



sibling rivalry

Leave childhood patterns behind and forge healthy adult relationships with your siblings

MAYBE YOU FEEL YOUR SISTER GOT THE good looks and – even though you know you shouldn't – you can't help feeling resentful. Or it aggravates you that she constantly reminds you of how clever her kids are. Or you still feel a little envious that she was always the sporty one. If any of these rings true, sibling rivalry may be the root of the problem.

"Sibling rivalry is a concept traditionally associated with childhood, when children compete for their parents' attention. As they develop into mature adults, it is generally expected that such rivalries will recede into the past. However, often this is not the case", says counselling psychologist Leatia Stemmet.

For some people, childhood battles continue to determine emotional responses in adult life and it's all too easy to slip back into the roles we played as children – with all the same feelings.

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TWISTED SISTER

"Adulthood sibling rivalry may be an extension of the themes which pervaded children's lives", says Cape Town psychotherapist Bruce Bradfield. He lists things such as alliances with either parent, the adoption of roles which place one or other sibling in the position of scapegoat and feelings of jealousy or unprocessed anger. This can lead to segregation in families, sometimes to a point where the family unit dissolves completely, he says. This means a lack of support for siblings, no meaningful extended family network for the children of those siblings, and the continuation of patterns of aggression and hurt.

As siblings get more established in their own lives, it's easy to drift apart. The demands of a spouse, children, career, money problems and many other realities of life can put sibling relationships on the backburner. All these factors can also increase competition between siblings as they compare their adult lives.

PLAY NICE – ADULT-STYLE

When sibling rivalry persists into adulthood, the conflict and self-doubts can be devastating. "One way to build resilience and reduce rivalry is to get to know yourself as an individual; know your strengths, successes, and what makes you happy – apart from your siblings. Sometimes comparing is easier than looking within, and finding a balance within your own life, or your own chosen family," says clinical psychologist Honor Genetski.

Consider the following advice from Stemmet when attempting to improve sibling relationships:

- ▶ Avoid sarcasm. This approach be experienced as demeaning, it hinders open communication, and it contributes to ineffective interaction.
- ▶ Avoid being competitive.
- ▶ Pick your battles.
- ▶ Don't blame the perceived "favourite" sibling.
- ▶ Take responsibility for your contribution. Accepting accountability reduces the perception of blame, which supports open communication.
- ▶ Accept and try to respect your differences.
- ▶ Speak up. If something bothers you, address it as soon as possible in order to avoid resentment.
- ▶ Realise that you're not children anymore. You're adults, and should behave that way.
- ▶ Don't compare your relationship to that of other siblings.
- ▶ Speak for yourself. Rather than criticise the other person, express your feelings.
- ▶ Support each other through difficult times.
- ▶ Seek outside help. Rivalry must be addressed, either from within the family system, or by involving a mediator. Professional help might be necessary, as the deep connection shared by siblings should be cultivated, not obstructed. **S**