Adult Sibling Relationships: New Friends or Old Foes?

What does it take to have good sibling relationships in adulthood? How do grown brothers and/or sisters arrive at a comfortable state of equilibrium, of give and take that accommodates basic differences and nourishes the seeds of closeness they may share?

Most of us have a few hair-raising stories about our brothers or sisters. Whether they were the good old days or the bad old days, siblings usually have stories of old conflicts: of patterns of dominance, rivalries and competition, pain and injury, neglect, and issues of favoritism – to name a few. As we grow up, conflict areas can become rigid and fixed and eventually prevent us from seeing one another as we are in the adult contemporary world. We can be thrown into childish meltdowns and overwhelmed by feelings of rejection and inferiority when these old issues are brought to the surface.

Siblings often have a unique ability to "push our buttons" in an intense way, perhaps because of several unique characteristics sibling relationships share. To begin with, they are usually the longest relationship that an individual is likely to experience in a lifetime. They include a special segment of shared history that we ordinarily do not have with any others. Whether the bond is weak or strong, the status of siblings is a permanent one which will always have influence in our lives.

In studies of siblings, there are a few findings on the subject of closeness that are consistent across studies. Overall, female siblings tend to be closer to each other than male siblings, with male/female sibs in between. Younger siblings tend to experience a closer bond to the older sibling than vice versa. There seems to be a natural phenomenon of increasing conflict in adolescence and decreasing conflict as we move on in to maturity. Also later in the life cycle, sibling relationships may be continued or abandoned and lost in a gradual way rather than as the result of significant interpersonal events.

There are so many sibship variations: same-sexed – opposite sexed, close -- isolated, large family – small, verbally expressive – repressive/avoidant, competitive – cooperative. Three types of sibships that have implications for the transition into adulthood are: tandem, conflicted and remote.

- **Tandem sibships** tend to be low conflict, symbiotic, and interdependent. In the transition into adulthood the primary risk is that it can interfere with the process of individuation and separation (becoming your own person).
- **Conflicted sibships** tend to have ongoing rivalry and distrust. In this case the risk factor in moving into adulthood is that it may disrupt the capacity for continuing closeness in relationships in general.
- **Isolated sibships** are those in which by age, proximity or family dynamics, there is only a limited development of the relationship. The risk in adulthood will be that there is little or no way to build a closer bond and it may also affect and limit the depth of other important relationships.

Returning to the question of how to achieve a comfortable adult relationship with one's siblings, the following steps may be a helpful guide to making a rewarding transition:

1) Recognize and analyze past issues. Identify deep hurts, conflicts, and injustices. This may mean recognizing feelings of rejection, inferiority, inadequacy or vindictiveness. Coming to terms with painful feelings and memories forms an important basis for mature development.

- 2) Become aware of your sibling's continued development and increasing maturity. Acquaint yourself with your sibling's "other life"-- activities and accomplishments outside of the realm of the sibling relationship and family of origin. Get to know their friendship world and values. Try to develop a more objective view of his/her sense of identity as an independent person. What you find may not add up to the idealized sibling you wished for, but you are well on your way to a sounder relationship with the sibling you have.
- 3) Learn to handle the pull of regressive childhood dynamics either positive or negative by getting to know what triggers old patterns of dysfunctional behavior and bad feelings. This is not an easy task and it takes time but is essential to promoting change.
- 4) Accept that some issues will never be resolved. Sometimes it is not possible to gain consensus on the facts of an incident, much less the intentions. When fundamental perceptions and interpretations of a set of experiences are so different that settling issues isn't possible, the current refrain, "Just don't go there" is most likely the way to go. If you are already there, it helps to recognize when to let go and to not stay emotionally engaged in the issue which can only be destructive.
- 5) Work on a balanced maturity of your own. Dealing from a position of a healthy sense of self reinforces the aim of healthy adult sibling relationships. We are most likely to succeed when we are psychologically comfortable and can interact freely with sisters and brothers without unsettling feelings and defensive needs cropping up.

Finally, assuming you don't just vote with your feet, the choice of addressing your connection with siblings rests with you. Perhaps for most of us it requires only a bit of consciousness raising and being alert to pitfalls. For some of us the goal of good relationships with our grown siblings will require considerable conscious effort and persistence. May your efforts be worthwhile.