

Are brothers and sisters for life?

They are the longest relationships in our lives, yet now a new book examines why sibling bonds are sometimes better broken.

Carol Midgley
reports

Jeanne Safer had an older brother, someone who for years lived in the same house as she did, ate at the same table, for a time even shared the same room. But he was never a brother to her.

Those are not my words, they are those appearing in the first sentence of her book — words that turn out to be something of an understatement since by the time Steven died, aged 64, all

contact had withered.

Even as he lay in a hospital bed following major surgery he had refused to take her phone call. Safer says that simmering mutual resentment as children had progressed to rare obligatory meetings as adults and ended in complete, estranged silence. Like many siblings who share similar colouring, talents and a surname, they simply never engaged. There was no connection. Perhaps some of this sounds familiar?

It is Safer's regret over her never-relationship with her only sibling

that inspired her book exploring a largely neglected area of psychoanalysis: sibling strife and the lifetime of shame and secrecy that accompanies it. It is a gripping work that quotes a breathtaking figure: at least a third of adults in America suffer serious sibling strife and up to 45 per cent will, when questioned, admit to having some type of dysfunctional relationship with a brother or sister. Given that it is usually the longest relationship one ever has, typically between 50 and 80 years, this is surely not just a waste but a tragedy. But Safer



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says it is often a hidden one since it is rarely discussed outside the family. "It festers, but outsiders never know. Everybody thinks that everybody else's relationships are amicable even though evidence says otherwise."

Do you have a close relationship with your sibling? Shared holidays, perhaps, exchanged confidences, convivial nights out? Do you count them among your chief confidantes? Then you are the sort of person who the detached adult sibling will regard with a mixture of envy, even fascination. For many the sibling relationship never progresses beyond the traps of childhood. It is fossilised in the past but the sibling feels awkward, panicked even, at the thought of breaking the spell. Many parents fret about having an only child; few consider the effects of a toxic sibling relationship.

Siblings can, of course, be ferociously competitive. The earliest template for this was biblical: Cain murdering his younger brother Abel. Ed Miliband may have "killed" his brother David only symbolically but their fraternal conflict has been an endless source of fascination. Last month Rhodri Giggs, brother of the hugely more wealthy and successful footballer Ryan Giggs, told of the competitive nature of their relationship. Ryan Giggs conducted a long affair with Rhodri's wife, Natasha. "He took Natasha despite him having everything and me nothing," Rhodri reportedly said. "She was the only thing I had and he did not — so he took it."

Perhaps you recognise some of the sibling-strife behaviour that Safer outlines. Many, for instance, cannot be their "adult selves" around their brother or sister because they are "frozen in time, frozen in place", the childhood rivalries replaying themselves. They never feel natural in each other's company; they cannot "be playful together or comfort each other". They even have a special language that she calls "Sibspeak" (they dread telephone conversations) and which has its own grammar and vocabulary. Though pat words about the weather or politics may be uttered, the truth is rarely spoken. Such conversations exist in a rut, a verbal merry-go-round.

They feel helpless as the conversation inevitably morphs into "a walk on eggshells", Safer writes. "Yet they seem hypnotised, never objecting or confronting their interlocutors. There is a numbingly repetitive, even compulsive quality about these exchanges." But the strange paralysis some feel when talking to a sibling is in fact, she says, evasion. By avoiding discussing anything "difficult", they think they can prevent their

brother or sister realising the awful (but patently obvious) truth about their relationship.

Safer, who lives in New York with her husband and has been a psychotherapist for 35 years, says she hadn't realised until she began writing the book how very many people have some sort of sibling-based strife. "It's fascinating", she says. "It's so remarkably widespread. What really struck me when I started working on this was that people have this idea that because they are now grown up and don't live in the same house any more that [the sibling] has no more influence." In fact the impact of the sibling relationship, good or bad, lasts

a lifetime. "We know that our parents continue to affect us profoundly even after their death," she says, "why wouldn't the people who shared our childhood? We shouldn't keep siblings in the psychological closet. They affect us every single minute."

She knows what was the root of her sibling problem: she was the favoured, darling child. Steven, seven years older, overweight and truculent, was not a source of joy and delight to their parents. She was. She excelled academically like their father; Steven flunked out of college. Being a child, she accepted her superior position in the family as normal. He, the family embarrassment, became more withdrawn. She doesn't remember a single shared moment or heart-to-heart talk with him. She doesn't own a photograph of him. She

has said that Steven was part of the reason she chose not to become a mother; she didn't want a child like him. When she was in her 40s (Steven became an accomplished musician, leading a band and having a radio show) she began to recognise how disadvantaged he had been in the family and tried to reach out by talking to him about it. But they were never properly reconciled. They shifted back to non-communication.

Does she believe it was beyond rescuing? "It's very hard to say. I think the favouritism in my family was so over the top that his resentment of me and my complete acceptance of my role . . . [meant] it probably was doomed," she says. "My brother saw me as totally entitled and he was right. I saw myself as charming and wonderful and that I worked hard and deserved everything."

Did he possibly see her as being arrogant? "Oh absolutely, but he also didn't see the intense anxiety I felt at having to be perfect. Unfavoured children can easily feel like victims their whole lives and that's their problem. Later in life I did talk to him and said: 'I was favourite and it wasn't good for me any more than it was good for you.' He seemed to be quite struck by that, but he couldn't pursue it."

Theirs may be an extreme case, but those feeling a guilty pang of recognition of other traits should take solace that sibling rivalry is part of nature. Brothers and sisters provoke primitive aggression even before we meet them. Animals and birds naturally vie with each other from birth for food, parental attention and protection. Baby egrets attack their siblings in the nest while the parents look on indifferently, even when it is to the death.

Murderous sibling rivalry, Safer says, is built into nature and humans are no exception. Her research showed that "intense competition for resources (emotional and physical nurturing) is a fundamental part of human nature". One of Safer's friends tried to persuade her mother to leave her baby sister on the bus; another remembers thinking how nice it would be to throw her brother from a fourth-floor window.

Siblings without rivalry are a virtual

impossibility, she asserts. What's more, human parents are complicit: they "pick favourites and offer love selectively because it is one complex behaviour to fester long after their own demise". Safer believes that human sibling relationships have an inbuilt dark side and loving siblings are an achievement, largely the happy result of how their parents handled their conflicts as children. If they didn't handle them well or turned a blind eye they contributed to sibling strife or

estrangement. Safer has interviewed many siblings for her book, which reveals the hidden faultlines running through many families. She identified five varieties.

1) Hostile siblings: where there is outright dislike and even hatred between them;

2) Siblings from another planet: where they are perfectly civil but are not really alike perhaps admitting "if we weren't related we'd never be friends in the outside world"

3) The favoured sibling;

4) The green-eyed sibling, where one sibling cannot be pleased for the other's successes;

5) The incompetent sibling who underachieves and may have to be constantly bailed out, treating their sibling as a surrogate parent. These differences can flare up in times of family crisis, such as caring for an ageing or dying parent.

Safer's book concludes with sound practical advice for healing rifts with siblings because, as she says, any sibling strife represents a loss. But, crucially, she also acknowledges that sometimes a sibling relationship is so toxic that it is better to sever contact. Not all betrayals can be forgiven. She includes a chapter on this entitled *Irreconcilable Differences*. "It's sometimes necessary to sever a biological tie," she says. "Sometimes it's damaging to maintain a masochistic relationship with someone who hates or envies you in poisonous ways. I think we need to say this out loud and give people permission to mindfully and thoughtfully sever ties, not try to maintain or improve them." Such people can compensate by seeking out close friends who act as

surrogate siblings.

She didn't grieve when Steven died several years ago. One of their last meetings had been strained: he had had a leg amputated because of diabetes. She took him a music CD but he told her he needed money. She later wrote to him saying the one thing she couldn't give him was cash; he never replied.

But 12 months after his death the immensity of their mutual loss hit her. She attended a concert of the vintage jazz he loved and had performed and found herself "weeping uncontrollably for what we never had". How did she feel when he died? "To be honest I felt relief; I feel people have to recognise that and not feel like they are monsters because of it. Because it was a relationship that gave me so little... I did what I could, I really tried, and I really felt the tragedy of his life, which he contributed to, but my parents played their part too."

But she also became more keenly aware of his accomplishments. "He was a fine musician. I felt regret that we couldn't share the things we did have in common." Near the end of his life she had asked him for some tapes of his Dixieland band and from his radio show. "He was very pleased to give them but never asked for anything from me. It was very one-sided."

The book is dedicated to a friend of Safer's, "the sister I wish I had". I ask whether she thought about dedicating it to her late brother. "I never considered dedicating it to Steven," she says. "It would have felt insincere. That would be the 'nice' thing to do."

But that doesn't mean he isn't with her every day, an important fixture in her life. "You owe it to yourself to understand the relationship because it's part of you. They are part of you."

***Cain's Legacy* by Jeanne Safer is out now (£17.99, [Basic Books](#))**

**Six
degrees
of sibling
separation**

Total permanent alienation

The relationship is over or it never began. These siblings have severed all contact via any medium for a long time and have no desire to reconsider.

Obligatory meetings only

Wedding-and-funeral siblings initiate no personal contact. Meetings are tense at best, overtly hostile at worst.

Going through the motions

These siblings keep contact to a minimum. In addition to attending family occasions they exchange birthday gifts and Christmas cards but avoid one-to-one interaction where possible. Neither enemies nor friends.

Cool civility

Both parties occasionally initiate contact but intimacy is lacking and avoidance entrenched. Each may wish to improve things but neither is willing to make the effort.

Rapprochement by proxy

Children and spouses are the medium through which these siblings approach each other. There is distance and discomfort but both parties wish for a more satisfactory relationship.

Chinks in the armour

These siblings have a history of serious strife but life events have led to more appreciation and

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moments of mutual goodwill that make them want more warmth.

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Drifting apart

Liam and Noel Gallagher

A 1995 bootleg single entitled *Wibbling Rivalry*, capturing an argument between Liam and Noel Gallagher of the band Oasis, is probably the best evidence of the long-standing turbulence between the two. Animosity flared up again after Liam sued his brother over accusations of alcoholism.

Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine

Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine were the first sisters to win Oscar Awards. A rivalry that began with childhood hair-pulling and a fractured collarbone has left them completely estranged eight decades later.

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Drifting apart

Mary I and Elizabeth I

Mary was the daughter of Henry VIII's downcast first wife, Catherine of Aragon. On her accession to the throne, Mary put Elizabeth in the Tower of London to prevent her leading a Protestant rebellion, then kept her under house arrest at Woodstock Palace.



Christopher and Peter Hitchens

Rarely have two brothers been so polarised on the political spectrum as Christopher and Peter Hitchens, their rivalry culminating in a *Question Time* face-off in June 2007. The two managed to reconcile before Christopher's death last year.

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Adolf and Rudolf Dassler

Rudolf and Adolf Dassler joined forces in Weimar Germany to form the business that we now know as adidas. An initial political rift led them to inform on one another and for Rudolf to eventually secede from the company to form Puma.

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