

SURVIVED SIBLINGS' LIFE CHANGES AFTER SIBLING SUICIDE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe the survived siblings' life changes after their sibling's suicide. The data (N=26) was collected by electronic e-survey and theme interviews from siblings whose sibling had passed away as a result of suicide. Twenty-four 15–54-year-old women participated in the study. The data was analyzed by qualitative content analysis.

The changes in life after a suicide varied between the siblings who participated in the study and included factors that shook the survivors' mental safety and issues related to evaluating their own life. The survived siblings suffered an increased concern about their loved ones, experienced a strained life, cumulated negative emotions, had changes in their family circumstances and lifeworld, but also a positive progression of selfhood.

After a suicide, a surviving sibling requires solidarity to get through the long period following the traumatic experience. The suicide of a sibling was described as a turning point of a situation that can weaken or strengthen the quality of life due to surviving the crisis. However, previous studies have shown that the surviving sibling often doesn't accept the support, even though the experience of suicide causes significant life changes for them.

KEYWORDS: suicide, sibling, life changes

BACKGROUND

Suicide is the fifth most common cause of death among working-age people in Finland, causing 573 deaths in this age-group in 2019 (OFS 2020). Among individuals aged 15 to 24, suicide is a central cause of death, counting over third of all causes of death in 2017 (OFS 2018). In the European Union (28-states) over 48 700 individuals committed suicide in 2016, which results an average of 11 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants resulting from suicide among the 28 EU-States in 2016 (Eurostat 2020). In 2017 the highest suicide rate was in Lithuania and the lowest rates for suicide were to find in Cyprus, Greece and Malta. Almost eight in ten suicides are committed among men. (Eurostat 2020.)

Death by suicide is one of the most emotionally devastating ways to lose a loved one, leaving a sense of emptiness and self-blame that may have severe consequences to the grieving process (Shields et al. 2017, Mastrocinque et al. 2020). The suicide of a loved one is often accompanied by shame, guilt, rejection and loss of social support (Turner et al. 2019, Ross et al. 2021). The felt embarrassment of talking about the suicide affects the social support of the grieving individuals leading to feelings of rejection, loneliness and isolation. (Ross et al. 2021). The lack of social support complicates further the grieving process and meaning making, which has been seen as central to the bereavement after losing a loved one by suicide (Shields et al. 2017).

Siblings have a unique relationship, that is expected to last a lifetime, providing understanding of the self and the world. Despite the great distress caused by experience of grief at young age, the mourning siblings are often overlooked by surroundings adults. (Adams et al. 2019). Siblings have been described as the most forgotten mourners after the suicide of a brother or a sister (Marshall 2009).

Tähän perään niitä muutoksia/seurauksia, joita sisarusten osalta on aiemmassa tutkimuksessa tunnistettu, ja sitten loppuun se tarkoitus ja tavoite.

Siblings often tend to withdraw from society, and their perspectives are not heard. Siblings are also expected to support other family members, and their own experiences are easily overshadowed by the sorrow of other siblings, parents, or children of the family (Marshall 2009).

The purpose of this study is to describe the life changes experienced by siblings after their sibling's suicide, and this area has been little researched in published literature (Zampitella 2016). Suicide deaths in a family cause more severe life changes and consequences than natural or accidental deaths (Mitchel 2004; De Groot et al. 2006; Lester 2012). Siblings are known to experience intense feelings after their siblings' has committed suicide, and often have to experience these feelings alone (Woodrow 2007). Siblings also use different techniques to cope with suicide-related uncertainty

(Powell & Matthys 2013), and often need the help of a professional to establish ways to cope with guilt, difficulty concentrating, and depression. Peer support groups have also been seen as good source of support in coping with the aftermath of suicide (Pettersson et al. 2014).

Rostila et al. (2013) showed that sibling suicide posed a significant increased risk of suicide and other causes of death among survivors. The death of a sibling also causes changes in family dynamics, and siblings have brought to light an experience that their social environment does not recognize the seriousness of a sibling's death (Sundar 2000). Suicide causes stigma and experiences of being rejected by friends and community (Dyregrov & Dyregrov 2005; Peters et al. 2016). Castelli and Dasart (2017) pointed out that going forward in life involves vulnerability, hard work and making life changes. Studies have also described a reduced ability to work, mental health problems, difficulty sleeping, and an avoidance of closeness as a consequence of near suicide (McMenamy 2008). However, positive changes have also been noted, and siblings have reported that their own values have changed and that a new cycle has begun in life after suicide (Fielden 2003; Dyregrov & Dyregrov 2005).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to describe the life changes experienced by the siblings after their sister's or brother's suicide. The purpose of the study is to provide insight into siblings' life changes, and thus increase the understanding of the support needed by those who have lost their sibling due to suicide, in order to prevent negative life changes.

The research question posed in the study was:

What are the life changes that take place after a sister's or brother's suicide?

RESEARCH METHODS

Collection of data and participants

The material was collected through an electronic (e-form) questionnaire and theme interviews with siblings whose sister or brother had committed suicide. The participants were recruited through third sector organizations (*Surunauha Ry* and *Tampere Setlementti Naapuri Ry*). In addition, snowball recruitment was used to recruit participants. Twenty-four siblings who had experienced suicide

responded to the questionnaire, and five were interviewed. Three of the interviewees had also responded to the questionnaire, so the final data consisted of 26 (N = 26) siblings.

The e-form survey contained 12 background variable questions relating to the age and sex of the surviving sibling and suicide sibling, and the place and method of the suicide. In addition, data was collected regarding the sibling's relationship to the person who committed suicide, the number of other siblings, prior suicide information, previous experiences of suicides, and the health of the sibling. An open-ended question in the questionnaire asked respondents to describe the life changes brought about by the suicide of the sibling. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to take part in an interview. These interviews were conducted as theme interviews, based on the life changes experienced by the sibling.

The majority of siblings (n = 24) had experienced biological sibling suicide, one sibling was the nephew of the suicide and one sibling. Of the responding siblings, 24 were women, aged between 15–54 years old. At the time of the sibling's suicide, they were aged between 12–53 years old. The siblings who had committed suicide were aged between 17–52 years old, 22 of whom were men and four were women. The siblings had committed suicide in various ways, including death by firearm, hanging, poison, explosives, deliberate drug overdose, and jumping under a train.

Analysis of the data

The data was analyzed using inductive content analysis, which is a method that has been acknowledged as being well suited for describing phenomena (Vaismoradi 2013). Content analysis looks for differences and similarities in how analytical units are classified into descriptive categories. As the analysis progresses, emerging findings move from a concrete level to a more abstract level. The study described the apparent content of the material with a low level of interpretation (Graneheim et al. 2017). The final classification was presented as a Table in which the results of the analysis were presented in a compiled and summarized form.

The unit of analysis was the surviving sibling's expressions regarding the changes in their life that had taken place. The reductions were classified according to their contents into subcategories. In total, there were 19 subcategories. Table 1 shows an example of the formation of one subclass. As the abstraction continued, same content subclasses were combined, yielding six upper classes.

Insert Table 1 here

RESULTS

The siblings experienced a change in their lives after the suicide of their sibling, manifesting as an increase in anxiety for their loved ones, angst over the burden of life, the accumulation of negative feelings, a change in family ties and changes to their living world, and a positive development of self (see Figure 1.)

Increased anxiety for loved ones

The fear of suicide by a loved one included a fear of the suicide risk of other loved ones, or of them being buried. In addition, the siblings had worried that the sibling (who committed suicide) would become ill and commit suicide just like his father.

"On the other hand, the fear that a nephew or niece sometimes does the same thing or gets the same disease."

The increased fear of losing loved ones by suicide was accompanied by an increased fear and anxiety about losing loved ones in general. The siblings were afraid of the sudden death of family members or loved ones. In addition, they would panic if they could not reach their loved ones by telephone. While siblings care more about their loved ones, their fear of their own death also increased.

"I'm afraid for my loved ones, I have a constant fear of who will die next."

The burden of life

Increased health problems experienced by the siblings included worsening eating disorders and long-term sick leave, as well as a need for weekly therapy. In addition, they experienced panic disorders and feelings of fear after the suicide had happened.

"I've been a year on sick leave."

The reduction in resources was accompanied by a decrease in working capacity and fatigue due to the death of the sibling. In addition, their own coping skills were perceived as being weakened.

"The kids' meeting will take place on weekends, depending on my ability."

Increased insecurity was accompanied by a better understanding of the unpredictability and insecurity of the future, and of life's uncontrollability.

"Understanding that life cannot be controlled."

Accumulation of negative feelings

A decline in pleasure was associated with less enjoyment of things in daily life, and also the seasons. The siblings depicted changes or decreases in the feeling of joy they had, and also an annoyance with anniversaries.

"Before, I enjoyed summer and the other times of the year. Now they don't mean anything at all. "

An increase in unpleasant feelings entailed feelings of anxiety, bitterness, sadness and emptiness. Other siblings and their children also became more jealous, inward, and lonely.

"I am very envious of other siblings or e.g. " The brother of the children ", because I will never have them."

For the surviving siblings, becoming more negative in the realms of thought meant becoming darker in character and always thinking the worst. In addition, their empty and gloomy thoughts increased. Siblings sought to escape negative thoughts through adopting a performance-oriented life.

"My positive nature has become darker and things have started to get worse."

Changing family ties

The breakup of family relationships involved the absence of important people in the life of their child, such as an aunt or godmother. It was also accompanied by the absence of siblings.

"My child is missing a godfather."

Changes in family relationships included a change in family perception, but also the development of closer family relationships where the siblings were in closer contact with the other living siblings. However, the siblings also experienced difficulties in family relationships, such as living alone as a family or changing the inheritance due to the death of the sibling. For example, their own children lived with their father due to a decline in the respondent's own coping.

"The concept of family has become different."

Missing a dead sibling involved finding a connection with a dead sibling, experiencing an unspeakable loss, and missing the sibling on a day-to-day basis. With the sibling's suicide, the

surviving siblings had lost an important friend and valuable person, and often felt they had lost a piece of themselves. Additionally, siblings were constantly looking for answers as to the causes of the suicide.

"I feel still that I have lost a lot losing my only sister, I miss her every day."

Changes in the living world

The desire for change in one's life included becoming a believer, divorcing, and moving home. The suicide experience was also the trigger for big changes such as retirement.

"I think my brother's suicide had an impact on the well-being of the relationship at the time, so we eventually divorced."

The complete change in life that accompanies the experience of suicide included the division of life as to life before and after the suicide of sibling. As a result, new perspectives were introduced into the lives of the siblings, which sometimes caused them to come to a standstill.

"But still nothing is as before."

Understanding the significance of peer support was accompanied by the experience that only a suicide survivor can understand someone in the same situation. Receiving peer support also aroused the desire to help others who had experienced the same situation, and suicide issues became very important for surviving siblings.

"Nowadays, suicides are close to the heart, and I really want to help those who have experienced them, because no one who has not experienced it can ever understand a person who has lost something so valuable in their lives".

Positive self-development

Increasing well-being in life meant wanting to live a full life, achieve one's own dreams, and to move forward in life. The siblings found positive things in themselves and wanted to seek happiness. Relationships were re-evaluated and siblings avoided spending time with people who negatively affected their well-being.

"... I want to live to the fullest and be happy because you never know what tomorrow will bring."

Increased courage was accompanied by fearlessness in general, a sense of fearlessness towards one's own death, as well as an increase in independence.

"I have faced their own death, I'm not afraid anymore."

Sensitivity to coexistence included an increase in appreciation and empathy towards other people. In addition, the siblings avoided hurting other people more, and took into account other people's moods. Their respect for other people was also felt to increase.

"I appreciate life and people in a completely different way, I am grateful to the people around me."

The reassessment of life values included neglecting small things, diminishing the value of material things and career, and also prioritizing things in life. Instantly, the appreciation of living seemed to increase and the siblings' own values changed. Siblings valued their experiences more than ever and had more respect for life. In addition, they were more prone to showing gratitude to those around them.

"Every minute of life is more important."

Spiritual empowerment included a perceived increase in understanding, a reflection on the meaning of forgiveness, a change in the perception of love, a more tolerant attitude, and spiritual growth. The siblings felt that they had become a different person. Their notions of humanity and death had changed, including a deeper understanding of death.

"The concept of life, love, humanity, death, everything changed completely."

DISCUSSION

Research ethics

The research was carried out in accordance with good scientific practice (TENK 2012). There is little previous research on the life-change that occurs after the suicide of a sibling, so conducting this line of research was justified. Suicide is still a common cause of death in Finland, especially among young people (Statistics Finland 2018), so the topic is both topical and important.

Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondents' informed consent was taken as their response to complete and submit the questionnaire. Prior to the interviews being conducted, written or oral consent was sought. The siblings had the opportunity to suspend their participation in the study at any time, and were informed accordingly. The anonymity of the study participants was maintained throughout the research process.

Reliability

The reliability of the study was evaluated throughout the research process against criteria for qualitative research, which were credibility, authenticity, reflection, verifiability and transferability (Graneheim et al. 2017).

Credibility and authenticity were sought in the analysis by staying close to the original material. The analysis process returned several times to the original expressions, so as not to over-interpret the data. The appropriate selection of respondents for the collection of data through both the e-questionnaire and interviews also strengthened the credibility of the study (Elo et al. 2014).

Verifiability was sought through an open description of the research process. The data were carefully selected to answer the research question. The progress was illustrated with illustrative examples. The results were reported systematically and are faithful to the data (Elo et al. 2014).

Reflectivity was pursued through keeping a research diary, reasoning and logic of decisions, and being aware of one's own starting points (Bengtsson 2016). The various stages of the research have been accurately recorded and the course of the research process has been critically evaluated.

The transferability of results is hampered by the small number of reporting agents, which is characteristic of qualitative research. Transferability is also hampered by the fact that the material has been collected mainly through of associate third sectors, and those who have not applied for their services may likely have been excluded from the study.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, sibling suicide causes many life changes in the life of a surviving sibling, and siblings need support in order for life changes to take a positive turn.

Sibling survival can be better supported by being aware of the potential consequences of sibling suicide. When formulating help strategies, one should be aware of the special characteristics of various family members and their need for help. It is essential for health promotion that the sibling is neither left alone, nor overshadowed by parents or other bereaved family members. Interventions that are timed to a sufficiently early stage can prevent a more complex situation building up further down the road. Especially, peer support is important for siblings.

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Table 1. Example of the formation of one subcategory.

Original expression	Reduced expression	Subcategory
<i>"Every minute of life is more important."</i>	Understanding the importance of every moment	Value of life-reassessment
<i>"On the other hand, my values changed completely with the loss of my sister. I appreciate life and people in a completely different way, I am grateful to those around me, and I want to live to the fullest and be happy, because you never know what tomorrow will bring. In the past, I appreciated more career and material, now I appreciated people and experiences. "</i>	Changes in one's own values	
	Feeling grateful for those around you	
	Increased appreciation of life	
	Decrease in career appreciation	
	Decrease in appreciation of matter	
<i>"You don't take all the little things so seriously."</i>	Ignoring small things	
<i>"... I can leave little things to my own credit."</i>		
<i>"... I respect life more than ever."</i>	Increased respect for life	
<i>"... things after order of importance."</i>	Prioritizing things	

Yläluokka	Alaluokka
Läheisiin liittyvä huolestuneisuuden lisääntyminen	Läheisten itsemurhan pelkääminen Läheisten menettämisen pelon lisääntyminen
Elämän kuormittuminen	Terveysongelmien lisääntyminen Voimavarojen väheneminen Epävarmuuden lisääntyminen
Kielteisten tunteiden kumuloituminen	Mielihyvän väheneminen Epämiellyttävien tunteiden lisääntyminen Ajatusmaailman kielteisemmäksi muuttuminen
Perhesiteiden muuttuminen	Läheisen sukulaissuhteen katkeaminen Perhesuhteiden muuttuminen Kuolleen sisaruksen kaipaaminen
Elämismaailman muuttuminen	Omaan elämään muutoksen haluaminen Elämän täydellinen muuttuminen Vertaistuen merkityksellisyyden ymmärtäminen
Minuuden myönteinen kehittyminen	Elämään hyvinvoinnin lisääminen Rohkeuden lisääntyminen Myötäelämiseen herkistyminen Elämänarvojen uudelleenarvioiminen Henkinen vahvistuminen

Kuvio 1. Sisarusten kokemat elämänmuutokset sisaruksen itsemurhan jälkeen.