

Hearing this percentage, a former student of mine once said, "If we're going to be close later in life, why wait? Might as well figure out the old stuff now." Chapter Five shows how to do that.

Aging Siblings

If you don't let go of the old ghosts, they can follow you into old age perpetuating a conflictual relationship. On the other hand, there can be a positive twist, as we see in the following, somewhat humorous story.

This was one of the more unusual requests for sibling therapy help I had ever received, since the caller was an only child. Clare, aged 47, was an adored niece to Aunt Augusta who had no children of her own. She called me because she was concerned about the intense arguing between her mother and her aunt.

Clare explained, "Six years ago, when Aunt Augusta was 87 and needed assisted living, my mother, one year younger, decided to move with her. I couldn't understand why since they always fought. For the first few years, they lived down the hall from each other, but because of their bickering, the staff moved Aunt Augusta to an apartment on the other side of the building."

Their constant arguing was terribly upsetting to Clare who loved both of these women.

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

"I hate how they argue. 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. I love them both dearly, but 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? At the time, I had just passed half a century, so how could I really understand what it meant to be at the end of your life, when time is measured in days, not years? Would I miss the full impact of what it meant to be the last remaining family members?

We met in her mother's apartment. Clare 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, coming mostly 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 lives for 90 years. Whatever it used to mean, it had shifted and now the fighting was all they had 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 voice loud enough, if they chose, for them to hear me.

I said, "Their squabbling is important to them. Why would you want to take it away? However, you must protect yourself from getting so upset about it."

Without interrupting their argument, nor lowering their voices, the sisters looked at me and nodded.

Clare exclaimed, "But, I can't stand to hear them go at each other like they are doing now."

"What would help *you*? I asked.

"Huh? For them to stop fighting," she repeated as if I were inane.

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

Three months later, I got a call from Clare thanking me profusely. "They're still at it. Some of the times when I speak up, they smile at each other and stop bickering. Other times, though, they don't even hear me, and I quietly leave. I feel so much freer."

Thank you Clare's Mom and Aunt Augusta. I learned a lot from you two that day.

Once you understanding the effect of the old ghosts – on your personally, and all your relationships – then what? The next chapter describes how to exorcise them.

Chapter 5

Exorcising the Ghosts

The title of Thomas Wolf's famous novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, sends a wrong message. In fact, you *must* go home again — literally or mentally. Going home means facing your ghosts, melting frozen images and breaking out of the crystallized roles that no longer fit you or your siblings. It also means, for some, uncovering how unhealthy loyalty to your siblings has blocked your full potential in relationships and at work. If you ever wish to establish a closer relationship with your siblings, dispelling your ghosts may very well make that possible.

Whether or not you want an improved relationship, it's only by going home and dispelling your ghosts that you can protect yourself from sibling transferences in other areas of your life. That is, you can begin to recognize when you react, or are beginning to react, to your loved ones, friends, and people at work out of old images of your siblings.

Another benefit of dealing with these past issues is that you avoid transferring them onto future generations – your children and their children. But most importantly, you must go home again so that you can be the adult you want to be *for* yourself and *with* others.

One of the first steps is to free yourself and your siblings from frozen images and crystalized roles and be willing to put yourself in their shoes, seeing their perspectives.

Releasing Your Frozen Images and Crystallized Roles

Your siblings' image of you, as well as your image of them, may be frozen in a way that no longer fits either of you. You both may have refused to acknowledge how much the other has changed. Most people can see how their siblings still have them categorized as they used to be; however, it is more difficult to see when you are doing that to them.

You may feel you have tried to change your behavior with your sibling, but to no avail. You may think your sister or brother continues to be controlling or is condescending to you, or otherwise refuses to treat you with the respect you deserve today.

What may be hard to see is that your sibling may feel the exact same way about you. Releasing frozen images and crystallized roles is hard if you don't understand what binds you to your own view of the other. It *is* possible to let go of your one-dimensional distortions of each other, to remove the outdated images, reassess the past roles you, and perhaps your parents, assigned them, and start relating to them as they are today.

To understand how this happens, let's go back to the Kopple siblings (see Chapter Four) to see how they began the process of releasing their frozen images and crystallized roles of one another. If you recall, Tom, Carol, and Peter were trying to decide about living arrangements for their parents, but they kept bumping into dead-end squabbles. Realizing they had to do something and do it quickly, they contacted me.

In the first session, it was clear to me their frozen images were getting in their way. Therefore, during the second meeting, I told them I was going to ask each of them the same question, and while one was talking, the others could not speak. This proved to be more difficult than they had realized, but with only a few reminders early on, they obeyed the rule.

Turning to Tom, the oldest, I said, “Tell me what you remember about your siblings during your elementary school years or before.”

"Carol was shy and very quiet,” Tom said. “Peter probably was good for her, because he played with her a lot. But she was a real pushover, letting him boss her around. He teased her, calling her ‘whimpering Carol, over the barrel.’

"Thinking about it now, Peter might have been pretty lonely in our family." Tom’s voice softens as he throws a quick glance at Peter. "Dad wouldn't play ball with him when Peter wanted, and Mom was always busy. Carol was Peter's only playmate, but unlike Peter, she wasn’t the rough-and-tumble type.

“I was content being in my room by myself,” Tom continued. “I was very orderly, and Peter would come in and mess up my things. He'd cause trouble and then try to make me look bad with Mom. He was always goading me; he couldn’t stand my ignoring him, which is what I did.” Tom’s eyes reddened, and he blew his nose. "Maybe that has something to do with why he is always so mad at me."

When he finished, there was silence. Peter was expressionless as he stared out the window; Carol was teary. I waited for Tom to regain his composure, then asked Carol the same question.

Carol remembered spending most of her time with Peter, even though he was 13 months younger. “He had me doing things I'd never do on my own; we had a lot of fun together. It’s curious, but I often forget that, because when he got mad, he was scary, and I never knew when he would erupt.”

About Tom, she said, “I hardly remember him. He was always in his room with his erector sets. I never thought about this before, but it has to be important: we called Peter Petey, but we never once called Tom Tommy."

More silence. Peter turned towards Tom, his eyes soft, but Tom didn't see him because now he was looking out the window.

It was Peter's turn. He remembered Tom either ignoring him or bossing him around. "Most of the time, though, I felt sorry for Tom being such a loner, so I'd go bother him, trying to get a reaction. I was huskier and stronger, so he would never hit me. Instead, he attacked me with words. His words could really bite."

About Carol, he hesitated before saying, "My overriding image is of her pulling away from me. Even though she was shy, because we were so close in age, I thought she'd be a playmate. Certainly my big brother wasn't. And, by the way, it was Tom, not me, who started the 'whimpering Carol over the barrel.' "

These siblings were locked in their crystallized roles: Tom as a loner, Carol as shy, and Peter as either pushy or scary. These childhood roles had become the basis for how they reacted to each other today. Yet, as they listened to each other during this session, they saw a broader, deeper picture of their siblings.

Carol's memory of Peter as frightening blocked her from remembering that they used to have a lot of fun together. Tom wasn't unhappy in his room by himself, as his siblings thought, so he misunderstood Peter's empathic reason for coming in. Instead, Tom found his younger brother's efforts as goading, intended to get him in trouble. Peter was surprised to learn that Carol had been afraid of him; he thought she was shy. What bothered him most was Tom's verbal abuse, which surprised Tom. Curiously, Peter was the only one who remembered Tom as bossy, and they disagreed about who tagged Carol with her moniker.

As a result of this discussion, they could see how their old roles and images fed their behavior during the conversation at the coffee house,

hindering them from doing something as uncomplicated as gathering information about housing for their parents.

It can be incredibly powerful when brothers and sisters hear each other's different memories of their childhood and relationships with one another. By having to listen without interrupting, these three siblings had the opportunity to really hear the others' perspectives. They opened up a new avenue for understanding behaviors that previously had annoyed them. This gave the potential for melting the frozen images, dispelling the old ghosts.

Stepping into Each Other's Shoes

Unlike what the siblings did in my office that day, you probably don't take the time to hear your sibling's perspective; you are only aware of your own. In order to accurately understand your sibling's reactions, you need to hear from them how they perceived their childhood relationship with you. Of course, when you are in conflict, you don't *want* to hear the other's side. You each feel hurt and angry; feelings about the current situation augment the already-built-up emotions left over from childhood.

Let's look at what happened to the Hoffman siblings (see Chapter One), as Donald and Hannah began to hear the other's perspective.

The tension between them had become so bad that Donald suggested they seek a consultation with a therapist who specialized in siblings. They requested I meet with them separately before I saw them together. You'll notice that before they were able to see the other's point of view, they had to know I heard and respected theirs.

In the individual meetings, I let each vent their anger and feelings about being unappreciated. I validated their feelings, from their perspective. Donald saw Hannah through his frozen image of her as his adoring little sister, which is why he was

surprised and hurt she didn't appreciate what a caring brother he was now. Hannah shared stories of her brother not appreciating her efforts to care for their mother, which reinforced her frozen image of Donald as selfish.

While still in their individual sessions, when I sensed each of them felt I had heard them and their perspective, I asked if they would try an experiment. In order to help them see the situation from the other's point of view, I played their role and had them take the position of the other. By standing in the other's shoes, they were able to see their own position as well as how their sibling saw them.

When you put together your and your sibling's perspectives, seeing *both* sides, you come to a new appreciation of your sibling's viewpoint. This doesn't mean you *accept* that view, just that you understand how it got formed. Only when each of you genuinely appreciates the other's perspective can you work towards a positive resolution.

Continuing the story of Donald and Hannah, when we all met together, Donald almost immediately told his sister how much he valued her efforts with their mother. It had just never occurred to him to tell her before. He sheepishly said, "I just assumed you knew it." He owned that he had allowed their mother to come between them. "That won't happen anymore, Hannah. From now on, I will check with you about anything I hear from her."

Knowing that he now understood how she felt, along with his acknowledgment of his own part, Hannah felt heard by her brother. That gave her the trust to freely tell him how much she appreciated his generosity with money. "My husband and I really needed it, since I had to stop working to take care of Mom." Then, she apologized for being so bitchy to him. Thus began the shift that resulted in their working collaboratively around their mother's care.

What the Kopple and Hoffman siblings found was that when they let go of the images they had of each other, they opened a door to get to know their siblings as adults. While Tom and Peter never became best friends,

they were friendly and sociable when together. Carol and Peter started doing things together that they, but not their spouses, enjoyed. And Donald and Hannah began looking forward to their phone calls -- just to talk.

(The examples here show just two of many ways of starting a sibling session. Other options are included in the next chapter.)

Part of the promise of dispelling the old ghosts is discovering a sibling. If you would like that, but feel your prior efforts have been rebuffed, keep reading to discover a new approach.

Offering an Olive Branch

Picture yourself in your 70's, 80's, or 90's. What type of relationship would you wish to have with your siblings? Do you hear yourself saying, "Of course, I wish we could get along, but I've tried," or "My sister isn't interested in talking with me"? You may have already offered an olive branch only to have had it rejected. Or, you yourself may have turned down a peace offering.

However, a refused attempt at reconciliation does not have to mean the subject is closed. When you step inside a sibling's shoes, and see the conflict or distance from her perspective, you have the opportunity to see how she believes that *you* have hurt, abandoned, or angered *her*. I suggest you offer a different type of olive branch in a different way.

To have a better chance at success, you need to plan. Don't rush. There are a number of steps you can take. If prior efforts have failed, it may be because you weren't well enough prepared or you gave up too soon.

Preparation

Before contacting your siblings, it is crucial that you are clear about your goals. What do you want to accomplish? Just expressing your anger is

not a useful goal. *If you don't know what you want from talking with your siblings, you probably won't get it.* Or you won't know if you have gotten it.

So, ask yourself: Do you want your siblings to treat you as an adult now, melting their frozen images of you from childhood? Do you want to understand them better now, melting your frozen image of them? Do you want to understand why certain things happened in the family when you were growing up? Do you just want them to stop their complaints about you and your life style now? Do you want to focus on the past or current situation, or both? Be clear with yourself so you can be clear with them.

Next, think about how you want to approach them. If the tension between you is severe, or you have no contact at all, you may start by writing a letter. On the other hand, if you can be together, talking in person might work for you. And, if neither of these methods seems workable, a consultation with a professional who specializes in siblings may be the most effective method.

Additionally, if you have several siblings, the same method may not work for each. Think about what you know of each sibling and choose a method that has the best chance of not being rejected.

In preparing to contact your siblings, it is vital that you do it in a way that leaves you feeling good about yourself *regardless of their reactions*. That way no matter what one says to you, you don't need to become defensive, and you don't need to return any barbs. The two overriding principles of contact with siblings are: *Don't attack them and don't defend yourself.*

The three methods of making contact, letter writing, talking in person, or consultation, are described below, followed by guidelines to provide structure for your conversation. Structure increases the chance for you both to feel emotionally safe, thus having a more productive exchange.

Method 1: Letter writing

When there is no contact or if there is hostility between you and your sibling, and if prior efforts at talking have failed, start by writing a letter, even if you live next door. A letter (not email or text) can be effective because each of you can write and rewrite it until you say exactly what you want, editing out accusations, sarcasm, defensiveness, and pandering. Letters also offer privacy and time for consideration while you communicate, so that neither of you can interrupt the other or divert the conversation. You each also have the opportunity to reread the other's letter several times, perhaps hearing different intentions each time.

Guidelines for letter writing:

1. Start your letter by saying that you miss talking to her or getting together; that you want to feel closer, or that you hate the silence or hostility between you. You might mention that soon you'll be the only remaining family members or that you already are adult orphans, and therefore need each other.
2. Tell her you'd like to hear her perspective of the problem. For example, you might write, "I really want to understand what I have done to upset you. I hate this coldness between us. You're very important to me, so I hope we can fix this. Please tell me your version of the problem."
3. You will notice this is all about her version. In arguments, it is difficult to hear the other's side until you feel your side is understood. But someone must go first! Since you want her to hear you, let her go first.
4. End by asking her to write you back, explaining that communicating by letter may allow you two to hear each other better.
5. When you get a response, give your next letter the same consideration as your first. First re-read her letter in an attempt to understand it better. Then, if you don't like what she has written, rather than argue

with her points, ask her questions to help you understand more. Only when you sense *she* is ready to hear *you* do you write your perspective.

6. These letters allow you to have both perspectives, giving a fuller picture of how the tensions got started, what kept them fueled, and what has prevented a resolution**.** And, don't be surprised if you learn something new. Keep alert to ways your parents may have unintentionally instigated tension between you two and be open to issues left over from childhood.
7. If you do not hear back to your first letter within a few weeks, reread it, seeing it through her eyes. Is there something she may not have liked? If so, do better in your next letter. Don't give up, write again.

If your anger is intense, you may need a step before writing the actual letter you will send. I call this the "Dear F-U Letter"; ***it is not to be sent.*** *S*ome clients reject this idea at first, then try it and are surprised at how freeing it is. Once the yucky things you would love to say are out of the way, you have a better chance to speak honestly, without attacking.

The Dear F-U Letter has its own guidelines.

1. Starting by cursing reminds you this is your chance to express all your fury – things you would never actually say but you've been feeling. Since you aren't sending it, you are free to say whatever you want; don't worry about being polite.
2. Use a minimum of five more curses throughout the letter in order to help you stay with your anger.
3. Do not ask questions; they defuse the power of your anger.
4. Don't worry about the length. Spew all the anger you have carried for however long.

5. When you are finished, read it out loud to yourself or a close friend. Then be sure to destroy it.
6. Now that you have vented, you are ready to write more calmly.
7. You may discover other benefits I haven't mentioned here.

Method 2: Talking in person

If the tension between you and your sibling is not volatile, and if she lives locally, invite her to meet you at some neutral, quiet place, specifically to discuss how to improve your relationship.

If your sibling lives out of town, suggest meeting half way (or in a neutral city) for a day or a weekend. Plan to do things you both enjoy, such as going to the theater or shopping. Don't mix the discussion of your relationship with the recreation; set aside specific times for talking and then go have fun again.

Guidelines for talking

Before you actually talk, offer your sibling the guidelines below and ask if she wants to add others.

1. Decide in advance what topics to talk about in order to narrow down the discussion. Do not start with the most highly charged topics. The more toxic ones can be discussed at a later point.
2. Set a time frame (such as one to three hours) for the conversation. Allow yourself time; don't squeeze this in between other obligations.
3. Plan to meet in a *neutral* quiet place (not either of your homes or your parents' place). It could be a park or an out-of-the-way restaurant. This helps ensure you both keep your voices low.
4. Do not have friends or relatives with you when you talk.
5. Agree to turn off cell phones and other devices.

6. Avoid words like "always," "never," "should," "must," "have to," "need to".
7. Have only one person talk at a time.
8. Don't speak for or about someone who isn't present; keep the conversation only about you two.
9. After each of you says something, the other repeats back what she has heard to make sure she heard correctly. (A missed word can change the entire meaning.)
10. Use humor. Before the discussion, agree on a lighthearted or silly word (i.e., eggplant, ishkabibble) to say when one of you breaks one of the guidelines.
11. If you are meeting out of town, mix the talk with socializing; do something you both enjoy, but build in breaks where you have your own space. You want to enjoy your time together enough to do it again.
12. Don't try to cover too much in one meeting. If it goes well, you can always meet again.

This structure may feel artificial, but remember, this discussion is hopefully only the beginning. If you can enjoy being together with less toxic, safe topics, down the road you may be able to handle the more painful ones.

Method 3: Therapy consultation

If letter writing and meeting in person aren't productive, I suggest that you meet with a sibling specialist. That person's job is to help moderate emotions, clarify your different memories of past events, unravel old rivalries, and put the unresolved "stuff" to rest so you can move on. This might be a one-time consultation, or a few sessions, or even a weekend focused specifically on improving your relationship. (See Chapter Six)

Anticipate Resistance to Change

We all have a natural tendency to resist change and maintain the status quo. You may not like the situation; you want the other person to change, but you probably don't realize that *you* have to make some changes. However, it only takes one person to instigate a change; since you have no control whether your sibling will, the only person you can rely on is yourself.

To understand this, think of a seesaw. To keep the balance, the two people have to adjust how far up or back each needs to sit for the seesaw to be parallel to the ground. Once balanced, if one person moves forward or back, the other *has* to move in order to rebalance the board. Or, they have to stop seesawing together.

In the past, you may have tried to repair your relationship – shifting your position on the seesaw – but your sibling resisted your efforts, not wanting to make the changes you wanted. After several rejections, you may have given up.

If you understand the process of change and resistance, you can anticipate her (consciously or unconsciously) blocking your efforts. Then you won't be put off when she rejects your initiative, but you'll need a new approach. You must hold firm in your resolve not to slip back to how you typically react to her, whether that be getting angry, feeling rejected, becoming passive or passive aggressive, or letting her drift away from you. What you do *after* she rejects your first efforts – if she does – is where real change can occur.

Let's look at this in regards to writing her a letter. If you write one, as described above, and she doesn't respond, you write again. Only this time, you share something you have learned about *your* part in the tension. Or, you might write what you imagine she would have said if she had responded. For example, "As I think about how we grew apart, I am wondering if you feel I let you down that time." Or, "If I try to see my behavior from your perspective, I can see how you

would think I was bullying you." Acknowledging that you played a role in the difficulties may soften her so she writes you back. Don't get defensive if she agrees it's all your fault; at least she wrote. That's progress. But, even if she doesn't write you back, you can contact her again in a while, writing something like, "I wish you would let me know my part in what happened between us because your relationship is important, and I want to fix what I can from my side."

If you get no response, give it another few weeks and write again. Assume she is not upset at your writing; if she were, she probably would have told you to stop. Too often, people get discouraged right away, thinking, "I was right; I knew she wouldn't change." As long as you are learning something new about your role in your relationship, you will benefit, whether or not she responds. And, in time, she may come around.

Your letters may go back and forth several times before she believes you really want to hear her point of view. At that point, you may choose to shift to a different method – suggesting you get together to talk or meet with a sibling counselor.

This may sound like more effort than you want to exert, but it really is no more than a few letters. And if you are successful, the benefit will be worth the effort.

If in one of your letters during this process, you hear she does not want to rehash the past, then your insistence on talking about the "problems" is disrespectful to her. So, if you want a relationship, accept it on her terms, *for the time being*. She may be willing to meet you for lunch or a movie if you make it clear you will not discuss the issues, you just want to get together. Then, at least, the seesaw will have shifted into a new balance by your doing this her way. Don't discount this time with her as superficial. If you two are enjoying your outings, that is a connection. That may be as much as she can do for the time being.

However, if she does not want to be with you, but you want a relationship with her children, ask if you can take your nephew to the ball game or send your niece holiday gifts. Break down what you want to the bare minimum.

As you can see, there are a number of possible steps you can take before you decide to give up; even then, you can give up for a while and try again next year. However, before charging ahead *or* giving up, go back and reread the beginning of the Preparation section; you want to be clear about your goals .

Healing From Abuse

If you were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by a sibling, or you abused a sibling, it is still possible for you and your sibling to heal and move on. However, certain things are a *must* for that to happen.

The one who did the abuse needs to take responsibility. It is not enough for him to just say he's sorry. He needs to hear and fully understand the impact, fear, and repercussions his behavior has caused you through the years. Achieving this is not a one-time conversation.

The abusing sibling has a story to tell also, such as having been abused himself, or perhaps having seen one parent abuse the other. He may need to deal with feelings of his own abuse before he can own what he did to a sibling.

As bad as sibling abuse is, the worst part, if that is even possible, is not having been able to tell you parents what happened. Children don't tell their parents if they don't think they will be believed, if they are threatened, if they blame themselves, or if they don't want to add more to an already troubled parent's problems.

To heal from the abuse, you may choose to confront your sibling. If so, know that his acknowledgement is less important than your being able to break the secrecy by speaking out now about the horror and shame.

During one of our early therapy sessions, after Hope had told me about having been sexually abused by her brother, she challenged, "What possible

benefit could I get from telling him? He will just get mad at me, blame me, or tell me I'm making it up."

After a few months of therapy, she began to accept the abuse was not her fault; she was only eight years old. She then made the connection to how the men she had been dating re-created variations of her abuse. As she began to feel better about herself, she realized she needed to confront her brother.

If you are going to talk to a sibling who has abused you, it is important to speak from your experience--what he did to you, what it was like for you, how you have suffered over the years, how the abuse has negatively impacted your life. You want to end the confrontation feeling good about yourself, proud of how you handled it, regardless of whether or not he acknowledges his actions.

When she was ready, Hope invited her brother, five years her senior, to join her for a therapy session, "to talk about our relationship." While they had not discussed the abuse, "in fact, he may never even think about it," Hope was pretty sure he would come to therapy with her because he had tried to be nice to her in recent years.

In preparation for his coming, I asked, "How will you feel if he denies he abused you or blames you?"

"I don't really care what he says. I need to face him and not feel ashamed or scared. I need to tell him what I have carried inside all these years because of him. I need to free myself so I will make better choices with men, not seeking out those who mistreat me. It would be wonderful if he could understand what I have suffered and took responsibility for it. But frankly, I don't care if he says I'm making it up. I will have finally told him I know it happened. I will no longer have all these feelings locked inside me; I will feel free, regardless of what he says."

As an afterthought, she added, "It's possible he, too, was abused. But, we both would have to heal ourselves before I can hope to heal our relationship.

Maybe this will motivate him to get help, to understand what led him to do such an atrocious thing to his little sister."

If you do confront your sibling, and he wants to learn more about why he abused you, this could be an opening for you to get from him what you need, to make peace with the abuse, and perhaps rebuild a relationship with him. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's terrifically healing.

Words of Caution

1. Some siblings are so damaged from the trauma of growing up in their family, whether or not there was sexual abuse, that reconnection is not possible or even desirable. They may need to keep you at a distance to protect a wall they had to build around themselves. If that is the case, do not personalize their rejecting you. (QTIP: quit taking it personally). You may need to grieve the loss of closeness with that sibling, *at least for the time being.*

2. If you have a verbally abusive sibling, don't allow yourself to be mistreated, but you may not want to give up too soon. By trying one or all of the methods described above, you will see if your sibling is willing to change. If she can't, you know you've done your best, and you can be at peace with that reality for now. Who knows what will happen between you two in the next 10-20 years!

Breaking the Generational Cycle of Ghosts

The dynamics of a sibling relationship are so powerful that they can continue through the generations. If one or both parents grew up with siblings, they bring to their new family expectations based on their own history. If they had a good

relationship, they expect to recreate that; if they had a conflictual one, they fear that will happen.

When you bring an expectation to what should be a blank slate, you may predetermine your children's relationships. If you had a positive experience with siblings, you may work too hard pushing your kids into liking each other and spending time together. If you had a negative experience and want something better for your children, you may also work too hard pushing the kids together.

On the other hand, you may overreact by unnecessarily stepping in to protect one of your children who, let's say, is being picked on, by punishing the other. Based on your history, you may also overact when siblings are only having normal squabbles. This is especially true when the children are all boys and mother was raised with only sisters.

In your efforts to shape your children's relationships, you may end up re-creating your own sibling ghosts and preventing the children from establishing the kind of relationship that works best for them at that point in their lives. (Over the years, children often shift their alliances among their brothers and sisters.) Thus, your unresolved issues with your siblings, regardless of the gender, can find new footholds in the next generation.

Parents Recreate their own Sibling Issues with Their Children

Let's see how this works with the Dean family.

Mrs. Dean was seeing me because of her inability to control her teenage children. Olin came and went as he pleased, breaking her (admittedly) inconsistent rules. "I feel intimidated by him, " she told me. Her daughter hated Olin and stayed away from the house, never telling mother where she was.

Since discussions about setting limits had been fruitless, I asked about Mrs. Dean's siblings when she was little. Although at first she was reluctant, she shared that her older brother, Frank, had been terribly intimidating throughout her younger years. When she complained, her mother confessed she was helpless to control him.

Mrs. Dean said, "I was scared of Frank, and the only way I could escape was to lock myself in my bedroom." She was surprised when I pointed out that both she and her daughter escaped from a brother -- she to her bedroom, her daughter out of the house. With that, Mrs. Dean recognized she felt the same helplessness in setting boundaries with Olin as her mother had with Frank.

If both you and your spouse have siblings, raising your children becomes even more complicated, because you each bring your own sibling experiences to your childrearing. Whether you two talk about what you want to repeat or do differently from your own childhood, your history follows you and interacts with your spouse's history. Not being aware of your own sibling relationship patterns may lead you to repeat them with your children. And, more significantly, if you go looking, you may find the patterns extend back several generations.

Sometimes I do not even need to ask about siblings in prior generations, because the family makes its own connection. In the next example, a family of two generations of parents and their two grown children are caught in the sibling trap.

I met with Mr. and Mrs. Zeno and their two daughters, Ann who was 32 years old and Carolyn, who was three years younger. The parents were concerned about Ann's depression. Although a talented painter, she was so incapable of taking care of herself that she had moved back into her parents' home. Mr. and Mrs. Zeno and Carolyn spent a lot of time giving Ann ideas for feeling better, getting a job, meeting friends, etc.

In one session, each of them was describing how Ann's depression affected them. Carolyn was teary as she explained she used to be jealous of her sister's talent; then surprising herself, she turned to Ann and blasted, "You are selfish and you're spoiled. I'm tired of figuring out your problems. I've got my own life to worry about." Carolyn had never stood up to Ann before. "I give a lot to you, but you don't give back. I don't have any more to give." She yelled, "I want my big sister back!"

In another session, Mr. Zeno described how Ann dragged herself into his office every day, complaining she was depressed. "I stop my work to talk to her, but nothing I say helps. I feel I have to walk on egg shells around her."

I asked, "Then why do you keep doing it?"

Slouched in his chair, he shrugged.

I pursued this. "Whom does Ann remind you of? When you were growing up was there someone everyone walked on eggshells around?"

Immediately, he sat up in the chair and talked about his older brother. Harry had gotten good grades in high school and was a great first-baseman. But once he got in college, Mr. Zeno said, "Harry started drinking heavily. I went to the same college the following year and moved in with him. I made sure he studied for his exams, got home safely from parties; I needed to make sure he was ok."

"Are there any similarities in the way you were with Harry and you are with Ann?"

"Hmm. I never got mad at him; I just kept picking up his pieces. I never demanded he be accountable for his actions. I can remember talking hour after hour with my brother and not getting anywhere." He looked surprised and added, "Just like with Ann."

"You never told him to shape up?" I asked.

"No, I never did." He sounded thoughtful.

"What you do with your brother now is another story; you may need to go back and talk to him about --"

Mr. Zeno cut me off. "I would like to."

I continued, "But do you want to try with your daughter? What do you need to tell her now?"

He looked at Ann. Finally, he said, "I expect you to be accountable for your actions. I'm not going to let you disrupt my work every day."

Mrs. Zeno, who had been listening quietly, sighed. "Oh, my goodness." Looking at Ann, she said, "It's just like with my brother Billy Boy, but he was retarded. He needed all the help anyone could give him. You don't, Ann, so I don't have to cater to you like I did with him."

"Look at what we're doing," Carolyn said to her father. "All three of us feel the need to be the more competent to our less competent sibling."

Mr. Zeno piped in, "It's like we see them as 'sick' with no expectations that they could pull themselves together."

Carolyn summarized the connection in a rush of words. "All three of the siblings—Ann, Uncle Harry, and Uncle Billy—acted as if they couldn't manage without us. And none of us could say how resentful we felt having to take care of them."

Carolyn got it right; her mother, father, and she had all assumed that their siblings could not manage without them. Whether true, as possibly with Uncle Billy, or not, as with Ann and Uncle Harry, none of them had considered other options for helping their sibling. Equally important, they had not considered the expense to themselves for taking responsibility for their sibling. Later, Carolyn said to me, "I

thought this sibling stuff was just psychobabble. But, wow!" When not stopped in one generation, the sibling pattern can be passed along.

In further discussions with the Zenos, they discovered variations of this pattern of caretaking a sick sibling that existed on both sides of their parent's generation and on one side in Mrs. Zeno's grandparent's generation.

You are not responsible for what was done by your parents or grandparents or any prior generation. You are only responsible for opening your eyes and using your insights to prevent passing along sibling patterns *not of your choice.*

The next chapter, written specifically for therapists (but may be useful for anyone), describes the whole process from how to identify sibling issues to conducting sibling therapy.

Chapter Six

For Therapists: The How To's of Sibling Therapy

As a therapist, you probably are working with individuals and couples who have sibling issues. While some specifically request help with these relationships, more often they are not even aware of their sibling issues. So, it is important for you to be able to recognize frozen images, crystallized roles, and unhealthy loyalty (see Chapter One), as well as sibling transferences (see Chapter Three) in your clinical work.

In my experience, I have found several ways that sibling issues present themselves. The most obvious is when a potential or current client asks if I would meet with all of the siblings together or just a subset, like the sisters or the youngest ones. They usually want to improve their relationship or deal with a specific problem between or among them.

I have also gotten calls from parents in their 70s or 80s wanting help for their adult children, saying, "We can't stand the thought of dying and having them hate each other or never being together again."

Frequently, I am seeing a client (in individual, couples, or family therapy) who has had several prior therapies for the same problem, and although they are psychologically savvy, their knowledge has not led to change. Therefore, it makes no sense to repeat what has already has been unsuccessful. Rather, a new approach, focusing on their siblings, may bypass any internal resistance to change.

Most often, though, I hear something in the sessions that leads me to suspect a sibling transference or lingering ghosts. That's when I do a sibling assessment.

Assessing For a Sibling Connection

When you start treatment with any new client, you probably do an assessment. The only difference here is including a sibling relationship as possibly related to their problems. The three main elements for considering whether a problem is with a sibling or a sibling transference are frozen images, crystallized roles, and an unhealthy loyalty.

Here are some typical clinical situations that could have a sibling connection.

When a client:

- is stuck in a unhealthy role in one or more relationships or has a pattern of unhealthy relationships
- has a marital problem
- idealizes a sibling or puts a sibling on a pedestal
- is bright and successful but is underachieving or self-sabotaging at work
- feels guilty about taking steps that would be helpful
- keeps losing a job, being fired or quitting
- has difficulty with co-workers
- complains of having poor self-esteem or self-image
- has few close friends or dysfunctional friendships
- feels isolated

Another situation amenable to involving siblings is when you are working with parents and their children but none of your suggestions or interventions is proving beneficial. And finally, when you are feeling stuck and nothing else has been helpful, consider bringing in a sibling.

My assessment of Jolene and Stanley, a middle age couple, shows how I look for possible sibling-related causes for their conflict. In their second session, it was obvious Stan was more intent on fighting Jolene's insistence that he not keep marijuana in the house than worrying about his kids knowing he had it.

This, together with the knowledge that they had been in therapy twice before coming to me, led me to consider a sibling transference.

Jolene started the session reporting she had found marijuana in Stanley's pocket and although she wished he wouldn't smoke, she said, "I absolutely don't want our kids to discover their father uses drugs."

I asked if he remembered how he had responded?"

"Yea," he snapped; "I said I'd have it in the house if I wanted, and if she had a problem with that, I'd just move out."

I pushed, "Think about that. Do you want your kids to know you use pot?" He shook his head, looking embarrassed. I continued, "You were more invested in rebelling against Jolene than in saying, 'Of course I don't want my kids to see this, so I won't keep it in the house.' It's as if you were setting yourself up for Jolene to get angry at you."

"So I could have a reason to be mad at her and walk out." He seemed surprised at his observation, then went quiet. "I do set it up, don't I? Why would I want to push her away?" He thought for a moment, then added, "to prove I don't need anyone. But, I have to figure this out because," he takes her hand, "I don't want to lose you."

"Have you felt that same rebelliousness before? Does it feel familiar?" I asked.

"No, well," but then he stopped.

"What were you going to say?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with Jolene, but when you asked when I felt this before, I flashed back to Dragon Mom. That's what I called my big sister when we were kids. She was always bossing me around, so I would find ways to thwart her. I remember feeling embarrassed she had so much control over me."

Stan recounted stories of Candyce making him do things he didn't want to do and how he thought up ways to get back at her.

To see if he could make the connection himself, I asked, "Do you think this could have anything to do with why you challenge Jolene and rebel against her reasonable requests?"

"It sure feels the same, but it's crazy. I hardly have any contact with my sister now. For that matter, my brother, either."

"If you really want to figure this out, if you want to save your marriage, I have a suggestion that may sound really kooky to you." That's how I presented the idea of bringing in his sister and brother for a weekend retreat.

As it turned out, my guess about a sibling transference was on target. Since he had made the connection himself, it was hard for him to reject the idea of inviting his siblings to help him. He told them, "I need to figure out why I push Jolene away so I can save my marriage."

What happened during the weekend is described below.

Preparations for a sibling session

Unlike a regular therapy session where you just show up, to have a successful sibling therapy session there are a number of issues you must address in advance.

While some people jump at the idea of bringing in their siblings, most do not. Therefore, planning the presentation to your client is the first thing you must do. This includes helping your client see that there is a sibling connection to their problem; talking with the client about how to present the idea of meeting together with the therapist; deciding which siblings to invite and how often to meet.

Helping clients see a sibling connection

Once I suspect a sibling connection, I ask the client questions about possible similarities or contrasts between their problem and their siblings, such as:

- What would your sibling do in this situation?
- How is your sibling's marriage?
- Do your arguments with your spouse/co-worker feel familiar?
- Think back to when you were in elementary school and any qualities in your siblings you didn't like. Does your spouse or co-worker have similar ones?
- Who among your siblings makes the most money or has the most prestigious job? Who the least?

If the client does not make the link, I may say something like, "You've just been telling me that you felt your brother never liked you, and now you are saying the same thing about your boss. Is there a possible connection?" Or, "I notice you've used the same words in describing your husband as you have in describing your brother. Are you curious about that?"

When a client refuses to invite the siblings, it may be because you've not made a strong enough case, so the client does not fully appreciate how it might be of benefit. Or, the client is anxious about what might happen. It's also possible that the client understands, in a way she can't explain, that it is not a good idea. You need to assess these possibilities, as well as any ambivalence *you* might have about including the siblings.

How to approach the siblings

When I suggest bringing siblings to a session, a client's initial response is almost always some variation of, "They won't come," or "I don't want them," or "It won't help." Even if the client likes the idea she may be hesitant because she can't imagine how to present it to them.

Therefore, once my client is willing to invite the siblings, we practice a variety of ways to ask for their involvement. "I need your help," is often a good one, because it keeps the problem focused on the client, and the

siblings don't feel they are going to be attacked. It is also useful because many siblings would like to be of help if they were aware of a problem.

If my client and his siblings are not getting along, I suggest he think of the benefits *for the siblings* if they attend. Even if the client thinks a sister is at fault, she is more likely to come if she sees some advantage for herself. This might be, "I know I blow up at you, and I need your help in understanding this so we can have disagreements without my getting out of control."

Sometimes it is useful to invite siblings when the client needs their help to fill in missing information about their childhood, in getting a different perspective, in getting some new ideas for solving the problem. This approach may help decrease the client's anxiety in asking, and it is easier for siblings to accept.

Since some siblings are likely to reject the idea, at least initially, I prepare my client to anticipate their resistance by using humor. I ask, "If you really want to make sure your sisters say no, how could you invite them?"

By starting with the negative, you side-step a client's potential sabotage. The response is almost always some humorous variation of, "Tell them my therapist says they have to come because they are the problem."

If you haven't prepared the client well, and the siblings refuse to come, you have no way of knowing whose resistance it is. It could be the client agreed just to please you but had no intention of having them come. Or, the client made the invitation vague or offensive. The siblings might have refused because they worried they would be blamed or attacked or didn't understand why they were needed.

Therefore, preparation with the client is important and may take weeks. On the other hand, while you don't want to rush it, you need to be

aware that your own ambivalence about doing the sibling therapy may allow you to keep postponing the idea.

The reality, though, is that no matter how well you prepare your client, not all siblings can or will help a brother or sister. When siblings do refuse, your task is to distinguish if it would be beneficial to ask again in a different way or in a few months, if it would be a waste a time to pursue the idea any further, or if continuing might be destructive to your client.

In all the years I have offered sibling therapy, once my client was clear about wanting the siblings to come and how to present the idea, very few siblings have refused. Some have come eager to tell me how mean/awful/manipulating my client is; some have come reluctantly, but they have come. And some initially refused to come, only to reverse their decision at a later date.

Once you and your client are ready to invite the siblings, there are a number of decisions to make as part of the preparation.

Whom to invite and how often to meet

Whom do you invite? You may decide to invite one sibling or all of them. Or, just a subgroup, like all the sisters or only the older ones. Even if some of them refuse, I go ahead with the meeting, and at the end, I ask those who do attend what they want to share with those who didn't come. Sometimes they write up a review of the meeting for those who were absent; sometimes they each call or write the absent sibling giving their own reaction. Sometimes they do nothing, waiting for the absent sibling to ask. Often, though, when the reluctant one learns everyone else is coming, he changes his mind, not wanting to be left out.

How often should you meet? Whether the siblings are local or from out of town, I suggest a two hour session. That gives enough time for something to happen, and for me to assess whether future sessions would be beneficial.

If so, I might suggest we meet a limited number of times, once a month, or leave it open-ended. If the issues are really complex and intense, regardless where everyone lives, I suggest a weekend retreat (see Sibling Retreat, below).

Ways to Involve Siblings

When my client is having a problem with one or more siblings, they are invited to be part of the therapy. However, if the siblings are being asked to help understand my client's sibling transference, they are invited as a consultant. Sometimes, though, once in the session, the sibling may choose to move into being a participant, as we see below.

Sibling as consultant

A sibling comes as a consultant to provide information or help clarify some confusion. If there is an issue about the past, while siblings experienced the same family event, they saw it through their own eyes, so they may have a different perspective on what was happening in the family. The oldest child, for instance, may have more information about a family trauma. Or, the males may have a different view than the females. Therefore, the different versions of the same long-ago events that were fixed in the client's mind may offer an alternative understanding for the client.

Using siblings as a consultant to the therapy may also serve the purpose of breaking through crystallized roles, such as when an older sibling turns to a younger one for help, or the "responsible one" turns to the "trouble-maker," or the "well one" turns to the "sick" one. (See Chapter One for more about crystallized roles.)

Sometimes siblings become involved around concrete tasks for one of them, but end up with all benefiting from that person's changes. In one family, a 45 year old man claimed he was too emotionally sick to work or even look for

work. He was living for free with one of his older sisters. It took all six brothers and sisters, who had had superficial contact with each other before, gathered together to orchestrate the tasks he was too anxious to do. They divided some tasks, like helping him apply for a job and get medication. They also worked together to help the sister not feel guilty about expecting him to do chores around the home in exchange for free room and board. They supported each other in expecting more from him. The biggest surprise was not that he was soon back to work; it was the significant changes they all made in their relationships.

Unlike this example, some siblings who have been out of touch for years may reconnect around the client's problems.

Robert, a happily married father of four, had a fairly successful job in marketing. His projects were good, but never great. When Robert told me he felt blocked, as if a wall were preventing access to his creativity, I asked about his siblings, thinking there might be a ghost following him to work. He said he had one sister, Rebecca, but he hadn't seen her in years.

When I suggested he invite Rebecca to a session, his initial reaction was, "You want me to do *WHAT*?" Yet, after further discussion, he decided to ask her, hoping she could shed light on this wall that blocked further professional achievement.

Even though they had not been close since college, the feelings when they were younger were strong enough to bring her across country. To their surprise, they discovered they were both locked in crystallized roles and felt a loyalty to each other that was holding them both back.

Rebecca, dubbed the smart one, asked her brother, "Don't you remember in high school, Dad telling you not to feel bad that I was smarter than you?"

While consciously forgetting that message, he realized he had honored her role, which led to a wall blocking his academic and creative potential. Rebecca had her own insight when she realized that out of loyalty to Robert, because of

father's message, she held herself back after college, not doing anything with her Master's degree in computer design. "I didn't want to give credence to Dad's comment."

From high school through college, each had tried to protect the other from feeling less smart. (The message from their father stemmed from his own sibling issues. To learn how sibling roles get passed through the generations, see Chapter Five.)

An unexpected outcome of Rebecca's visit, but one that happens frequently was the siblings drew closer as they let go of their frozen images and retired their crystallized roles.

In working with siblings who come as a consultant, the therapist must be vigilant about preserving that role and not do therapy with them unless it is mutually agreed upon, as shown in the next section.

Another reason I suggest inviting siblings in as a consultant is when my client feels isolated, has few friends and no close relationship with the siblings. The purpose here is to provide the client with a support system, while at the same time potentially nurturing or rekindling their relationship.

As we saw with Robert and Rebecca, brothers and sisters who were close as children often grow apart as they become adults. When a crisis hits one of them or someone in their extended family, they may not think of turning to their siblings for support.

For example, if a sister is having marital problems, has a developmentally disabled child, or has been fired from a job, sibling therapy can help rekindle their lost affection, making it easier to deal with the crisis. Or, if a person, married or single, has no emotional intimacy in her life, siblings becoming involved can be nurturing. Once the person feels emotionally connected with a sibling, it may be easier to emotionally connect with others.

When you believe in the importance of including siblings and getting their input, you'll find brothers and sisters can be a valuable resource to the therapy. They not only may be part of the problem, but as you see from these examples, and from the next one, they can be part of the solution.

Consultant-turn-participant

Sometimes, a sibling comes to a therapy session as a consultant, but learns so much about himself that he wishes to become a participant, as we see in the following story of Angelo and Sal, brothers I saw many decades ago. You'll see how my frustration in not being helpful to my client led me to discover the power of siblings in therapy.

Angelo, a 35 year old married father of two, was the oldest son of a strong Italian hierarchy and first vice president of his father's business. Despite his many prior therapies, he was still feeling depressed and inadequate.

One day, afraid his work with me would be yet another unsuccessful therapy, I said, "If you really want to get better, next week bring someone who knows you well."

This is one of the principles of family therapy -- if you are stuck, bring in more people. I anticipated he would bring his wife but was astonished when he introduced me to Sal, his 13 month younger brother. I learned that a few years before, Sal had argued with their very difficult father and left the family company, setting up a competitive firm right down the street. Rather than being angry, father admired Sal's gutsiness.

In the session, Sal described feeling satisfaction that he had replaced his big brother as father's favorite. And, while he didn't use the language of frozen images or crystallized roles, he was proud he was no longer "the sweet #2 son."

At one point in the session, Sal asked, "Are you scared to stand up to Dad at work now that you have given me the role of #1?"

Angelo was silent for a while and then said, "As long as I can remember I knew, as the oldest, I was Dad's favorite and would inherit the business; I've always felt I owed you something, but I couldn't figure out what."

With amazing honesty, Sal responded, "We were raised valuing loyalty to our family code of hierarchy – first son gets the business; it was pushed down our throats, along with the motto of 'family first.' I have felt guilt at being jealous of you all these years, and even more so now at having beat you in standing up to Dad."

I posed several questions to them: "Can you be loyal to each other and still be competitive in your business? Can you be loyal to each other while also breaking out of the roles you were assigned as #1 and #2? Can you rethink your father's rule of 'family first' so you can make decisions that are best for each of you?"

The session ended with them startled by how family loyalty and their roles had caused Angelo to be stymied at work and Sal to resent his older brother. Sal looked at Angelo, "I came to help you, but this has been so useful for me." He insisted on paying half of my fee. They set another appointment to come together the following week.

During that week, Angelo told his father it was time for father to retire; he was ready to take over the company. It is unlikely Angelo would have been able to move forward without this conversation with Sal.

Beginning the Sessions

Once all the other preparatory decisions have been made and everyone is in the room, I usually start by asking my client, "What did you say to your siblings about why you wanted them to come?" I follow this with a question to each sibling, "How did you decide to come?" Even when my client is hesitant to invite his siblings, so often they simply respond, "My sister asked me."

As part of my engaging the siblings, I make supportive statements to them such as "You are brave to be here," or "What a caring sister you must be to do this."

I then guide my client and each sibling in describing their version of the problem. This allows them all to speak in the beginning and gives me a chance to assess alliances, degrees of cooperation, styles of relating, etc.

The shape of the rest of the in-office session can follow according to your clinical style. The major difference is that throughout the session, I watch for and point out indications of their frozen images of each other, their crystallized roles, and any unhealthy loyalties.

Importance of Flexibility

It is important to be flexible as well as creative in working with siblings. Initially, I believed relationships only got better when siblings talked about their problems and that everyone had to be in the room together. Over the years (and perhaps out of my own stubbornness at not wanting to give up), I have found there are situations that didn't fit my image of how to help siblings.

Below, I describe a therapy in which one sister refused to be in the same room as my client – but was willing to help. Next, I discuss how not talking about their problems may be the best approach to helping siblings get along.

If a sibling refuses to come, or you think it might not be beneficial for the siblings to be in the room together, there are other options. I inadvertently stumbled onto one: seeing sisters separately while acting as a go-between.

Francie was hurt that her older sister, Louise, ignored her. Based on my suggestion, she wrote Louise, asking her to come into therapy with her. Louise refused. That's when I came up with the idea of meeting with them

separately, and with their permission, passing the information back and forth. They would each know what I would be sharing. Louise and Francie both agreed to this.

I met with them on alternate weeks, sharing the gist of each session with the other and my observations and insights. It felt weird at first, but it turned out to be quite an inventive way to help them.

Louise said Francie was too needy. When I shared that with Francie, she agreed to back off, but needed to know how much contact was okay. Louise said for me to tell Francie she didn't want any contact at that point. It became clear Louise felt fragile because she was dealing with the residual emotional abuse by their mother. I validated her feeling too vulnerable to deal with her sister at the same time, especially since Francie, who denied having suffered the same abuse, was still close to their mother.

Francie was surprised when I passed this information to her, but it helped her stop personalizing her big sister's rejection.

Through a two month process of alternate weeks, both sisters made some significant shifts. Francie went from feeling angry at Louise and wondering why her sister didn't like her, to feeling sad for her and hoping she worked out the problem enough so they could be close again. Louise went from needing total avoidance of Francie to allowing periodic contact with limits as to what they could talk about.

Not perfect, but much better for them both.

There are times when your client wants to resolve painful issues with a sibling, but all efforts to talk together have been unproductive or have caused the sibling to totally withdraw. Too often, the client sees no other option but reluctantly eliminating contact. Sometimes, though, there is another option, one we therapists don't often recommend: ignore the problems. I recommend the client suggest getting together with a sibling, for a short period of time -- first making it clear they will not discuss anything more

serious than which restaurant to choose or how a new pair of shoes would look with a certain dress.

Keeping the conversations superficial still allows for contact and maybe even some good times. And, who knows how many good times they will have before the sibling is willing to discuss more serious topics. But, even if never, at least they have some times they can be together that are pleasant.

Sibling Retreats

Another approach to working with siblings is in weekend retreats which have a different tenor than in-office sessions because of the intensity of the siblings being together for an extended period of time.

Sibling retreats allow enough time for each of them to identify and melt their frozen images and reassess their crystallized roles. There is time to break secrets, fill in missing pieces to make sense of their history, clarify the mixed messages and stories they have heard from parents and each other. The extended time allows for an immersion into their individual concerns with each other, and an awareness of how some or all of them have sibling transferences in other parts of their lives. Further, having the siblings for that block of time reduces any ambivalence about quitting which may happen when the sessions are held weekly.

Generally, I hold the retreat in a neutral setting. Meeting at your office or your client's home may cause the others to feel an imbalance as they are "guests" not equal players. Therefore, a neutral setting (such as a local retreat facility or lodge) decreases potential for the imbalance, while also providing a pleasant environment with space to get away, go for a walk or hike to help absorb all that they are experiencing.

Retreats are designed specifically for each individual family. However, there are some commonalities.

I start as I do with in-office sessions, allowing them to talk about why they have come. Early on, though, I give them a task to do together that is non-threatening and is usually a tension reliever. I have them draw their family's genogram (family tree) and to include as many generations as they can.

I give them a color code of behaviors I have specifically chosen for their family, such as addiction, explosive anger, sexual abuse, peace maker, and I have them mark each person with any applicable colors.

This informative genogram serves all of us. For my benefit, it shows me a fuller picture of their family, and I get to see how they relate on a non-threating task. For their benefit, it opens avenues for laughter, conversation, and for learning more about their family. It often is the vehicle for sharing or breaking secrets. The color coding lets them visually see patterns across the generations of their family.

Throughout the weekend, I meet with everyone together, like in a family therapy session, as well as in subgroups. Sometimes I send some of them off with a specific assignment. For instance, for two siblings who barely talk, I may have them devise a game (or joke/trick) to present to the rest. Or, I might have several of them share their different versions of a particular event in the family.

In addition to group discussions, I create exercises based on what is happening between or among them. The point of the exercises is to see and express themselves, their situations, and their feelings in non-verbal ways. And, always, I am looking for instances that demonstrate the presence of any of the three components of their ghosts. I also build in time for each of them to be alone and reflect on what they are learning.

By the end of the retreat, they are aware of how their frozen images and crystallized roles frame their behaviors with each other, preventing them from seeing each other as they are today. They understand what lies behind

any unhealthy loyalty and are clear how they transfer some of these old issues onto people they love and those at work.

They may or may not end up best friends, but the air has been cleared and awkward tensions are eased. In addition, siblings have better lines of communication, preparing them for the time when they will be the oldest generation. Another benefit is their awareness of how sibling issues can be passed on to their children.

To demonstrate a sibling retreat, let's go back to Stan and Jolene, the couple I talked about when making a sibling-related assessment. Stan was rebelling against Jolene's not wanting him to keep marijuana in the house, even though he forbade his kids from smoking.

When I suggested Stan invite his sister, whom he called Dragon Mom, and brother to help him figure out this pattern, "to save your marriage," he felt desperate enough to try it. The following week, he reported, "They both said yes -- even before I finished explaining." He was stunned at their adamant support of him even though, "I've not been a very good brother to either of them for many years."

The first evening of the weekend retreat, the three of them worked together on their genogram, laughing at shared memories and hearing new information about family members.

Saturday morning, I ask them to tell me about Stan when he was little. Candyce turned to him, "You were such a cute kid; you were happy and laughed a lot -- up until about age 11."

"What do you think happened to change him then?" I asked.

Candyce filled in their history: their mother had to be away for several months, leaving her in charge of her brothers. She was only 15, Stan was 11, and Toby 10.

Stan recalled, "You were so bossy: clean up, eat, don't do this, come home when I tell you. Toby and I called you Dragon Mom. I was always furious at you."

Candyce became teary. "That was such an awful time for me. I had just gotten my driver's license. I had to drive you to and from school. I was terrified." Once home, she had to get them started on homework, get dinner ready. "I rarely had time to sit and eat because Dad needed me at the store in the evenings. I worked with him until closing, getting home by 9:30 or 10:00, when I started my homework."

Stan's mouth hung open. "I had no idea. I only knew you were bossy. Out of spite, if you told me to come inside, I'd stay out, even if I just walked around."

Showing great empathy for his big sister, he said, "That's much too much responsibility for a 15 year old. I suppose Mom and Dad had to rely on you, but that must have been awful, taking care of two bratty brothers, with no time for yourself or your friends."

When we broke for lunch, I suggested they eat together without talking about any problems, just have fun. They returned laughing.

Stan then shared something he'd never told anyone before. That summer the neighborhood kids frequently beat him up. Suffering from bossy Candyce and those kids bullying him, he pledged, "I'd never let anyone tell me what to do again. That's when I started hanging out with tough guys. After all, Dad used to call me his 'tough son.'" Stan quickly looked at his brother.

"It's alright," Toby said softly, explaining, "Stan heard those guys calling me names and he tried to defend me. You were the tough son, and I was the wimp. If Dad had the courage he probably would have called me his queer son. I often wondered if you felt you had to be doubly tough to make up for me being so pathetic."

"You weren't pathetic."

Toby gave him a sharp look, "Come on; we can be honest here. I was pathetic back then. And, you were embarrassed by me. You may have been defending me, but you started pulling away. We hardly ever did anything together after that."

"Well, look who has the last laugh. You aren't pathetic now. You're incredible successful; you have a loving partner of 17 years, longer and smoother than my marriage. You make a bunch of money in a job you really love …."

"And Dad really respects me, huh? Are you going to add that, too? You know he's totally mortified by me – even with all I've accomplished."

I asked Stan if he thought his difficulty with relationships was in any way related to knowing his father didn't respect….

Toby bitterly finished my sentence for me, "me as much as he does you."

Stan, physically curled into his seat, practically whispered, "No matter how much I mess up, it still doesn't help him treat you better."

The next morning, thinking about how he curled into his seat, Stan said, "That's a great metaphor for what I've learned this weekend; I have tried to make myself smaller than you, Toby. It's as if I could make myself less competent, you would look better – to Dad."

Stan recreated his crystallized tough guy role from childhood in his marriage. His unhealthy loyalty to a brother he loved but was embarrassed by, held him back. He unconsciously let Toby be more successful in love – the area that caused his father such shame. His anger at his sister's bullying him was transferred to his wife.

At the end of the weekend, Stan told his siblings, "I need to show you both I care, that I don't have to be tough. If I can do it with you guys, hopefully I can do it with the woman I love. I just hope Jolene holds on while I'm learning."

As is apparent, having the three of them together provided more depth to the issues, bringing more to light than ever would have happened in individual or couple's therapy. And, their spending the entire weekend together intensified their relationship, allowing me to see the dynamics quicker. This made it easier to see the origin of his need to be tough, thus pinpointing his transference from both Candyce and Toby to Jolene.

After doing a number of these retreats, I learned the importance of including a follow up to help gel the changes among the siblings. As happens with any kind of weekend retreat (or even business conference) the glow from the intensity of the weekend too often fades before Monday evening. Therefore, I now include a three month phone conference with the siblings to ensure the momentum from the retreat is maintained with lasting changes.

Skills Necessary for Sibling Therapy

To be an effective sibling therapist, it's important to have a good understanding of systems theory and family dynamics. Some additional skills include creativity in designing exercises, flexibility, and the ability to think quickly on your feet.

While all therapists must address issues of anger with their clients, working with siblings requires a tolerance for a heightened expression of it, without feeling threatened by it *or aborting the intensity*. This is where creative exercises can allow siblings to vent and appropriately channel the anger.

As for all therapists, it's important to be aware of your own issues and transferences from your parents. Here, in this work, it's especially important to flesh out your own sibling ghosts and to be aware of your sibling transferences.

I love working with siblings. I love the intensity that exists among brothers and sisters who love each other, yet who fought vehemently over a

toy and have that same degree of passion as adults. I find it thrilling to see siblings meet in conflict and tension, to guide their interactions, and to watch them leave having revamped their images of each other and themselves.

In the trainings I offer therapists, it has become clear this work is not for the faint of heart. But for those who are invested in learning, it is incredibly rewarding.

For information on therapist training for work with siblings, including sibling retreats, here is my contact information:

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APPENDIX

a. **10 Causes of Sibling Conflict**

b. **Your Sibling Relationships May Follow an Hourglass Pattern**

c. **Other Books by the Author**

10 Causes of Sibling Conflict

1. Parental favoritism occurs when the special attention goes only to one child, to the exclusion of the others.
   It is a problem for the favored child when:
   a. it comes with strings that the child must meet a parent's emotional needs
   b. the child is a buffer between the parents or fills the void of an empty marriage
   c. the specialness of the child helps to stabilize the marriage
   d. the favoring of one child is to spite or hurt the other parent
   e. the siblings react by isolating or taunting the child.

2. Children recreate parents' conflicts
   Children model what they see with their parents, developing a relationship with each other that mirrors the parents' conflicts.
   a. If one parent is passive to the other's aggression, one child becomes the victim to a sibling, not fighting back.
   b. The child aligned with the passive parent may "model" for that parent how to stand up and fight for oneself.
   c. If both parents fight verbally or physically, the children absorb the tension and spew it at each other – ratcheting it up several notches.
   d. When parents don't want to argue in front of the children, their anger still gets indirectly transmitted to the children who reflect it off each other.

3. Parents recreate their own sibling issues with their children
   The sibling relationship is so powerful it flows through the generations. Parents' expectations for their children are based on their own history.

If they had a good relationship, they expect to recreate that; if they had a conflictual one, they fear that will happen to their children. Their expectations predetermine their children's relationship with each other.

a. Those with positive experiences as a child, over-react when their children have normal squabbles.
b. Those with negative experiences over-react by stepping in to ease conflicts unnecessarily.

4. One parent is "switchboard operator" for the siblings

   The hub of a family's communication is usually the mother – because she knows what happens for each child. Thus, she is between the children, interfering with their own choice of what to share and how to be with each other.

   When she unnecessarily intervenes, she

   a. interferes with their problem solving ability
   b. prevents them from learning to modulate their anger themselves, to find non-argumentative solutions
   c. teaches them to continue fighting until she steps in, so they don't learn to set their own limits
   d. helps them avoid finding their own alternate ways to settle conflicts with someone stronger, bigger – such as bartering, negotiating, using humor, or outwitting a sibling
   e. blocks them from the closeness that occurs when they resolve their own problems.

5. Parents assign crystallized roles for each child

   Parents' expectations often result in directing their children into rigid roles which then become a crystallized part of their children's identity.

When aspects of a child's behavior or interest is praised or dismissed, the child is shaped into a specific role. These roles then rigidly define the child's identity. For example, the funny child becomes the "family comic"; the quiet one gets labeled "shy." Parents may direct a child into a specific role to prevent competition or rivalry, which eventually backfires. The rigid roles leave children less flexible to fully develop themselves.

6. Dysfunctional parents cause siblings to turn anger onto each other
   When one or both parents are physically, verbally, sexually, or emotionally abusive – to each other or the children -- the children find their own ways to survive. One way is to recreate the same abusive pattern with each other.

7. Dysfunctional parents cause sibling to isolate themselves
   When one or both parents are physically, verbally, sexually, or emotionally abusive – to each other or the children -- the children find their own ways to survive. Rather than turn to each other for mutual support and nurturance (or fight), they may isolate themselves from each other, believing that is the safest way to protect themselves.

8. Younger sibling feels abandoned as older moves away
   When siblings are close in age and like each other, there is a normal developmental shift that occurs as the older one reaches adolescence and has less investment in the younger siblings. If not at that time, the break occurs as the older graduates from high school. The younger one takes the abandonment personally and feels discarded and rejected. Over the years, these feelings often get turned (usually

unconsciously) into anger at the older sibling – who has no idea why the younger is being mean or avoiding him or her.

9. Cultural preference in looks, abilities, personality
   Unfortunately, society values some traits and physical characteristics more than others, such as athletic skills, blond hair and blue eyes. Each culture has its own preferences. Regardless how a parent tries to equalize the children, they know when they do or don't meet the standard. The child with the socially valued attributes may tease or isolate from the one who doesn't meet the standard. Or, he or she may diminish the valued traits or develop a behavior problem to counter the valued role.

10. Mental illness and neurological conditions
    When a neurological condition (i.e., Attention Deficit Disorder, Tourette Syndrome) is undiagnosed, the behaviors can be disruptive, even violent. Even if the parents are trying to get help, the other siblings have to live with the out-of-control brother or sister. They may feel guilty about hating a sibling who is weird or violent.

Your Sibling Relationships May Follow an Hourglass Pattern

Some siblings have always been close. However, most have gone through different periods of closeness. Your siblings may weave in and out of your life in varying degrees of intensity, depending on your age and your life situation.

One way to think about this pattern is to picture an hourglass, with the flat top of the glass being childhood and the flat bottom being old age. The long line across the top and the bottom represents a lot of contact during childhood and old age, the periods when siblings feel closest to each other. The hourglass progressively narrows as you move into your adolescent and young adulthood, and reaches the "waist" as siblings have minimal connection during their 20s and 30s while establishing their own careers and personal lives.

During the childrearing years, the hourglass begins to widen. Siblings increase their contact, wanting their children to know their cousins and the extended family. Then, in your middle years, you are often brought even closer as you have to work together around your aging parents.

Unless adult siblings really like each other, it seems the reasons for continued contact would diminish once the children are grown and parents have died. Yet, research supports the widening of the hourglass in old age; senior siblings talk to each other at least once a week. And many even move to live closer to each other.

Here is a more detailed description of the quality of the sibling relationship in each of these age periods. Obviously, this does not fit for everyone.

Childhood

Siblings who are within about four years of age are called high access. Regardless how they relate to each other when parents are present, when alone, high access children form their own subgroup of the family. They may have their own rules and hierarchies. In fact, they have their own separate history. (My brothers still chuckle how they used to slide down the winding two story laundry shoot. This amazes my parents, who question this, "How could they have done this without our knowing about it?)

Young siblings evolve their own rhythm of interaction. In fact, think about your childhood siblings as your first marriage, that is your first life experience of two people of the same generation learning the back and forth flow between loving and fighting. It's a time when children learn to negotiate around toys in the way spouses must negotiate around the proverbial toothpaste -- do you squeeze from the bottom or the middle?

If you are lucky, you have both positive and negative memories. You spent your childhood cruising between taunting (or being taunted) and playing with your siblings. Despite the yelling, you always knew you loved each other. If you weren't so lucky, you may have felt hatred, terror, or perhaps worse, no connection at all with your siblings.

Low access siblings, those who are more than four years apart, had little overlap in their lives. They probably did not share friends, bedroom, or clothes. They may not even have known each other very well.

Young Adulthood

Following the hourglass as it narrows, you move through your 20s, and early 30s. There are some siblings who remain close, even attend the same college, share friends, maybe live together. They consider each other

among their best friends. However, these are probably among the minority of young adult siblings.

Most often, during these years, there is less contact with your siblings. The focus moves away from family and towards the outside world. You may be busy establishing yourself as an adult, settling in your career, looking for a partner, raising a family.

Childhood is not far enough away to have really forgotten those old jealousies, resentments, rejections. Images you had of each other back then have become "frozen" in your mind. "She's bossy." "He's lazy and manipulative." You hold on to these images, frozen in time as they used to be, not recognizing your siblings have changed. They do the same with you. For them, you remain the "cry baby," "goody two-shoes," "troublemaker."

You may think your unfinished business with each sibling is of no relevance in your life at this point. You may not recognize how you read meaning into their behavior as if they were the same young brother or sister. And, they do the same with you. You may not see how you transfer these frozen sibling images onto other people in your current life, so you keep bumping into variations of your troublesome siblings among your friends and at work.

Adulthood

The hourglass begins to expand again in adulthood, with the arrival of the next generation. Your children or theirs draw you back to the extended family around holidays or summer vacations. You may want your children to know their cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Despite your maturity in the rest of your life, you may be surprised to find when you are together, those old sibling feelings are not far from the surface, easily re-tapped. You may tell yourself you're an adult now; you prepare for visits by promising yourself you won't get caught up in them.

If it seems you can't run away from these familiar quarrels, it's true. You can't. Parents may inadvertently contribute to recharging the old jealousies. Most siblings, though, are able to keep these old feelings tucked away enough to get together with the whole family a couple of times a year – with only one blow up or two, or three, or….

Mid-Life Adulthood

As your parents get older, get sick or die, you and your siblings may have to deal more with each other. All the unresolved issues from your childhood resurface – with a vengeance. You may be squabbling with each other like you did back then.

The fighting now, though, has a variety of meanings. The old jealousies or other unfinished business with your siblings are still locked inside. Now they indirectly resurface around the task of decision making for your parents. Your frozen images of your siblings as bossy, manipulative, shirking their chores, get transferred to this new task. The ways in which you differ in helping your parents may reflect your childhood style of arguing: pitting one sib against the other, going behind the other's back, passive-aggressively "giving up." The questions about allegiances may be the same as back then – who sides with which parent, who feels left out or favored, who is caught between your parents or between one parent and a sibling?

There are a myriad of reasons why the unfinished business from childhood, even if contained over the years, now resurfaces. By fighting with each other, keeping the focus on your siblings, you all avoid the reality of your parents' aging (and your own). You avoid any grief or guilt you have about your parents. You don't have to ask yourself hard questions, like, "Did you get what you needed from them? What unfinished business do I still have with them? Have I done enough for them now?

Along with this suitcase of old feelings, there are current ones. Fighting with your siblings can deflect from your feelings of inadequacy and helplessness of curing your parents or relieving their pain. Your own mid-life and your parents' aging bring you face to face with your mortality. Preparing for or dealing with the loss of your parents often raises feelings about your becoming an "adult orphan," the older generation. You have to confront (or avoid confronting) how life is running out on you. You look into the mirror and wonder who is that old woman, that old man? Where'd *you* go? Basically, it's easier to fight with your siblings – it's more familiar and less anxiety provoking.

Old Age

Research confirms the hourglass does return to its fullest size in old age as your siblings assume more importance in your life. By age 65, over one half of people with siblings talk or see them at least once a week. Many even move so they can live closer in their declining years. While the old rivalries may still be there, they have softened or are just avoided. No matter how intense the hostility during childhood or the middle adult years, by old age, only three percent of siblings cut themselves off from each other, that is, go through their last years without any contact with their sisters and brothers.

Perhaps the most important thing siblings provide for each other in old age is a validation they once had been young and vital. They are the only ones who know you used to be skinny; they are the only ones who remember the home run you hit, or the cigarettes you used to sneak in the garage.

When retelling these exploits, you *are* that 11 year old, not the wrinkled face in the mirror. In old age, siblings provide a continuity of your family history, the scrapbook of family stories. They are the only ones who

can laugh, 60 or 80 years later, at just the mention of Uncle Ruby. You all know that's shorthand for the longer story of how every Passover he spilled red wine on the white table cloth.

Other Books by Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Why Don't You Understand? A gender relationship dictionary

With or Without a Man: Single women taking control of their lives

Workbook: With or without a man

Family Therapy Applications to Social Work: Teaching and clinical practice (ed)

Variations on Teaching and Supervising Group Therapy (ed.)

Siblings in Therapy: Life span and clinical issues. (co-edited with Michael Kahn)

ebooks

11 Stories on being Single in a Married World

The Secret to a Solid Marriage: Stories for understanding gender differences

Stories for Your Marriage: How to deal with the tough times

About the Author

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis is a marriage and family therapist who specializes in helping adult siblings repair their relationships. Over more than four decades, she has found that this important relationship has significant influence on other areas of their adult lives. She offers Sibling Retreats, intensive weekends for siblings in the same family.

Dr. Lewis is co-editor of *Siblings in Therapy: Life Span and Clinical Issues*, and has written several dozen articles about all aspects of sibling relationships. In addition, she has presented workshops and specialized trainings, both nationally and internationally, for mental health professionals on issues involving adult siblings.

In 1996, she founded Unique Retreats for Women, specialized weekends for women ready for change, single women, and women divorced from powerful husbands.

Dr. Lewis has authored several books and has lectured both on marriage and gender differences, single women, women's friendships, and adult siblings. She is frequently interviewed by newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

She has private practices in Washington, DC and Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dr. Lewis is available for consultation and therapy with siblings— in her office or by phone and Skype. She also offers training for therapists working with siblings or wanting to begin treating siblings.

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