They Still Grieve - A Nationwide Follow up of Young Adults Two to Nine Years after Losing a Sibling to Cancer

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Introduction and aim
Siblings who have lost a brother or sister to cancer have expressed emotional problems. Yet research on bereaved young adult siblings is sparse. The aim of the study was to assess the prevalence of unresolved grief in bereaved young adults after losing a brother or sister to cancer.

Method
The study was a Swedish population-based nationwide study of young adults who had lost a brother or sister to cancer, two to nine years earlier. 173 siblings, 101 female and 72 male, completed a study-specific questionnaire. This study focused on siblings’ resolution of grief with one simple question: Do you think you have worked through your grief over your sibling’s death.

Results
The participants were between 12 and 25 years of age (mean =17.7, SD=3.7) at the time of death of their brother or sister. At the time of investigation the participants were 19-33 year old (mean=24.0, SD=3.8). Time since loss was 6.3 years (range 2-9, SD=2.3).

Thirteen (8%) of the bereaved siblings reported that they had not worked through their grief at all, 79 (46%) reported that they had worked through grief to some extent. Sixty (35%) of the siblings stated having worked through their grief a great deal, and 19 (11%) stated having completely worked through their grief (Figure 1). Two (1%) siblings answered “Not applicable, I was too young.”

Discussion
Even 2-9 years after the loss of a sibling to cancer, more than half of the bereaved young adults had not worked through their grief.

This may be an indication that young adult sibling’s grieving process in prolonged. The sibling bond is thought to be one of the most important in one’s lives, and thus, it may be difficult to come to terms with the loss of a brother or sister, especially during the vulnerable time of being a teenager or young adult.

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Conclusion:
The majority of bereaved young adults had not worked through their grief over the sibling’s death at time of follow-up. Some of the siblings reported that they had not worked through their grief at all, which may be an indicator of prolonged grief.