



Sibling Suicide Loss: Grieving Alone and Surviving Together

Written by Lena Heilmann

In November 2012, I lost my sister Danielle to suicide. She had just turned 24; she would be turning 32 this year. As her older sister, I felt protective of her throughout her life and had to confront intense guilt and loneliness when she died.

It is always difficult, when writing or talking about my sister, to pause and to try to share who she was. Anything I write is always mediated by text and time, and describing her in a few sentences can feel inauthentic in its brevity. But she deserves to be remembered, not only every day in my heart, but also whenever I write about the depths of my grief for her.

Danielle deeply loved her friends, family, and her devoted service dog Bruno. She was a loyal sister and cared for me when I struggled, physically or emotionally. She had hilarious comedic timing and banter and could bring everyone around her to belly laughs. She was an excellent cook and baker. She held herself to high standards: she was a self-taught computer programmer, a college graduate with double degrees in German Literature and Economics, an excellent writer and critical thinker, fluent in English and German. Danielle and I created a world of inside jokes and a secret sister-language, which we continued to use and expanded into our adult years. She understood me better than anyone else ever could. We had an abbreviated lifetime of overlapping identities, and I am so grateful for every moment she was in my life.

I'll soon be approaching the eight-year marker of her death. As those who know this grief all too well, counting time in this way is surreal. What is eight years? Sometimes it feels like Danielle died yesterday—as though, if I tried hard enough, I could reach my hand back and alter the final days of her life. Or reach back and hug her just once more. Other times, it feels like not just eight years, but a different lifetime and an entirely different reality. A different me.

Those of us who have lost a loved one to suicide may also be familiar with the nightmare that is the days, weeks, months, and years that come after our traumatic loss. Even though I understood my sister's struggles against her severe and worsening PTSD in the years leading up to her death, I still found myself ruminating over every memory we shared, trying to understand (not just logically, but somewhere deep in my soul) how my little sister—who made up silly dances, surprised her friends with thoughtful gifts, sought out travel adventures, experimented with new technology in playful ways, texted me every day, all day—could die at such a young age.



Over the years, I've been finding patterns that provide me solace in my grief. I have come to accept the changing seasons and their linked emotions. I notice my grief start to accelerate in the fall, leading up to November, the month that holds my sister's birthday and the anniversary of her loss. I brace myself to get through New Year's Eve and the long nights of winter, and then breathe a sigh of relief as the days start getting longer again. Knowing the general trajectory of how my grief ebbs and flows throughout the year allows me to plan ahead a bit and give in to the harder months and days.

I have long put into place carefully arranged mental health supports. My routines sustain me through turbulent grief waves. I have a sleep hygiene routine; I try to watch the sunrise and sunset every day; I spend as much time outside as possible; whenever I struggle, I reach out to my friends, family, and mental health supports to stay connected.

My sister died when I was writing my dissertation on 18th-century German women writers. I resolved to finish my PhD and continue forward with the life that I had envisioned. I thought forging ahead as planned showed strength and was the best way to survive. After my dissertation defense, I accepted a faculty position at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest and taught there for two years. During that time, it became clearer to me that I was living a life that might have made sense if my sister were still alive. Every day, I felt more and more distant from my career and from my own sense of self. It was exhausting trying to switch from a suicide loss survivor mode every day to a German professor one. I felt like I had to turn the grief off during my working hours, and it became increasingly difficult to ignore that my heart was no longer in the career for which I had worked so hard. In the spring of 2016, I decided to leave academia and pursue a career and mission-driven life in the loosely-defined field of suicide prevention.

In the course of these past four years, I have found a deeper, truer space for myself, surrounded by a community of people dedicated to creating a world worth living in. My friends and colleagues have lived experience related to surviving suicidal despair, suicide attempts, and losing loved ones to suicide. We teach, connect, fund, fundraise, research, lead, organize, coordinate, write, create art, speak, advocate, and volunteer. We work to change systems by centering the experiences of those who have been disproportionately impacted by societal inequities and injustices. In this community, I have found a new self, one where my professional work in suicide prevention intersects with my lived experience as a sibling survivor of suicide loss.

I no longer have to shut out my grief every day. Being able to work and volunteer with people who understand suicidal despair through their own experiences or those of their loved ones and community empowers me to share and accept my many identities and to continue surviving my sister's death, even on my hardest days. Being able to do this work is how I honor my sister and how I grieve with an open heart. I not only want to create a world worth living in; I want to make this a world that my sister deserved. For her, I will keep on surviving. I love you, Danielle.



About the Author

Lena Heilmann, Ph.D., M.N.M., is a sibling suicide loss survivor living in Colorado. She is the Suicide Prevention Strategies Manager with the Colorado Office of Suicide Prevention. Lena also volunteers for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's *Healing Conversations* program and is the Vice-Chair of the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Colorado. Lena edited a collection of essays: *Still With Us: Voices of Sibling Suicide Loss Survivors*, to provide community and loss support for other sibling survivors.