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SAARA BULLETIN

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Adult Survivors of Sibling Abuse: Your Experiences are Valid

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Adults who have survived childhood and/or adolescent experiences of sibling abuse may continue to struggle with the long-term emotional outcomes. Since the impacts of sibling abuse occur both as it is happening and well into adulthood, there are several difficult aspects with which survivors grapple.

This bulletin is written to help survivors and the practitioners who work with them. It includes ideas and practical advice on:

1. Learning to manage anger and conflict
2. Navigating sibling and family relationships
3. Finding healing and forgiveness

Directed and Misdirected Anger

For many, anger becomes a complicated emotion. It may surface quickly, feel too strong for the current situation, or, alternatively, feel entirely unavailable. As victims of sibling abuse, it is likely that survivors were not permitted to express anger safely, particularly when family members and our society minimize the harm. These views contribute to an invalidation of survivors' experiences and feelings. Survivors may also have learned that raising their voices or having intense emotions leads to retaliation.

As adults, survivors may find others' anger, as well as their own, frightening, shameful, or out of control. Yet anger, like conflict, is a healthy emotion and a necessary part of relationships. Expressing dissatisfaction does not have to be negative or destructive. The problem is not anger itself; it is how anger is expressed, avoided, or suppressed.



Discomfort with Conflict

Because sibling abuse involves a betrayal of the sibling bond and an emotional abandonment—both by the sibling who caused harm and by the absence of adequate parental intervention or prevention—conflict often is experienced or feels like the relationship will end. Within these family dynamics, conflict may indeed have meant danger, humiliation, escalation, or emotional withdrawal.

As a result, disagreement can feel less like a normal relational process and more like a threat. However, conflict is not a sign that a relationship is failing. It merely represents that there are two separate people with different histories, needs, and perspectives. In actuality, and in healthier relationships, avoidance of conflict can lead to resentment, emotional distance, and passive-aggressive dynamics.

Sibling abuse is not the same as conflict. Abuse involves overpowering, controlling, and harmful behavior. Conflict, when communicated constructively and with good timing, fosters growth. It invites dialogue, deepens understanding, and strengthens connection. Learning to see conflict as an opportunity rather than a threat requires a meaningful shift in perspective. Likewise, expressing anger or hurt need not be explosive or destructive; it is a skill that can be learned and practiced safely.

Learning to Manage Anger and Conflict

When anger arises, pause and consider its source. Is your reaction connected to the present moment, or does it feel like a replay of earlier family dynamics? Are you responding to what is happening now, or to what once happened then? If it feels familiar in an old way, there may be emotional exploration to do. If, however, you can recognize that your anger is valid, it signals the need for respectful confrontation.

Confrontation does not mean cruelty or hostility. It simply means clearly asking for what you need. It means naming an impact and an opportunity to repair a relationship. Yet another important consideration is whether the person you are speaking to able to hear you. Are they open to understanding what upsets you and willing to reflect on their behavior? In other words, are they open to change?

This assessment can help you differentiate between “this is my old wound being activated” and “this relationship dynamic is not healthy for me.” Many survivors of sibling abuse default to believing they are always at fault. Others may shift toward feeling chronically oppressed or wronged.

The challenge lies in developing enough self-awareness to consider each situation on its own merits rather than through the lens of past hurt. Over time, this practice helps untangle past trauma from present relationships. It allows conflict to become informative rather than catastrophic, and anger to become clarifying rather than overwhelming.

Learning to tolerate one’s own anger and another’s requires the ability to manage one’s emotions, reflect, and trust. These skills take time to develop. It’s like building a muscle that hasn’t been used. Learning to understand, tolerate, and channel anger in healthy ways is not about becoming less emotional; it is about reclaiming the legitimacy of one’s feelings. Start with the least threatening person to you: someone who generally feels safe, or with whom the stakes feel low. The more you practice, the easier it will get, honestly. But you deserve to be heard, and to have your needs met.



Navigating Sibling and Family Relationships

Oftentimes, anger at the sibling who caused harm carries into adulthood and impacts relationships with that sibling and other family members. Survivors often find themselves trying to decide between remaining in a relationship with their sibling, and sometimes parents, or cutting them off. Family expectations and/or strains, cultural norms, shared history, a desire for a sibling bond, and pressure to "move on" can create deep internal conflict.

Survivors may shift between longing for repair and a need for distance to preserve their physical and/or emotional safety. They may question their own perceptions of the sibling relationship, minimize their experiences, or feel guilty about setting boundaries. The choice about remaining in contact is deeply personal. There will always be trade-offs with the decision made: anxiety when in contact, tension around family events, conflict with other family members, and loss of relationships.

Many survivors choose to confront their siblings or other family members regarding their pain. When the sibling who caused the abuse apologizes or shows remorse, there may be hope of repairing the relationship. Sometimes, sibling abuse continues throughout adulthood, and one has to weigh whether to endure the abuse or permanently end the relationship.

Healing and Forgiveness

Regardless of whether the sibling who abused apologizes, forgiveness may help survivors move forward. It does not mean accepting the behavior, but rather understanding one's sibling's emotional limitations. It requires mourning the loss of what a sibling could have been or should have been.

Forgiveness does not mean reconciliation. It does not require access, trust, or a continued relationship. It does not excuse or condone what happened. Rather, it may be a way of releasing the expectation that the past could have been different, or that the person who caused harm will become who you needed them to be.

Ultimately, the work belongs to the harmed, not the harmer. It is about reclaiming power. Whether through reconciliation, structured distance, or estrangement, healing rests in the survivor's right to choose safety and to put themselves first.

The family patterns that were present in childhood often continue. Dynamics shaped by sibling abuse may include the following re-enactments with adult friendships, partnerships, and professional relationships: consistently meeting the needs of others, fearing conflict, fearing rejection, overly pleasing, difficulty trusting, or shutting down emotionally. These responses are adaptive strategies that were once helpful for survival, and they can be overcome.

Survivors may find themselves emotionally drained, struggling to assert themselves, tolerating mistreatment, or reacting intensely to perceived betrayals. As adults, they may feel disappointed, hurt, or angry in their relationships when others fail to provide the care, validation, or support they long for. This response is understandable given that their emotional needs were often neglected during some of the most vulnerable periods of their development.

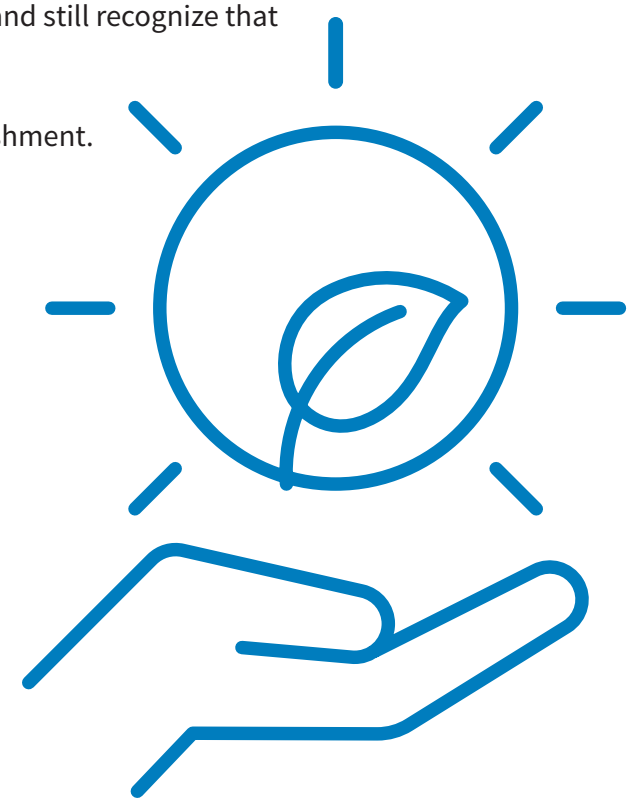
Although patterns of sibling abuse can linger across time, they do not define a survivor's future. With awareness, support, and intentional boundary-setting, survivors can learn to make choices about family relationships that emphasize self-preservation and cultivate adult connections rooted in mutual respect.

FOR SURVIVORS

Choosing Yourself

Survivors of sibling abuse often benefit from repeated, compassionate reminders that challenge long-standing patterns of self-doubt and self-neglect.

- You matter.
- Your experiences are real, even if they were minimized or ignored.
- Share yourself with others. You deserve to use your voice.
- Your needs are valid. It's not selfish to tend to them.
- You are allowed to define yourself outside of your sibling's narrative of you.
- It's ok to miss your sibling. You can miss someone and still recognize that the relationship is not safe or healthy for you.
- Distance can be a form of self-protection, not punishment.
- Grief for the relationship you wanted is real.



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