



Senior Series

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SS-180-01

Siblings Are Forever

Even though there is not much attention given to sibling relationships in old age, researchers have shown that having brothers and sisters can significantly benefit us in later life. Possibly because siblings share memories and a sense of family identity, people with siblings report higher life satisfaction and lower rates of depression in old age. In times of illness or crisis, siblings are shown to provide emotional and psychological support to each other. This exchange of support is common between siblings who live far away as well as those who live next door to each other.

Why are sibling relationships so important?

- While friendships come and go, sibling relationships are permanent. We cannot choose our siblings as we do friends; that is what makes this relationship unique.
- The sibling relationship has the longest duration of any human relationship!

Next to our parents, who often know us from birth to adulthood, our siblings are likely to know us even longer. Because most siblings are within 10 years of age, we are likely to share a relationship for more years than any other family relationship.

- Our siblings share with us a lifetime worth of memories and stories. For example, your sister may be the only other living person who remembers that vacation to Niagara Falls when you were children or your brother is the only one who can remember how your grandpa used to eat your vegetables behind grandma's back. This shared history is priceless and becomes more valuable as we age.

How do sibling relationships change over the life span?

Not surprisingly, many of us begin our lives having close contact and a growing emotional bond with our siblings. Except for moments of sibling

rivalry, we often turned to our siblings for entertainment, support, and advice. As we get older, however, the sibling relationship often changes:

- Once individuals reach adulthood, it is common for siblings to “go their separate ways” in order to establish their identity and independence, pursue employment, and establish a family of their own.
- During late middle-age siblings often “find each other” and establish close ties once again.
- Significant life events (death, divorce, birth of grandchildren, relocation, retirement, illness) can cause siblings to renew their contact. Earlier rivalries or conflicts are often put aside in the desire to share this re-discovered relationship.

What can we do to enhance sibling relations?

Because sibling relationships can be so beneficial in later life, it is important to nourish interactions with siblings in adulthood and among our children.

Between children:

- Parents need to foster and respect the sibling relationships among their children.
- Provide siblings with opportunities to share time and activities, despite differences in age.
- Be sure no “favoritism” (the most common cause of bitter sibling rivalry that can last into later life) is practiced by parents or other extended family.
- Allow siblings to work through their own disagreements therefore building a relationship with each other that is separate from their parents.
- When older siblings begin to leave home, encourage them to maintain contact with their younger siblings and facilitate these interactions with family events.

In adulthood:

- Parents need to facilitate and maintain strong sibling ties with their own sisters and/or brothers in adulthood. These relationships will serve as models of healthy sibling interaction for their children.
- Establishing and maintaining good sibling relations in adulthood often depends on the development of positive relations with sisters and brothers-in-law. Adult siblings need to make an extra effort to establish a mutually respectful and congenial relationship with the spouse of their sibling(s).
- Adult siblings must practice mutual support and cooperation during times of stress or family upheaval. This collaboration will continue into later life and serve as a source of emotional, psychological, and instrumental support.
- Research shows that it is often sisters who maintain contact with siblings and facilitate interaction and communication. Adult siblings, especially broth-

ers, need to take the responsibility of maintaining continued contact with each other.

- Important life events are occasions for siblings to interact. These events serve as opportunities for siblings to strengthen or even repair sibling ties. Giving special attention to these events and providing time to share with siblings is important.

References

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People with siblings report higher life satisfaction and lower rates of depression in old age.

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