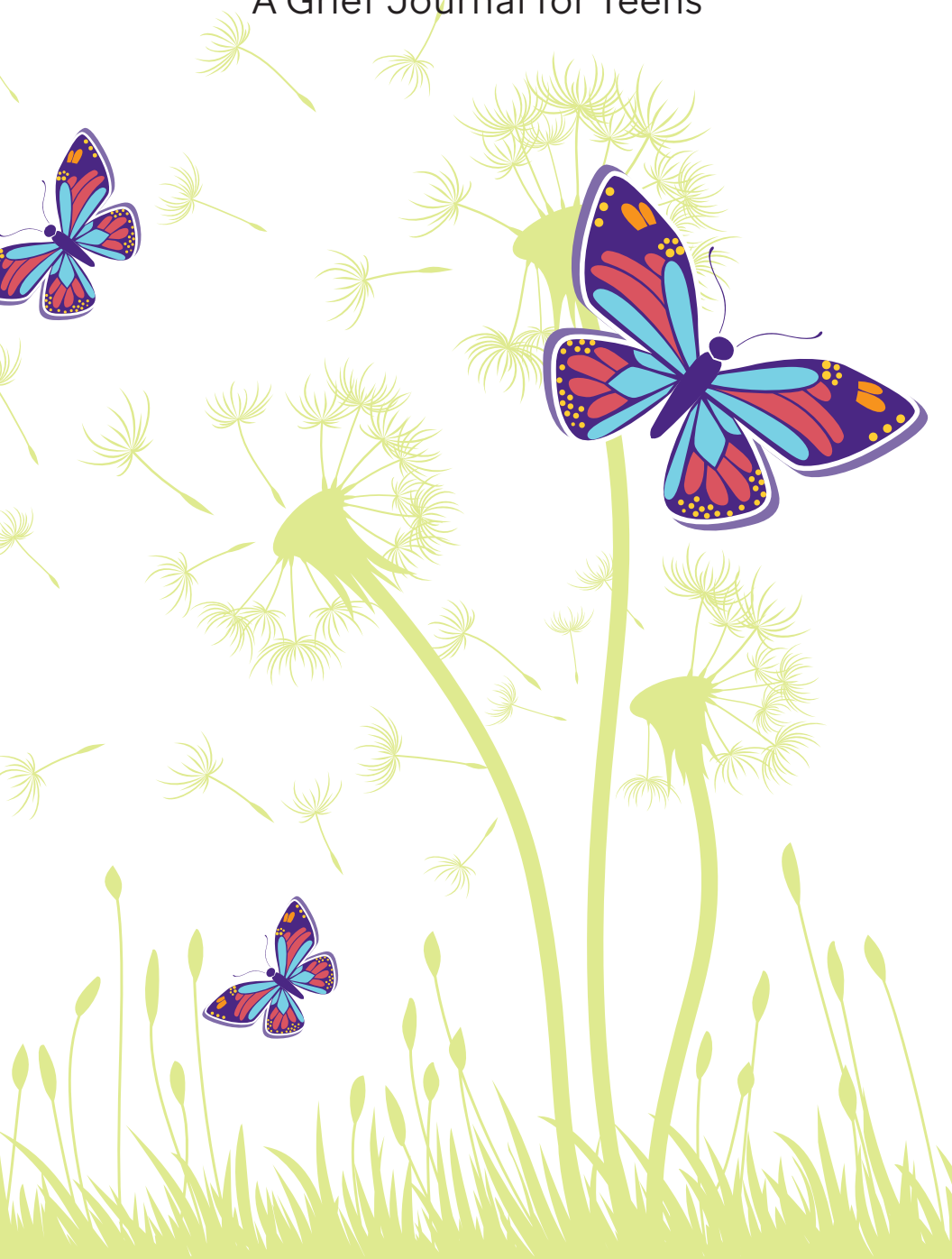
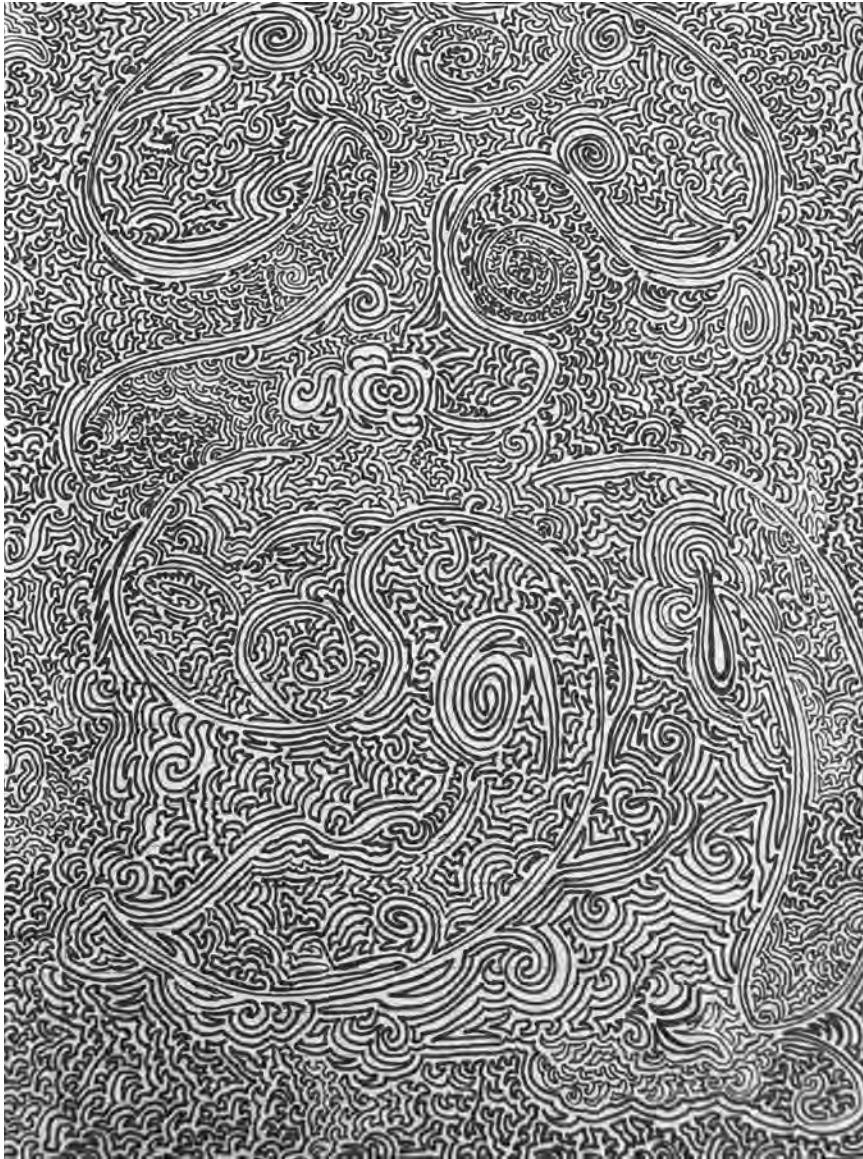


Wish You Were Here

A Grief Journal for Teens





Wish You Were Here

A Grief Journal for Teens

By Maggie, Mia, Molly, and M.E. O'Brien

Inside cover artwork by Max O'Brien

In memory of Catie O'Brien

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Hello, Thank You, and We're Sorry

This is your book, your journal to do with whatever you want. Trust us, we wish you weren't reading this. The fact that you are means you, like us, have a sibling who died, and you have to deal with that just like we do.

Our sister Catie was 7 years old when she was diagnosed with cancer from a tumor in her spine. She went through surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. Still, the tumor came back and, after just eight months, she died. When she died, we were 10, 6, 4, and 2 years old, so our memories of her differ greatly. Our grief over the last 10 years has been different as well, and that is OK. Everyone's grief is their own. Our grief will be different from yours in some ways. There will be some things that we share with you and with each other. We miss our sister. We miss the chance to see her become who she might have been. We miss the time we would have spent with her.

What we share in the following pages are our memories of Catie, our relationship with her while she was alive and in treatment. We also share our journey with the grief that accompanied her death. Our hope is that you make this journal your own. Some of what we share on these pages may make sense to you while some may not. Some of what we have written may help you to know you are not alone in the thoughts and feelings you have, as we have felt that way, too.

These pages offer opportunities to write your thoughts, answer questions that helped us get through some hard days, color a picture, or simply move on to another page. This is your journal and if throwing it across the room makes you feel better, go ahead and do that! We offer it to you not because it has all the answers, but simply because we know at least a little bit of what you are going through. We want you to know that you are not alone. We read a whole bunch of books and tons of journals in the last few years and none of them gave us what we wanted or needed, so we decided to create our own. Thank you for accepting our words and for taking this step. We hope what we share will help.

Maggie, Mia, Molly, and M. E. – Catie's sisters



You are NOT Alone

The most important thing we want this journal to show you about yourself, your grief and your life is that you are not alone. You may not experience every situation and emotion that we share in this journal, and we're sure you will experience things none of us did. Even if your journey does not match ours perfectly, we have been where you are and we are getting through it and you will, too. One day at a time. You are not alone. Take a deep breath. Even though it's hard, you can do this!

We know that grief is not easy, and, while you may feel alone, the truth is you aren't. When you are feeling alone there are some things you can do that might help. For example:

- Talk to friends, as they are an amazing and powerful resource.
- Talk to your family.
- Pray if that is your cup of tea.
- Use this journal.

We offer advice from our own struggles, some of which you may share. We hope you will recognize that you too can get through this.

*Do you ever feel alone in your journey? What do you do with those feelings?
Are there things that have helped in the past?*



Emotions

My emotions are uncontrollable and have always been a problem for me. I will find myself in a situation with some of my friends, then, all of a sudden, I'll be super sad. For example, this year is the year my sister would have graduated from high school. Some of my friends have sisters her age, and I often find myself imagining my sister in the situations of the other seniors. Then, I'll feel sad. I have found these emotions shouldn't be suppressed or ignored. If I'm feeling sad, mad, alone, happy, or even nothing at all, that is OK. If I need to reach out to someone for help navigating my emotions, that isn't a bad thing either.

Losing your brother or sister is an experience you will never forget. Whether you were best friends with your sibling or you don't even remember them, you will miss them and have moments of sadness and anger. My advice is to embrace those moments and grow.

What are some moments you remember your sibling or times you miss them the most? What emotions do you have at these moments?



Confusion

Being younger than a brother or sister who dies is hard. I looked up to my sister to guide me, and now she's gone. It sometimes feels like my older siblings, who knew my sister longer than I did, believe their emotions are more important than mine. There are specific things I can vividly remember about my sister. But, because I was so young, they are like little five-minute, random, unimportant things. The big stuff, the important stuff, just isn't there. I know I would have held onto those memories if I was older.

It's confusing and it's hard because I want to remember more. I want to be able to think about special times I had with my sister. For example, I know we had these plastic red and yellow toy cars. I know we played with them all the time. My mom tells me my sister would pretend she was a cop, and she would "pull me over." I can't for the life of me remember any of that.

All of us hear stories about things we did and said when we were too young to remember. I wish I had more memories of my sister. Sometimes I sit and look at pictures of her with me, and it makes me a little sad but also a little happy. Even though I can't remember, I can see that we were close.

Do you have pictures of you and your sibling? Which pictures do you like to look at most?



Questions

When your brother or sister dies, there's lots of stuff for people to ask questions about. When they ask, sometimes the question may be hard to answer. One of the toughest questions for me is when a teacher asks me why I am not in school on January 25. One of our traditions is to stay home on the anniversary of my sister's death. If a teacher is new or doesn't know my sister died, explaining why I am not in school is sometimes difficult.

Some people are just really curious. They ask questions all the time, and some of those questions can bring up painful memories.

What questions have people asked you that were hard to answer or made you think about your brother or sister?



Happy and Sad

When I first met one of my friends, she had recently lost a grandparent she was very close to. She was shocked by my ability to deal with death and loss because her grief was still so new. I could laugh and smile and be happy some days, yet still have sad days. This friend and others seem to have a hard time understanding how it could be both ways for me. But, grief is like that. I found it hard to talk to this friend because, when we met, I was happy and I felt like she expected me to always be happy. That was hard because I couldn't guarantee that.

I thought this mix of emotions was something only I had experienced, and it sometimes made me feel crazy. Then, I made a new friend, and, by chance, I mentioned my sister had died. She stared at me in shock and shared that she too had lost a sister to cancer. I discovered the two of us had similar stories. I brought up how hard it was to explain to friends how I was happy but still sometimes sad. By talking to her, I realized how unique this experience of having opposite emotions at the same time can be to grief. I can be telling a beautiful story about how awesome my sister was and then be hit with the reminder that she is gone. This new friend was able to understand me in a way that none of my friends had before. We were able to share and understand each other. She is an amazing gift, and I am so grateful to have someone with whom to share my feelings.

Do you ever feel happy but still sad? What do you do? Do you have someone you can talk to who has gone through something similar?

I felt like this crazy flip-flop of emotions was unique to me. Learning that it wasn't really helped me. *Does knowing this help you?*



Tough Days

Grief is unpredictable. Every day there is the possibility of something coming up that will be harder than you expected. Something may remind you of your sibling and will make you feel a range of emotions. Then there are days, like your loved one's birthday or anniversary of their death. It is a normal day for everyone around you, but to you it can be a difficult reminder of someone who is missing.

I remember the first year after my sister died, a teacher announced in class that we had a test on January 25—the anniversary of my sister's death. It shocked me that her mentioning this day, which was a big deal to me, was so casual and nonchalant. Even many years later there are still days that are so important to me and my family, but an average day for everyone around us.

Something that helps me to cope with these important but tough days is recognizing when they are coming. Knowing when they are approaching helps me prepare for them by making a plan for how I will spend those days.

Maybe making a plan for your tough days will help you, too. Are there any days that might be harder for you than other days?

Write them down and think of things you could do on those days to remember your loved one or to help yourself feel better.

If these tough days pass and you aren't sad, it's OK! It doesn't mean that you don't miss your brother or sister or that you are forgetting them. That is the challenge with tough dates, leading up to them can be stressful, because it is an unknown. You can't predict how you will feel, what will happen, how you will react. That's why, for me, planning ahead can help. Every year, every tough day is different, and that is OK. Whatever you feel on that day is personal and how you choose to spend it is up to you. Don't be afraid, even years later, to reach out to a friend, family member, or any other supportive, understanding person on that day just to have someone to talk to about how you are feeling.



Never Suffering

My mom was talking the other day about how she hoped when she got older she would just die of a heart attack in her sleep rather than us having to watch her decline. She said she didn't want us to have memories of her not as herself. This really made me think a lot. I don't think there is something wrong with having memories of a person when they were not the picture of health. Granted, my sister died pretty quickly after we got the news her cancer was back, so it wasn't a drawn-out and extended period of time during which we had to watch her decline slowly. I think watching her be less of the active kid I knew actually helped me to understand she was dying and to better accept her death when it happened. I'm not saying I accepted my sister's death happily, but I knew it was happening.

I think if I had no memories of my sister being in pain or suffering, it would be harder to wrap my head around why she was gone. If I had only ever seen her healthy and then she just died one night, I truly think that would have been harder to accept. I don't think I understood it at the time, but I knew she was going to die and was able to match that with the physical changes that I look back and recognize now. I don't believe that is as terrible as my mom may think.

Do you have any memories of your sibling suffering?

The memories I have of my sister when she was sick, don't change who my sister was. I think that's what is important to remember. Even though she was less energetic and active when she was sick, she was still my sister. My sister was still in there. Her smile remained. She was still herself, and that is who I will remember!



Acceptance

Grief is a bitch of a thing to deal with! People tell you they know what you are going through, even though they probably don't. People just don't know what to say. There's this movie called *My Girl*, and there's this line in the movie, "Kids aren't supposed to die." Yeah, a kid can scrape a knee and get a cough, but they're not supposed to die. Unless you've had a sick parent or you've already lost someone you know, death isn't a normal thing for kids to have to think about. I think parents try to keep us in this cocoon of happiness where we don't have to feel that type of loss. Because grief that comes from a death (and there's literally no other way to put this) is a bitch.

Acceptance of what happened, especially for a sibling, can come slower than for a parent. If your sibling was in the hospital, your parents were most likely also at the hospital getting the medical updates. They were more likely to be with your sibling most of the time. They might have told you your sibling was going to die, but even with that knowledge you weren't ready to accept reality when it happened.

I was so young when I lost my sister. Because of that, it took me longer to really understand what I was feeling and why I was feeling it. I'm not going to lie, I think the process of grief that grief "experts" have laid out is crap. For me, the steps didn't go in order, and sometimes I didn't even feel certain steps. And that's OK. Everyone's grief journey is different. For that reason, every person may have something they can teach you about how they dealt with and accepted their new reality. Acceptance is hard and there may be things holding you back. There may be things that make you wake up in a cold sweat after a dream about this new reality where your sister or brother isn't with you anymore. The part that made it a little easier for me was talking to my mom or dad and knowing how sad they were as well.

Does talking to your parents and knowing they are also sad help you? Talking to anyone else?



Telling Others

When you meet someone new or are in a situation where you have to tell someone about the sibling you have lost, it is hard to know where to begin. They may see a picture, catch something in what you said, or hear something from someone else and want you to clarify. Remember, they aren't trying to make you sad. If telling them is hard for you, you can share that, too. Don't let the difficulty of telling new people stop you from sharing your sibling's story if you want to.

If you are telling people for the first time, it can be helpful to have a plan for what you might want to say. For instance, when I told a new teacher about my sister, I told her my sister's name, and then I said, "She was diagnosed with cancer when she was 7, and, unfortunately, she passed away. I miss her a lot, and sometimes I am sad. But I know that she is still with me, and I still love her even if we are apart."

What might you say when telling someone for the first time about your sister or brother?

In my own experience of sharing my sister's story with other people, there have been times when I knew it was going to be hard, and I really didn't want to share. In general, I think I have overwhelmingly felt relief and at least a small sense of peace in sharing my sister with someone new.

There is no magic threshold you will someday cross when telling people will become super easy. I wish there was. But the more times you tell people, you will find a way that works for you and makes you comfortable. It will get a little easier.



Friends

First, I want to say that your friends care about you, but if they have never experienced a loss like you have, it can be hard for them to know what to say or how to help. There are days you may be at school and you may be feeling fine, then something unexpected may happen and suddenly you are sad. You don't have to act happy around your true friends. If you are sad then be sad. You don't need to put on a mask for your friends. Trust your friends.

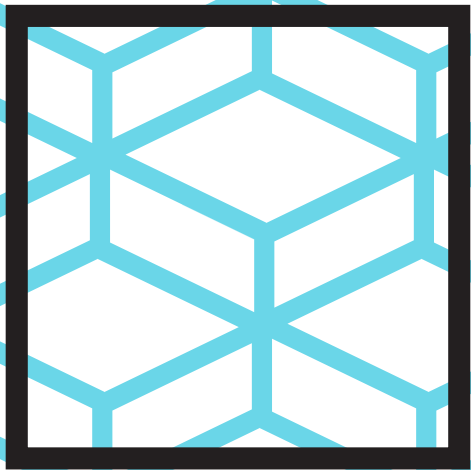
Who are some good friends you can tell when you are sad?

Your friends can be a great support, and having friends to help you through your grief is a wonderful gift. But, there may be times when they are not able to help. Remember, they won't always have the answer or the words, or they might not understand. Since kids don't always have the answers, it is important to also have a trusted adult, teacher, parent, or counselor to talk to.

Who are some adults you can talk to?

You may have some friends who become distant or just fall away because they don't know how to deal with grief or because they maybe aren't ready to. If you lose a couple friends on your journey, you will find new friends! Maybe the new friends are the ones you needed all along—friends who will try to understand you and support you the best they can. If you find a wonderful friend who helps you, is there for you, and makes your days a little better, make sure you thank them for being such a gift to you.

Have you had some friends who fell away? Have you discovered some new friends who are there for you and understand?



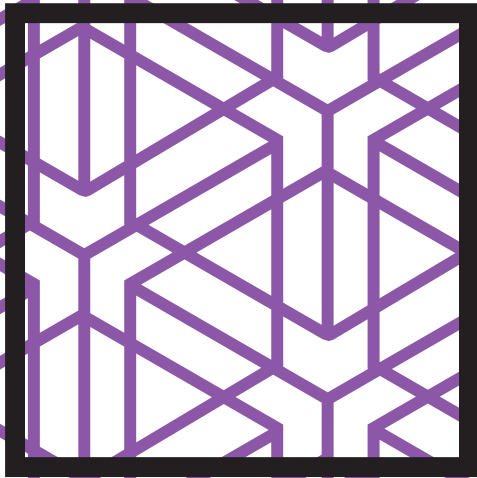
Sharing Your Sibling

I have gotten pretty comfortable telling my sister's story and bringing her up in my everyday life. For me, telling funny little stories or sharing memories about her helps me. This can make other people uncomfortable, depending on their own personal feelings about loss and death. It has been a challenge for me because, as much as I want to keep my sister a part of my life, I never want to make anyone else uncomfortable. Of all the things I struggle with, this is one of the hardest. I have known people who never wanted me to talk about her because they thought it was weird. So when I was around them, I didn't talk about her.

I met some new people and started sharing stories and my grief journey with them. For me it was like a weight falling off my shoulders. My sister is still a part of my life and I love sharing that with other people. Talking about her continues to help me heal and brings me joy and peace.

If talking about your sibling with friends or in public is too much, that is OK. How you choose to remember your sibling is personal. Whatever feels right for YOU, do that!

Does talking about your sibling help you or it is too hard?



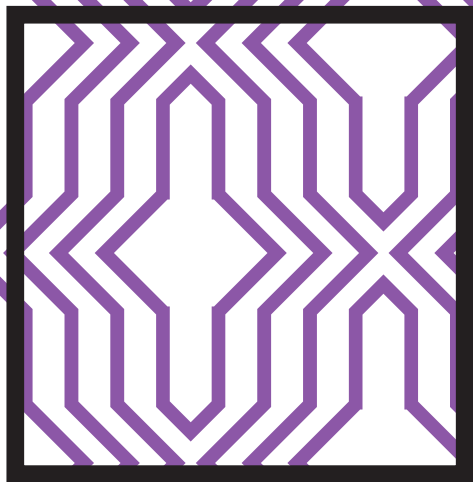
School

So, at first I didn't know how to write about this because it is such a sensitive topic for me. One of the toughest things for me is when my parents come to my school and talk about my sister. I have trouble keeping it together. I used to worry about it before they came. I knew I was going to fall apart and either start crying, not be able to listen, or have a sad or distant reaction for the rest of the day. There is this awards ceremony every year, and my parents present the school with an award for working so hard to raise money and awareness for cancer research.

Last year, I had been having a great day when my dad came to present the award. I was embarrassed when my dad got up to talk but also so proud. My dad started talking and after about three minutes I felt my face get hot. I was starting to tear up and trying so hard not to cry, but the tears started streaming down my face. My best friend, who was sitting next to me, looked over and I thought to myself, "Damn, now they're all gonna look at me!" I had to leave to compose myself and when I came back everyone was so kind. I learned that: first, I had to get used to this; second, real friends are going to stick with you no matter what happens; and third, it's OK to cry (sorry, that sounded cheesy).

Have you ever cried in school? How did you handle it?

On an everyday basis I tell myself, "It's OK to cry." Some days I have to tell myself more than once. Honestly, I cannot stress enough it's OK to cry. Seriously!



Counting Siblings

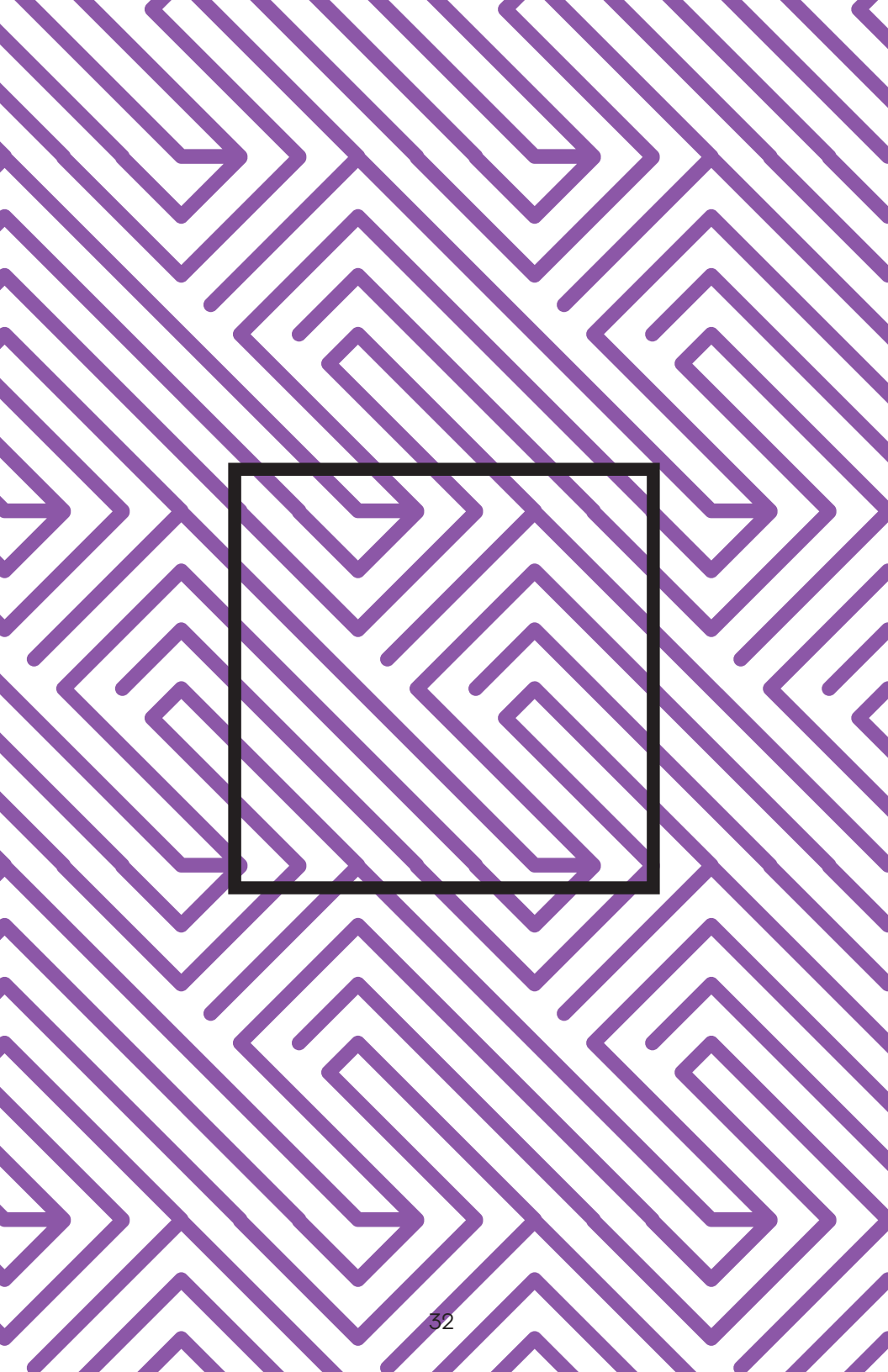
People casually ask every day “How many siblings do you have?” They usually ask this “innocent” question as an icebreaker or a way to get to know someone more. It can be confusing and difficult to answer this question when you have lost a sibling. How you choose to answer the question is up to you.

I had told a friend I had 6 siblings. Sometime later, he looked at a more recent family photo, counted and said, “No, you don’t.” That made me really upset and made me think about why and how I answered this question. For me, I still count the people that I have lost as part of my family. While they are not with me, they will always be my family. So, I choose to continue to count them. How you choose to count is up to you. But it can be helpful to think about this question and your answer in advance, so the question doesn’t catch you off guard when someone is making casual conversation.

What do you think about counting siblings? Have you been in a similar situation? What did you do? Is there anything you would do differently next time?

I also recognize when I say, “I have 6 siblings,” I am opening the door for more questions about the people I have lost in my life. It may cause me to have to share my sister’s story with someone new, which can be challenging. Personally, the difficulty of sharing has never changed the way I chose to count my siblings.

It is good to be aware that your answer to the question “How many siblings do you have?” may lead to further questions.



Veil vs. Cloud

My mom asked us the other day if we ever felt life was always colored by the fact that my sister had died. We debated this in the kitchen with some people and agreed. Yeah, life is and will always be colored a little differently with the grief we have shared. It is as if there is a thin veil over everything.

In my opinion there isn't a veil covering everything and coloring it differently, but a little cloud that is always there. Some days it is a little darker or a little bigger, like a rain cloud. Other days it is the little cloud on a hot day. While it is interrupting the perfect blue sky, you get to look at it and pick out the shapes in the sky.

Do you think that your life is always colored by the fact that your sibling died?



Family Photo

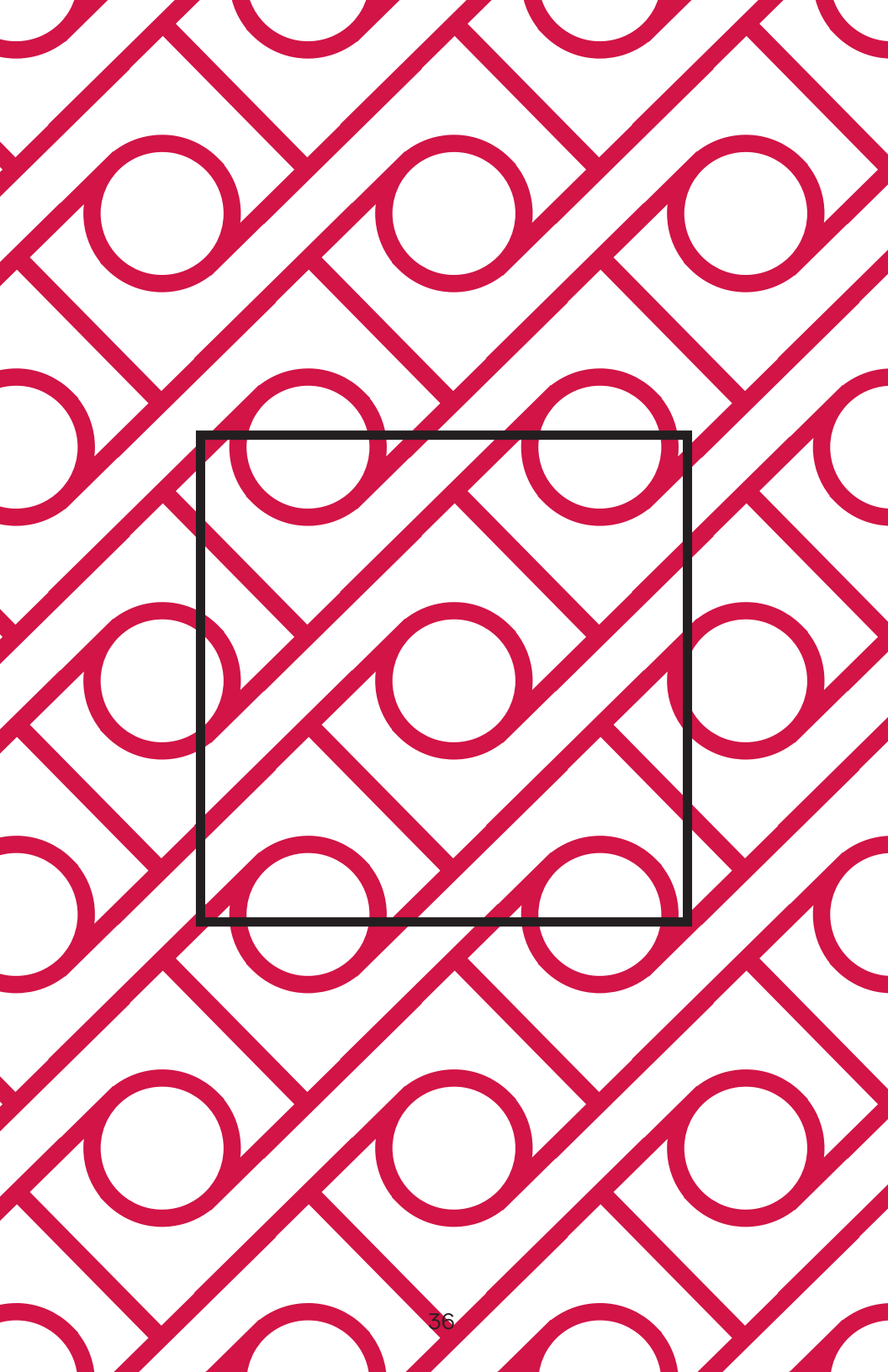
My mom has always loved taking pictures of our family. You can imagine with our large family it has never been easy getting everybody to smile at the same time. But the first Christmas picture after our sister died was the worst. It was a month away from the one-year anniversary of her death, and a bunch of stuff had gone wrong leading up to the time we were going to take the picture. So, we all stood by the tree, at least a couple of us were crying, and it was a mess.

From that mess we started what I think became a beautiful tradition. For the majority of the planned photos we take, we now hold a picture of our sister, showing how she is still with us. Holding her picture with us helped us not have to see a void in the picture where she should have been. We have continued doing that for years. What we choose to do might not be right for you. But, it is worth considering what might help you if taking family pictures is something you find difficult.

Whether it is for a holiday card or a spontaneous moment, taking a family photo can be hard. When you look at the photo you may be sad because there is an empty spot where your sibling should be. This is an important time to remind yourself that life doesn't stop moving. It is hard to accept time continuing without your loved one. Comparing pictures year-to-year, where you can see how much people have changed, is undeniable proof of time moving forward.

Is taking a family photo stressful or difficult for you? If it is or if you think it might be, what are some things you can do to alleviate that stress?

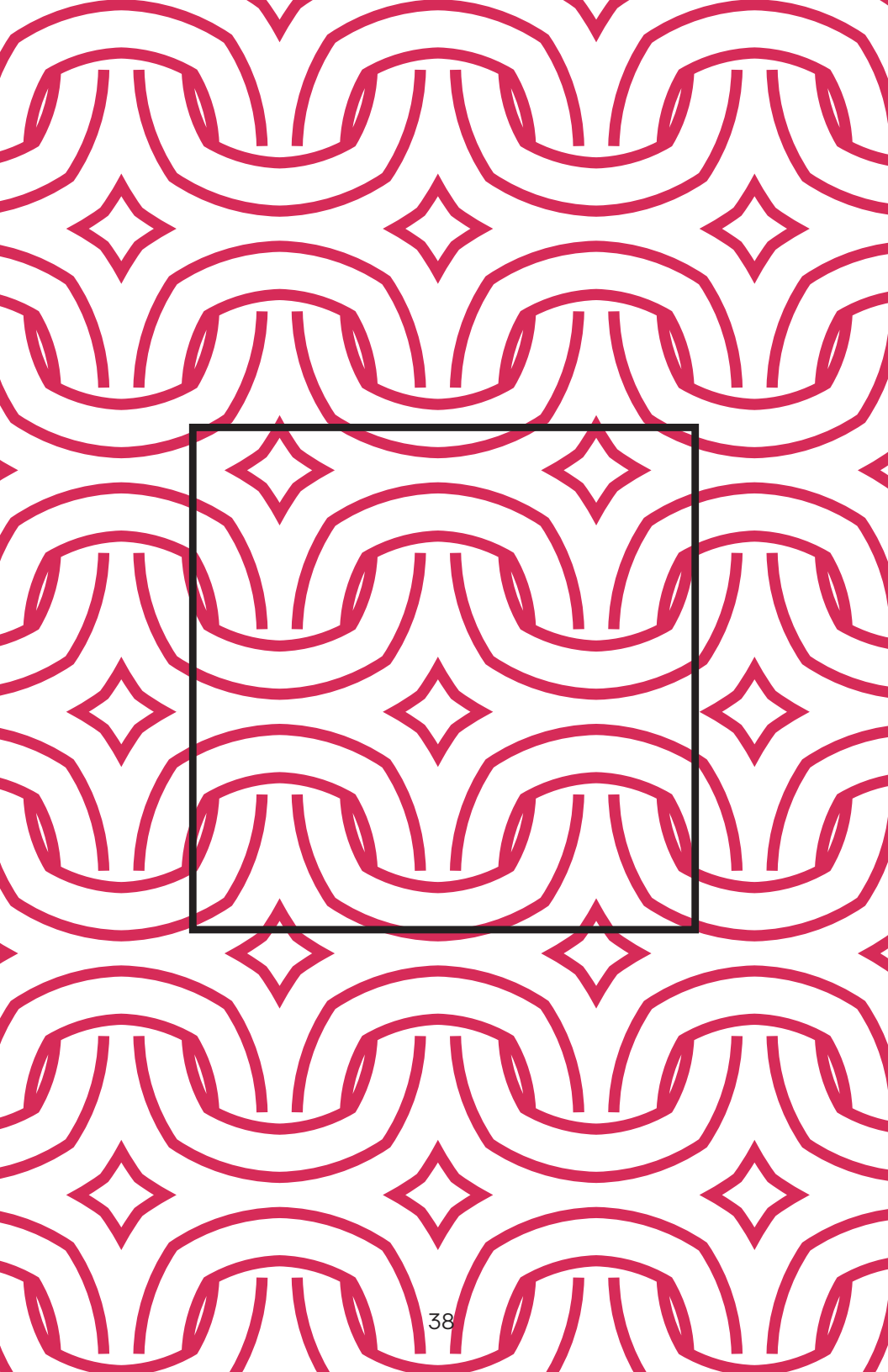
In my opinion and experience, family picture-taking without your sibling will never be stress-free. Still, it is helpful to try and do what you can to alleviate any extra stress so you can focus on the stress of getting everyone to smile and look in the same direction!



Keepsakes

I don't remember when I got it, but I have this little stuffed animal, Lilly. She is a little cocker spaniel *Webkinz* that belonged to my sister. I used to flip out if Lilly was washed or out of my sight because I thought I was losing the last little piece of my sister I had left. Now, 10 years after my sister died, Lilly is no longer even in my room. I think Lilly is now in a closet in my parents' room, but that is beside the point. In a sense, I don't need Lilly as much as I used to. I now see my sister in other things, and I have accepted that I cannot change anything. All I can do is keep her memory alive.

Are there ways you keep your sibling's memory alive? Are there keepsakes that are precious to you?



Looking Back

When my sister was sick my parents kept a blog of what was happening to keep our extended family and numerous friends up to date. There are days when looking back and reading this is super painful. We know how the story turned out—our sister died—but at the time when part of the story was written, we still had tons of hope. Those memories were made months before we would have to say goodbye.

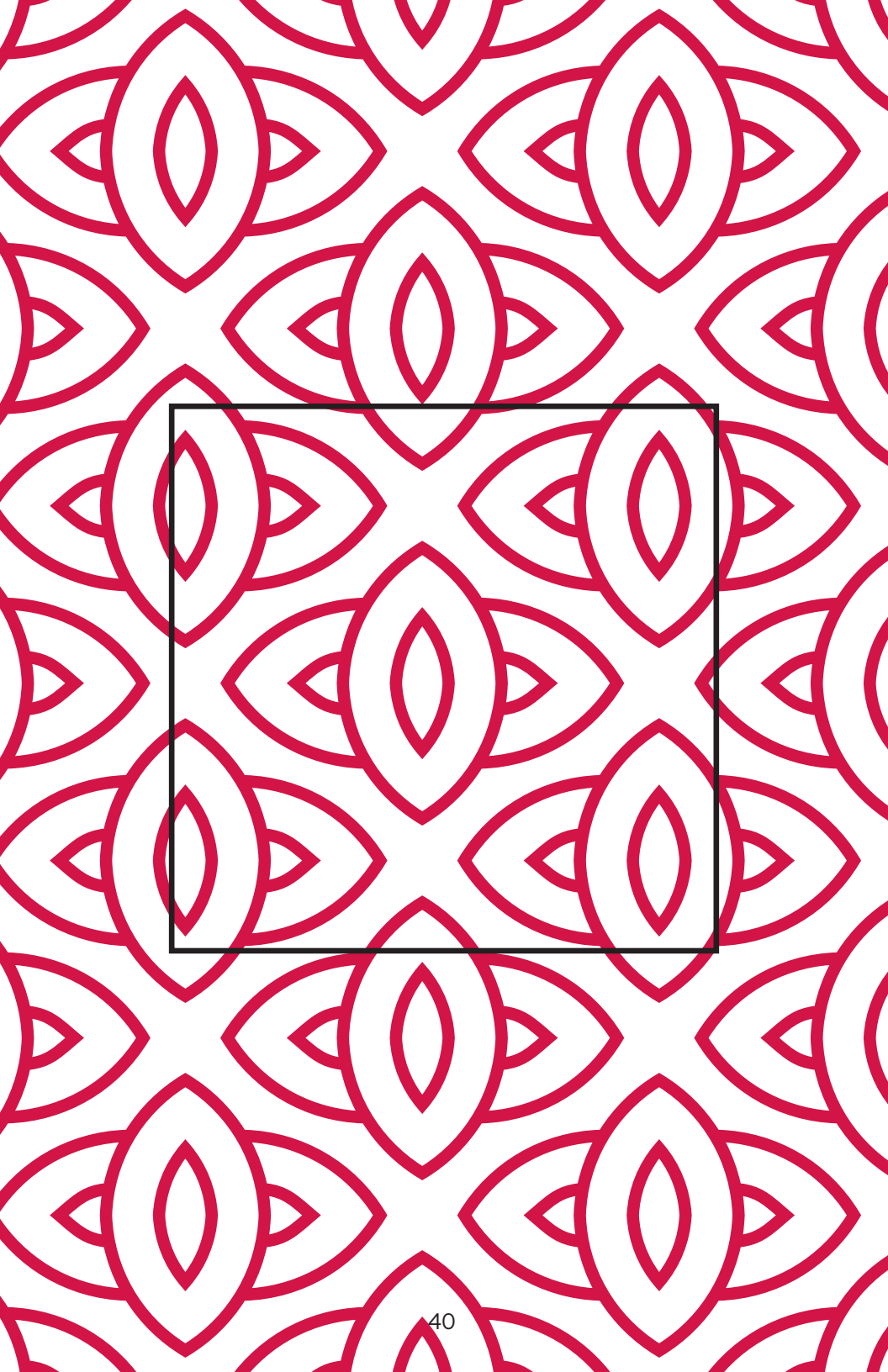
Some days when I'm sad I will read these blogs almost as a way to justify my sadness to myself. "Hey look, I have a reason to be sad. Remember when this happened? It was right before she passed away, and she was in pain."

But other days I am able to look back and remember happy times, and it gives me a sense of peace. We were so happy together, she lived every moment of her life. I am so grateful for the life she lived and that I got to be a part of such a beautiful life.

I don't have the best memory, so looking at a picture doesn't help me to look back as much as reading an account of what happened. Still, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words.

Whether you are happy or sad it can be good to look back. Look back and remember. Smile, laugh, cry. Whatever you need to do is OK, but don't be afraid to stop for a moment and look back.

What are some ways you look back and remember?



Things You Wish You Had Said

Because of my age at the time my sibling died, I do not remember if I even got to say goodbye. I know we were all ushered into my parents' bedroom, but I think by then she was already gone and she had been in a coma for days prior. Some days the thought that I never said goodbye haunts me. If there was one thing I truly wish I could say to her or ask of her though, it wouldn't be goodbye. I think I would ask if she was OK or if she was happy. Nonetheless, I really can't say anything to her; she's dead. While that may be blunt, it's true. I have to realize and understand that and accept that I will never see her again. What I can do is keep the memories I have of her and her legacy alive, because that is what's important. I can also take care of myself and others and try my hardest to help people, so they never have to experience the pain my sister and I went through.

Your sibling is dead and there is nothing you can do to change that. However, you can work to keep the memory of your sibling alive. You can take care of yourself and others. Helping others can be a way of honoring your sibling and creating a legacy for your sibling.

What do you wish you could say to your sibling? Are there ways you honor your sibling?



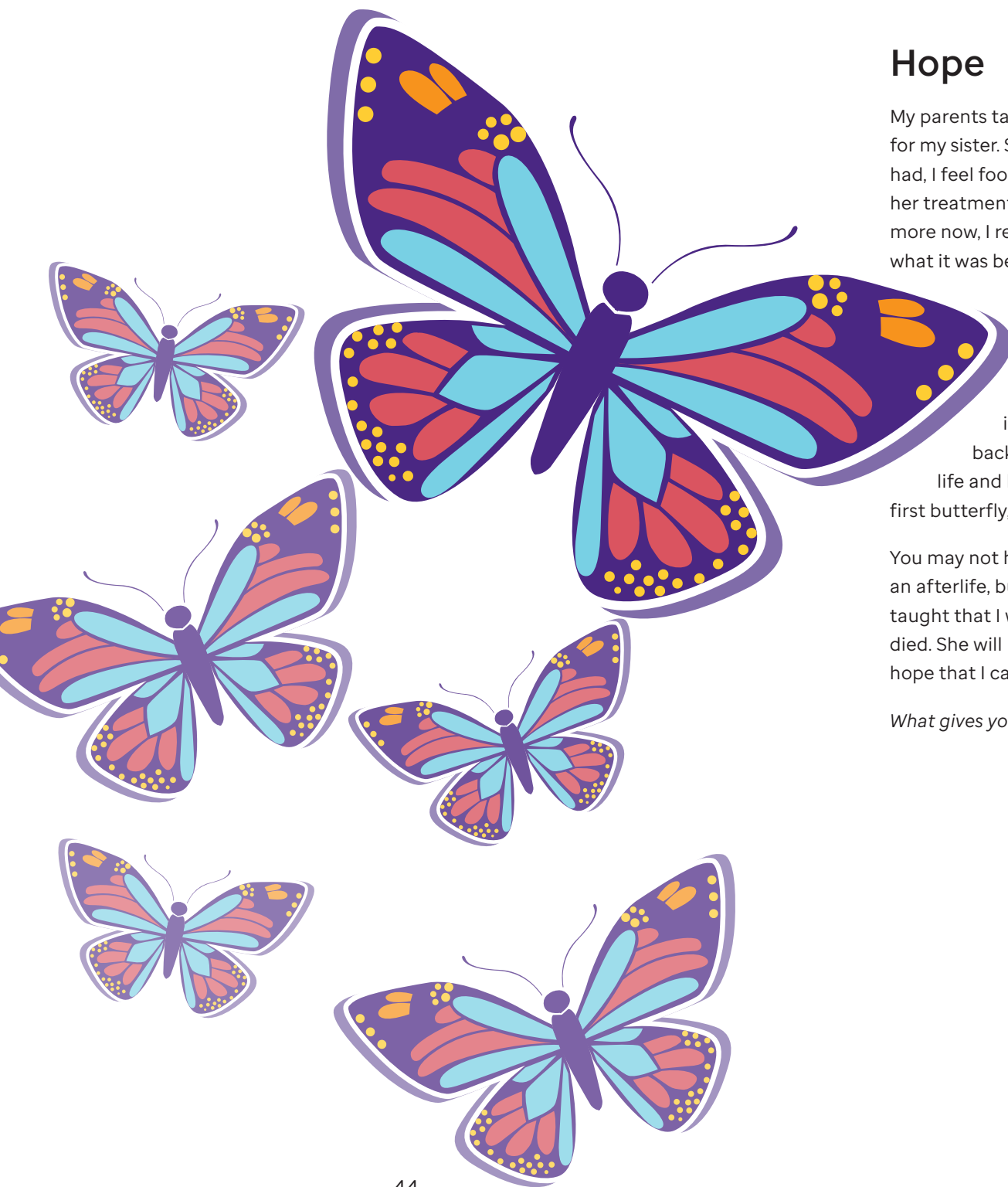
Caring for Yourself

When you get on an airplane and the flight attendant gives the safety speech, one of the first things they talk about is oxygen masks. I don't know if you have heard this before, but what they say is passengers need to first secure their own mask before assisting another person. This particular analogy has been used many times before, and it applies to losing a sibling as well. Put on your mask first! Because if you don't have oxygen you cannot help anyone else.

If you have other siblings who are also grieving and you try to help them before you help yourself, you cannot do it well. That is not to say you should turn them away, ignore them, or refuse to talk to them. Recognize instead that you don't have all the tools, the resources, or the ability to give them the help they need. You need to take time in your grief to care for you first or you will be unable to help anyone else.

What are some ways you can care for yourself? Physically? Mentally?

In taking time to care for yourself following loss, you allow yourself the chance to grow. You gain knowledge and experience that can help carry you through life's challenges beyond this journey. Caring for yourself, even doing something small, can be like a desperately needed breath of fresh air.



Hope

My parents talk a lot about how full of hope we all were for a physical cure for my sister. Some days when I am really sad and I reflect on the hope we had, I feel foolish. She was so sick, but we were so convinced she would finish her treatment and life would go back to exactly what it was before. Knowing more now, I realize even if she had been cured, life would never be “exactly what it was before.” We still would have had a new and different normal.

On other days when I reflect on the hope we shared when she was sick, I see it as such a wonderful thing. Our hope was so innocent and beautiful and exactly what we needed to get through that very difficult time. Immediately following her death that hope was gone for a little while, but it came back the next spring when we saw the first butterfly. We saw new life and hope and thought of our sister. Each spring when we see the first butterfly, we continue to see new life and hope and think of our sister.

You may not have a religion that shares as part of its message the hope of an afterlife, but it is part of mine. I am so grateful for it, because I have been taught that I will see my sister again and she will be unlike she was when she died. She will be able to walk, she will be beautiful, happy, and at peace. The hope that I can get from my faith is priceless.

What gives you hope?

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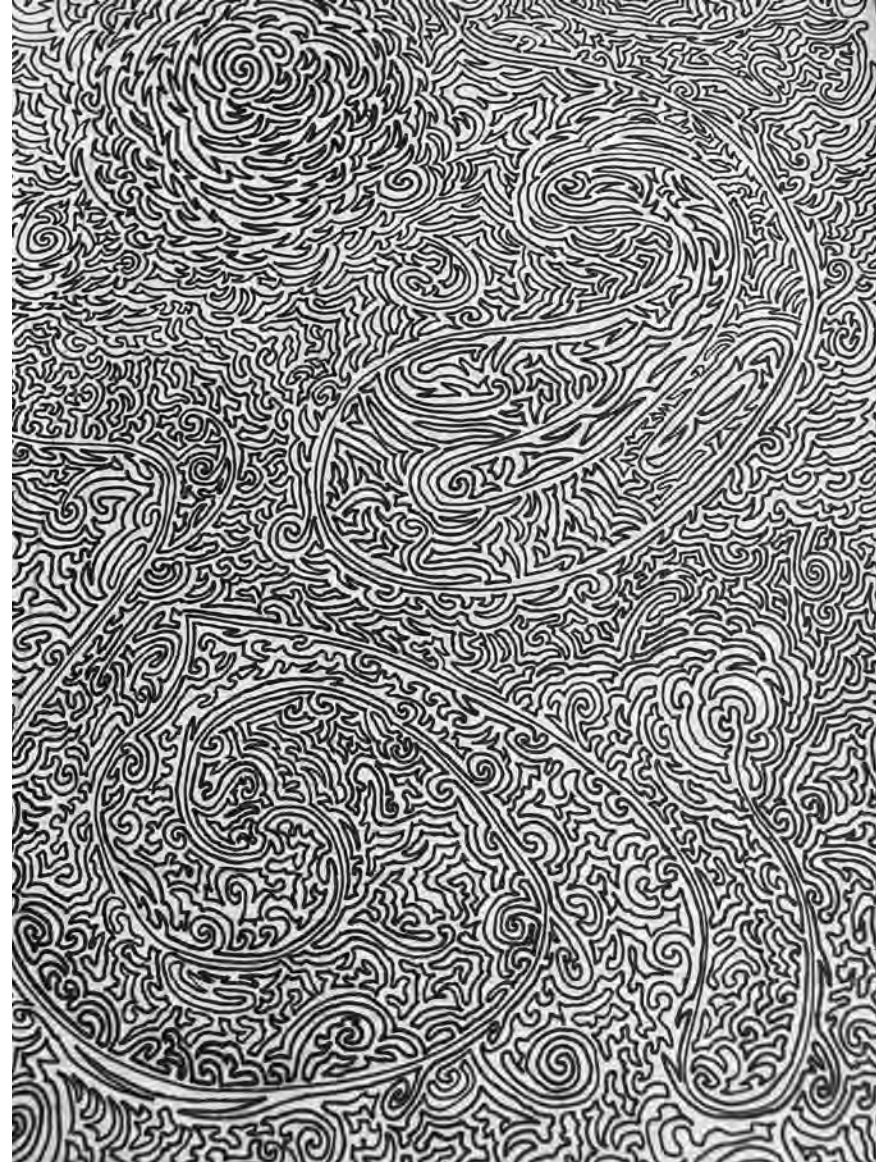
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