

## Chapter One: Introduction

Quite some time ago when I was a newcomer to Brisbane, I developed a close relationship with my neighbor Christine over the back fence. A neighbour who drank tea and shared life's ups and downs helped me enormously in my transition to life in a new country. Although it wasn't easy, I adapted and our children grew up playing together in our backyards. Life continued through its many different stages, until Christine's 17-year-old son was killed tragically in an accident. Although she did her best to move on with her life, Christine could see that her two remaining children remained stricken with their grief.

Christine shared her belief with me that, when a child or young person dies, support is available to the parents but there is little assistance for the siblings. Counselling is available, but her children didn't know what they wanted at that time and were not always able to articulate their feelings. Skilled counselors can work within these limitations, but many young people would rather not think about their grief, and, if the adult in the situation is also struggling with the grief, then they may be of little help. The loss doesn't go away and dealing with grief as a developing adolescent is extremely difficult.

It came to Christine in a dream that a book needed to be written that contained stories of sibling loss and grief so that parents and young people in similar situations would know that they were not alone. The message of *Save our Sons and Daughters (So SaD)* was clear to her. She spoke with friends, including me, who had suffered the loss of a child. We were

excited by the idea and hoped that our children would write and contribute their own stories. We wanted the siblings themselves to include their experiences in their own voices.

Christine's passion was infectious. Everyone in the initial group discussed the importance of reaching young adults and teenagers experiencing similar losses, and so I committed to the responsibility of bringing Christine's dream to fruition.

We believed in the vital importance of this subject. We also agreed that the book's primary aim was not to provide personal therapeutic benefit, and cathartic expression was not the primary focus of this book. Children, teenagers, young adults and adults can feel lost and unsupported in their grief, and this was the reason that we shared our stories. We hoped our testimonies would assist readers suffering a loss to find connections with their own personal journeys.

While the pathway through loss and grief is different for everyone, most people agree that grief is not easy to confront. Through our stories, we identify with those who are lost in the dense woods of their feelings and, in reading the different chapters of this book, it is possible to reflect on one's own personal journey while marveling upon the sheer indomitable spirit of human nature.

Psychotherapist and family grief expert, Zoë Krupka provides valuable information regarding sibling grief and how the death of a brother or sister may affect siblings throughout their lives. Her academic research is supported by her own experience of loss. Nine contributors provide their testimonies of loss and a chapter is included on post traumatic growth, in the hope that it may be helpful in facilitating a move forward through grief. While it is not proposed that there might be an end point to the process, it is possible to move through different stages and to become more aware. This can allow feelings of strength and autonomy when, previously, life might have seemed out of control.

The very act of reading this book can be seen as post traumatic growth. Even where personal testimonies bear no relationship to a reader's specific situation, we hope that the act of reading our stories may provide an opportunity to reflect and analyse a personal situation, and, in turn, move toward post traumatic growth.

The contributors created a patchwork quilt through their backgrounds, writing experience and styles. The patches are cobbled together in a variety of shapes and sizes. Detailed patches contrast with strong, uniform colours; happy patches sit alongside sadness, as age and youth add to the comfort and warmth of a shared quilt. In some instances, contextual information colours the message of sibling loss and, in other cases, the writers focus directly on their loss.

Many of them have written about their experiences of loss when they were young, with the passing of time providing the strength to reflect upon their grief, while others have written about more recent losses. Those whose grief is still raw have tended to speak directly to the reader, or, as in Candice's case, to her dead sibling.

Writing about emotional content is quite challenging, yet the writers pushed through the pain, sustained by the belief that they were supporting others in similar situations. These personal vignettes speak from the heart, each bringing a powerful message of precious individual value sewn together around our common theme.

Kari contributed her mother's story. Her mother died in 2011, but left a diary entry regarding the loss of her brother when she was ten years old. Kari has carefully edited the story to fit as a chapter of this book, drawing upon the stories relayed to her by her mother.

In "My Brother David", Rose documents the effects of 'a cone of silence' that descended upon her family when her little brother died from a cot death. Her writing opens up a conversation around the damage that silence has upon children as they grow up.

Gabriella relates the story of how her mother's stillborn births affected her, not only through the guilt that she felt as a sibling, but also as a family secret that was revealed only after Gabriella gave birth to her own child.

The loss of a baby may resonate with readers who struggled to share their grief in similar circumstances. While the grief of a stillborn birth can be as painful as losing a grown child or sibling, how does one process grief when deprived of 'knowing' that child or sibling? This must seem like a double blow and it would appear that this is a particular area of loss that requires more open discussion. A grieving parent or sibling will not have any memories to recall, but, as Zoë explained in her chapter, a sense of family history becomes particularly important in allowing siblings to discover their place in the world. Rather than 'being brave' and getting on with life, it is important for parents to share their emotions and their stories with their remaining children.

My own story documents the deaths of my two children so that I may introduce them and provide a context for their stories. I have also included an assignment written by my daughter before she died about the loss of her brother. My youngest child, Tim, believed that it would help others if he was honest about his journey following the loss of his brother and then several years later, his sister.

Christine has written about the loss of her son and how that loss has affected her two remaining children. Her daughter Candice's testimony follows with a heartfelt letter to her brother.

Josie has written about the loss of her brother and recounts the difficult circumstances that she and her brother experienced before he died. She documents the lives of her family before focusing on the sadness and futility of her brother Nicholas's death.

Hunnah's grief is still quite new and she bravely records the first year since the death of her sister, reaching out to the

reader in the hope that her words might offer support.

Although this book began with a specific focus to reach out to children, teenagers and young adults who have lost siblings, it should appeal to anyone who has suffered a loss. Anyone who has experienced grief will relate to the content and those who have not yet been touched by the death of a loved one may grow in their understanding of the topic.

As the chapters developed it became apparent that this book speaks equally to the parents and grandparents of siblings who have suffered the loss of a brother or sister. Adult understanding may assist in knowing, 'what to do', 'what to say' and 'how to help'.

Through their sharing, the writers hope to bring awareness to the subject matter and allow all those in pain to know that they are not alone. If we assist someone in taking even a small step forward toward a healing place, then we will have achieved our goal.