

FRIENDS FOR LIFE

We've just returned from a spirited week in the Florida Keys with my two brothers and sister and their spouses. Whenever we told anyone that the eight of us were vacationing together, the response was very positive with some amazement and awe that we were all good friends with one another. I remember when our father died the four of us went to the funeral home to make the arrangements. The funeral director told us that he had never worked with such a cooperative family.

As might be expected, in my psychotherapy work I frequently hear of angry, hostile sibling relationships. I became curious about what percentage of adult siblings have friendly, supportive sibling relationships and the percentage that have apathetic or hostile sibling relationships.

Researchers at Oakland University surveyed 18 to 65 year old people and arrived at these percentages:

26%: Highly supportive with frequent contact and low competitiveness

39%: Friendly and supportive with no clear measure or definition of this group. Some skepticism about this percentage as self-report could include denial to avoid embarrassment.

19%: Apathetic: No real motivation to interact.

16%: Hostile: Having deep hurt and intense anger.

In aggregate, these numbers show 65% of adult sibling relationships are friendly and supportive while 35% are apathetic or hostile. A relatively small number of family social science research studies address adult sibling relationships. More research is needed. The majority of research studies focus on husband-wife and parent-child relationships.

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Although we may repress and deny our innate or inborn need or desire to be positively connected with our adult siblings, the gnawing in our heart doesn't go away. Herein we'll address several steps or strategies to get better connected with our brothers and sisters.

- **Getting Motivated:** The obvious first step is deciding that it's a good idea to have a healthy relationship with our siblings. The idea is that if we have hardness in our heart for one person, that hardness may get generalized to other persons. It's much healthier to be at peace with everyone and everything.

We also need to examine whether we have "notional assent" or "real assent" to developing and maintaining a positive relationship with our sibling (s). We must be like Yoda in Star Wars, i.e. "Try not! Do or do not! There is no try!" Trying is for adolescents. As adults, we put ourselves in impotency when we say we'll "try". We assume a powerful stance when we decide to do or not do.

- **Forgiveness:** Family hurt is deep, penetrating hurt. And hurt can occur in so many different forms or scenarios. Grandparents who unwittingly favor one family of grandchildren over other grandchildren spark intense hurt and resentment. One sibling receiving more monetary help from the parents than the other children sparks ill will, contributing to animosity among siblings. Superhuman understanding is needed to retain positive relationships.

C.S. Lewis wisely wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea (in the abstract!) until we have something to forgive." At www.positivemotivation.net we find "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and realize the prisoner is me." My favorite quote on this subject is "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."

Research reveals that adult sibling rivalry, discord and animosity are much less when each sibling has accomplished career success and fulfillment. Such accomplishment generally coincides with the strength that comes from self-valuing and self-acceptance.

- **The Journey:** Forgiveness also entails a gradual process or journey as well as a distinct decision or commitment. Murray Bowen, considered by many to be the world's foremost family therapy theoretician, proposes a long-term stance (might be 10 years or longer) of extending love or civility towards one's siblings without expecting, needing or demanding any type of reciprocation. This is a tall order! But of course, the rewards for the entire extended family are worth this herculean, heroic stance. Weekly contact is ideal.

The journey toward connecting reminds me of Erma Bombeck's hilarious reflection entitled "Treat friends and kids the same." If we're called to treat our friends with courtesy, dignity and diplomacy, we need to treat our children and adult siblings with those same qualities.

In my own family, though our three children and seven grandchildren are all very different and live in different parts of the country, we make it a point to have one family beach vacation together every summer. We also gather as much as possible for holidays. It gives them a chance to reconnect with each other, to laugh about all their growing up experiences and to share who they are today. My wife and I love these times together and hope it will keep them closer as the years pass by.

Final Thoughts

Another broader perspective is my hunch that adult sibling alienation (ASA) may be part of the societal trend away from valuing extended family relationships. Fifteen years ago Robert D. Putnam researched this trend in his blockbuster book, Bowling Alone. More recently, his book, Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis addresses a similar manifestation of societal rugged individualism.

Another hunch is creeping social isolation brought about by technology, where we immerse ourselves in our electronic games, smartphones, Ipads, kindles,

T.V., etc. Of course, technology is a two-sided coin. We may use it to connect with friends and family or isolate ourselves from them. I'm sure you've noticed that younger people prefer texting to talking. We need to take advantage of this technology to connect with our siblings.

When we stop to think about it, we only have our parents for a limited number of years, but our siblings are with us for most of our lives. It seems tragic to not stay connected with those with whom we have shared our childhood. Although our siblings can hurt us deeply and quickly, staying alienated has serious negative emotional ramifications for ourselves and our entire extended family. Please keep in mind that when we forgive we give a gift to ourselves. Adam Hamilton has a book, [Finding Peace through Letting Go](#). I also recommend [The Way to Love](#) by Anthony De Mello, a meditative journey filled with transformation.

When was the last time you spoke with your brother or sister? Is it perhaps time to pick up that phone and connect with one another? You are family. It is wise and healthy to be there for one another, now and always. Friends for life!

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