

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Can you help me with a dilemma? I don't know how I should respond to a question my son recently asked about my "non-relationship" with my brother Tom, and his wife Sarah. I was very close to Tom until he married late in life. Our family wholeheartedly welcomed Sarah into our lives, and were very happy for Tom, who was "blindly" in love. But almost immediately, Sarah told lies trying (I believe) to sabotage my brother's and my relationship. I honestly preferred that he be "happily" married than to be alone. I decided to ease out of our former closeness, trying to maintain a pleasant, if superficial, connection. But it soon was apparent that even that small interaction had to be severed. I felt I didn't want to be in my brother's life if he thought that I was a liar and a deceitful person. (Didn't he know me better than that?) It has been over twenty years, and we've only been in touch for our father's funeral. I'm at peace with my irrevocable decision to not have any connection with them. Recently my son, his wife, and their children moved to within an hour's drive of Tom and Sarah. My son – who has not seen my brother since he was six years old -- told me that he has always had a nagging feeling that he would like to stop by and visit him. He said that he has not done so out of loyalty to me. He said that he felt that if he did see him and didn't tell me, it would be like lying. And if he did see him and told me, it would be like a slap in the face to me, or at least that's what he believes. I'm grateful that my son respects me enough to want my "blessing," but I admit to having a gnawing sense of discomfort when I think of him contacting my brother. I'd appreciate your point of view. Thank you!

-- Ellen

Dear Ellen,

What a sad story, Ellen. Though you say that you are "at peace" with your decision, I'm sure that peace has only evolved after much heartache. Sibling relationships are so important, though they are often undervalued in adult life, as people move forward raising their own families. But these connections can be powerful. Siblings share memories, and a sense of family identity. If they are close in age (and the vast majority of brothers and sisters are within ten years of each other's age), we can expect them to go the distance with us. It's a shame that you and your brother no longer feel the closeness that, apparently, carried you both through a lot of your lives. People who report close sibling relationships also experience higher life satisfaction, and lower rates of depression in old age. Sibling connections offer psychological and emotional support in times of crisis, such as the illness/death of parents, (not to mention all of the good times they might offer as well).

Your son deserves the opportunity to determine for himself what (if any) relationship he will have with his uncle. The fact that he and his family now live nearby offers him opportunity to do this easily.

If your take on this situation is accurate, then Sarah needs professional help. If she has been envious of the close relationship that you and Tom have shared, she has

major problems. Now, you can't change her, but you can change your reactions to her, and the situation you find yourself in with regard to your brother.

Although a great deal of time has passed, it is never too late to heal wounds, even those that have festered for years.

First, give your blessing to your son to seek out your brother, and let him make his own decision about whether Tom is the kind of man he would like to have a connection with. Second, look into your own heart and ask yourself if you want to reestablish a relationship with your brother. If the answer is "yes," then contact him. Tell him that you realize that life is short and that you miss him in your life. Let him know that you love him, and would like to find a way to change the situation. Note: This is not all your responsibility. But I'm coaching you because you have written me, and I haven't heard a word from Tom. If he wrote, I would recommend the same course of action to him. It is unlikely that after twenty years of marriage, Tom is still "blindly" in love. He may have a deeper understanding of Sarah's insecurities. That is not to say that this will be easy. And you don't have to plan weekend get-togethers or family vacations with Tom and Sarah to feel connected. It may just be enough – it may be all that is possible – to know that you care for each other, and will be there for each other when you are needed. I am not in favor of "irrevocable" decisions. People change. Life changes all of us. People who forgive live longer, healthier lives. Good luck.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.

