



The Bereaved Twin

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Abstract. This three-year study was based on individual interviews of over 200 bereaved MZ and DZ adult twins. Its purpose was to record the lone twins' response to the loss of their twin and to investigate factors that correlated with either the severity or amelioration of the loss.

Key words: Bereavement, Twins

This paper presents some preliminary findings based on a study of adult twins who had lost their twin at different times of life. The data was provided by a self-selected group of 219 lone twins over the age of 18 years, living in England and Wales, who volunteered to contribute to the research. There is no control group, but the sample is big enough to provide reasonably reliable information concerning those within it and valuable pointers for twins and their parents in general. The fact that I am bereaved twin (my MZ twin died at three years) played an important part in building up trust and rapport during interviewing.

THE SAMPLE

Of the 219 lone twins interviewed, 168 were female and 51 male, 90 were MZ (65 F and 35 M), 111 DZ (88 F and 25 M) and 18 of unknown zygosity. Three times as many females came into the study as males, which follows the well known pattern of women's greater readiness to involve themselves in such studies.

The age of the lone twins interviewed ranged between 18 and 92 years (Table 1).

Table 1 - Age of twins at interview

Age (yr)	Females	Males	Total
18-25	15	6	21
26-40	66	18	84
41-60	36	14	50
60 +	51	13	64

The age at death of twin ranged from birth to over 60 (Table 2).

Table 2 - Age of death of twin

Age (yr)	Females	Males	Total
0-1/2	73	11	84
1/2-16	26	10	36
17-35	32	20	52
36-60	26	9	35
60 +	11	1	12
Total	168	51	219

Of the 219 lone twins 122 were married. The other 97 were made up as follows: Widowed 23; divorced 16; separated 5; single 53. The same proportion of males and females were married. The higher number of widowed females (22 out of 23) may be attributed to the higher proportions of older females in the sample. The following figures were based on the OPCS classification of Occupations. The twins divided into 125 economically active (93 F and 32 M) and 94 economically inactive (76 F and 18 M). There was a high proportion of twins in Group III in the economically active section, and a high proportion of retired females in the economically inactive section.

Originally the study was based on Birmingham and the Midlands for reasons of time and cost. This region supplied half the sample. The request for help was then extended nationally and eventually covered 24 Counties and Wales. Scotland was rejected on the grounds of distance. Letters and articles were placed in local newspapers; posters were placed in libraries, surgeries and colleges in Birmingham. A national TV programme and a letter in a national women's magazine brought the number to approximately 200, which was considered to be a "realistic" sample.

described deep fears of being alone. Some who had lost a twin in childhood feared for the loss of their own children when they reached the same age. One man in his 40s became ill when his daughter reached the same age as his MZ twin had been when he was killed in an accident.

The perception of sharing was an important one with some twins wanting to share all aspects of their lives with others and feeling only doing that made “sense” to them.

7. The Worst Aspects of Loss

There were many variations of this and it was the hardest theme for the twins to talk about. The “accumulative effect” was an outstanding one. So often the loss of a twin led to other severe losses such as parents splitting up or dying. One woman lost her MZ sister when they both had young children. She broke down under the strain of coping with two lots of children and she lost her memory. During a lengthy period of hospitalization her husband left her, obtained custody of the children and later a divorce. When she regained herself, she had no husband, home or children.

Many twins experienced an “endless seeking” for what they knew could never be found. Some felt that their loss was denied in the face of the loss experienced by the twin’s spouse or parents. Some twins never forget the horrendous manner of their twin’s death, and for others the existence of other pairs of twins in the family constantly reminded the bereaved twin of their loss. For some twins the sense of loss get worse as they grew older.

8. Factors that Ameliorated the Loss

There was a significant correlation between those twins recording their response to the loss as “slight” and the recording of ameliorating factors. The most important of these were deep religious beliefs. For some these included ESP experiences. Some twins carried a complete conviction that they would eventually be reunited with their twin.

One variation of lessening the pain of loss, especially for women, was the naming of their children after the lost twin. Many sons were named after lost brothers. Three twins were very angry that elder siblings had done this and felt distressed by the intrusion. Some turned for affection to another special person or animal, but this carried the same additional vulnerability as that felt by those who were overdependent on their mothers.

Two other interesting perceptions were described by the twins who felt that they took on the characteristics of the twin who died. One twin said that he had “absorbed the spirit of his brother”. The other was a feeling of being “lucky to be the alive one”, which led some twins to be more appreciative of life and feel that they were the strong one “specially chosen” to survive.

When the "severe" and "marked" groups were put together there was a significant correlation for the twins who lost their twin before six months. This appears to be linked with the effect of the parental attitude. The fact that the nature of the death and being without a married partner were also significant confirms the value of a close partner in ameliorating feelings of loss.

Table 4 - Factors and their correlation with severe response to loss

Factor	Comment
1 Age at death ($P < 0.02$)	In 0-6 months group when "severe and marked" taken together
2 Zygosity ($P < 0.01$)	High correlation in male and female MZ twins
3 Sex ($P < 0.01$)	High correlation for same sex twins for males and females
4 Cause of death ($P < 0.03$)	Some significant correlation when cause of death traumatic / accident / suicide / murder
5 Marital status ($P < 0.01$)	High correlation between unmarried and "severe" response
6 Time gap since ($P < 0.01$)	High correlation between severe response and loss less than 10 years
7 Problems at school	No correlation, but females experienced significantly more problems than males
8 Problems at work	There was a significant correlation for females but not for males, though the proportion of problems reported was the same

The fact that females recorded more problems at school was probably due to far more of them being subjected to "overprotection". Work problems were experienced in the same proportion by males and females, but the females' view that this was due to the loss of their twins may well be a culturally determined difference of attitude between men and women towards work.

There was a small group of females whose twins' sex and zygosity were unknown, yet they recorded their loss as "severe". This group seems worthy of further investigation.

THEMES

The twins provided various themes that they spoke about spontaneously in addition to their responses to the structured pro-forma. Eight of these emerged and are discussed in the following.

1. The Effect of Parental Attitude

This was raised by those twins who lost their twin in the age range 0 to 16 years. It was expressed by the twins in two extreme forms.

The first form was overprotection, which affected females far more than males. It was a very crushing experience for some, who made comments like: "I was always kept little; I never caught up" or, "I was always ill and kept in bed."

The opposite experience was severe parental rejection producing very low levels of self-esteem in twins of both sexes. This was keenly felt by female twins who lost brothers and who commented that they felt "Useless as they were not the longed for son." The sense of rejection was worst when a twin felt blamed for their twin's death. Some were actually told such things as: "You took all the food" or "crushed your twin". One said, "I was a murderer in my mother's eyes." One twin girl aged ten years was told by her mother in an outburst of temper that she had caused her twin to be "dismembered before birth". The child asked her teachers the next day what this meant. Three years later this young girl made a serious suicide attempt. A milder form of rejection is experienced by some children who feel devalued by their bereavement. One said: "I felt so special and my parents were so proud of us; then I became nothing as a one."

A positive effect came to a few twins whose parents told them that they were glad there was only one. They were made to feel very special and none of these twins recorded their response to the loss as "severe."

There was a significant correlation between twins of both sexes who reported the parental effects of overprotection and severe rejection and having problems at school related to the loss.

2. Guilt

The theme of guilt was closely connected to that of "parental attitude", although it was reported by twins who lost their twin in later age groups as well as the earlier ones.

The essence of the guilt was about being the survivor; made much worse if the twins had been led to believe that they played a part in the other twin's death. Some felt that they were "the bad undeserving ones" who "should have died". Some spoke of having a very high level of drive all their lives and of feelings that they had to "live for two", as if they had to justify being alive. Some felt that they should have done more to keep their twin alive. Others expressed a sense of having to be "so good" to "make up" to their mothers for the loss. Some were patterned into a lifelong need to please and care for others.

Guilt was a very strong factor when the twin had taken his/her own life, or if the twin had been handicapped. Some spoke of ESP experiences, a few believed that their dead twin was "jealous" and trying to make them suffer.

3. Negative Aspects of Being a Twin

This was recognised by a few in the form of a “flash” thought, later to be denied, that a sense of relief was experienced at their twin’s death. As one said: “I suddenly realised I would no longer be described as the ‘boys’.” This feeling could be more openly expressed by those twins whose weaker or handicapped twin had been experienced as a “drag” or “dead weight”. Some twins, specially females, felt angry at being held back educationally because of parental refusal to separate them from their twin.

4. Closeness

The theme is a familiar one; specially among MZ twins. Many spoke of their ability to hoodwink teachers, employers, and girl and boy friends because of the twins’ similarity. A more interesting aspect of deep levels of awareness of each other, even when separated, was revealed. Some, for example, reported knowing that their twin had died before it was officially known. A few felt unable to face living after the loss. A man in his 40s, describing the loss of a MZ brother at 19, said his death was “equivalent to watching himself die.” Twins told in childhood that they had lost a twin at birth, confirmed how this information made “sense” of feelings that they had previously experienced which had seemed mysterious.

5. Polarization

This theme was linked to “closeness” and was expressed by twins who realised that their need to feel “different” from each other was essential in order to differentiate themselves. One was seen as lively, strong and outgoing, the other as quieter and weaker. Some twins complimented each other making a good team. This tended to increase their sense of being “only a half” when their twin died. One twin said she wanted to take on her dead twin’s name in order “not to be myself anymore.”

6. Effect of the Loss on Relating

This was the most recorded theme. A severe loss affects one’s deepest perception of oneself. A twin by definition is the nearest other human to oneself and so one would expect bereaved twins to be deeply affected in the way they relate to other people. Some twins expressed a sense of loneliness so intense and constant that nobody could help to ease it. Many feared seeking closeness because of risking another loss. A few felt the opposite, that their deep wish to be close frightened others away, and many described themselves a lifelong “loners” feeling the “odd one out” and “different to others”. Another effect was expressed by those with a great reliance on closeness, specially those very dependent on their mothers. Some

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CONCLUSIONS

A total of 219 adult MZ and DZ bereaved twins aged between 18 and 90 years were interviewed concerning their response to the loss of their twin, regardless of their age at the time of their twin's death. Of these, 81% reported their response to the loss as having a "severe" or "marked" effect on their lives, and 19% said it was "slight". There was a highly significant correlation between those whose response was "severe" and the reporting of related "nervous troubles". Correlations were also found with those in the "severe" response category and those with the following factors: MZ or same-sex twin loss; a particularly traumatic death; loss within the previous ten years; the lone twin having no married partner.

Significantly more problems at school were experienced by females than males. Problems at work had a significant correlation with a "severe" response in women. Eight themes considered of importance to the bereaved twin were examined in detail: "parental attitude"; "guilt"; "relating"; "negative aspects of being a twin"; "closeness"; "polarization"; the "worst aspect of the loss" and "factors felt to have ameliorated the loss".

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