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Attachment Issues Associated with the Loss of a Co-twin before Birth

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A brief study of twins and their relationship quickly reveals what is known as the 'twin bond'. This article explores the ways in which the twin bond differs from all other attachment bonds formed in the lifetime of a human being. The article shows how different the bonding is between identical and fraternal twins with a view to examining the psychology of 'wombtwin survivors', people who started life as a twin but whose co-twin died before birth. The study reveals how the twin attachment bond is created in the womb at the very beginning of life and lasts a lifetime. Wombtwin survivors display many of the same characteristics of twins who are born together, for the effects of the bond between twins - the preoccupation; the paradox; the lack of a sense of identity and the need for the physical presence of the lost co-twin - is also present in the life of the sole survivor.

Introduction

A brief study of twins and their relationship quickly reveals what is known as the 'twin bond'. This is the primary attachment bond for twins and it is quite unlike any other bond (**Tancredy & Fraley, 2006**). Twins live entwined lives, at every level imaginable. This article will explore the ways in which the twin bond differs from all other attachment bonds formed in the lifetime of a human being. We will consider the bond between identical twins first, in their total preoccupation for each other and their constant struggle for identity, individuality, and equality within the twin pair. Then we will take a look at fraternal twinning and how different this bonding is and how it varies widely among twins and between twin pairs, according to the gender mix and genetic differences.

Finally, we will examine the psychology of 'wombtwin survivors', who are people who started life as a twin but whose co-twin died before birth. This study will reveal how the twin attachment bond is created in the womb at the very beginning of life and lasts a lifetime. Wombtwin survivors display many of the same characteristics of twins who are born together, as the effects of the bond between twins - the preoccupation; the paradox; the lack of a sense of identity and the need for the physical presence of the lost co-twin - are also present in the life of the sole survivor.

The survivor once shared a womb, and sometimes even a placenta and amniotic sac, with their twin, but this happened too early to be accessible as a memory in born life. However, many wombtwin survivors are not aware of their twin. Unknowingly troubled by the loss of their twin but unable to find words to express their feelings of loss and sorrow, they are greatly helped when they are taken seriously as being genuinely bereaved by the death of their twin before birth. Just to know that there is a normal and rational reason for their

feelings and attitudes can be a great relief. Then therapists can facilitate a healing process that will enable the survivor to begin to build close relationships with others, which will help to combat the prevailing sense of isolation and grief commonly experienced by the bereaved twin **(Bryan, 1995)**.

Two Types of Twinning

Identical (Monozygotic or One-Egg) Twins

Identical twins are formed from a single zygote (fertilized egg), which splits into two halves, and each half becomes a distinct individual, while sharing the same genes. Identical twins vary in how identical they are to each other **(Kothari & Mehta, 1985)**. That split into two may happen less than perfectly, **(Hall, 1996)** and a lot depends on at what stage of very early development the split occurred. If the split happens in the first four days, then each twin will develop its own placenta and amniotic sac. If it is a few days later the twins share a placenta and if a few days after that the twins will develop in the same sac. If the split occurs later still at about fourteen days, then the twins share parts of their body: Siamese twins. There can be slight genetic differences between identical twins, and even a few cases of boy/girl identical twins have been documented **(Edwards, Dent, & Kahn, 1966.)** There can also be developmental differences between identical twins, for a lot depends on how much nourishment each twin can obtain from the placenta. This means that there is almost always a dominant twin, who is often born first and tends to initiate activities, even in the womb. **Piontelli, Bocconi, Boschetto, Kusterman, & Nicolini (1999)** observed twins in the womb and this marked behavioural difference, even between identical twins, was clearly observable. Meanwhile they found that the less dominant twin was mostly content to comply and follow the dominant twin **(Piontelli et al., 1997)**. In this article I will express this difference as ‘Alpha’ and ‘Beta’ twins, with the Alpha twin being the dominant one of the pair.

Fraternal (Dizygotic) or Two-Egg Twins

Fraternal twins are formed from two separate eggs produced in the same month. They are no more alike than other siblings, but they do share the womb from the very beginning of life and become bonded to each other because of their lifelong association. Fraternal twins are more commonly found in the population than identical twins, particularly these days, when assisted reproduction technology (ART) is employed to assist women in becoming pregnant. ART includes in vitro fertilization (IVF) and gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT) and it is common practice for several fertilized eggs to be transferred

into the mother's womb at the same time, which greatly increases the likelihood of a multiple pregnancy. It has also been found (**Martin, Shanley, Butt, Osborne, & O'Brien, 1991**) that mothers pregnant naturally with dizygotic twins do tend to produce more than one egg a month.

The unique aspect of being a fraternal twin is to have someone in your life of exactly the same age as you. The first-born twin may take the Alpha role, but that does not necessarily follow, for different genes can cause very different developmental outcomes. Fraternal twins may be same sex or mixed sex, and have differing hair colour, body build, skin tone, IQ, skills, interests, etc.

Fraternal twins differ markedly from identical twins in the way they make and share their friends. Identical twins may share as many as half of their friends, but then they share so much already and have always done so since their earliest days. Fraternal twins share fewer: about 25% for same sex and only 5% for opposite sex (**Thorpe & Gardner, 2006**). This seems predictable because of the way that fraternal twins are often so different with regards to interests and temperament. Opposite sex twins may end up at different schools and spend much of their lives living separately. It seems safe to assume, therefore, that the style of attachment between opposite-sex fraternal twins is much less intimate than that between same-sex fraternal twins and identical twins.

Opposite-sex fraternal twins are tolerant of the opposite sex at a psychological and a physical level; after all, they shared a womb with a person of the opposite sex and where the blood vessels of the two placentas merged and mixed there would have been an exchange of testosterone and oestrogen hormones, which can leave both twins with some opposite-sex signs, which may be manifested physically or psychologically. For example, the female twin may be the first born, and take the dominant role and become the Alpha twin of the pair, whereas the male Beta twin may be quiet and compliant by comparison; this may go against the social mores if the twins live in a patriarchal society, where to be male and yet compliant may be seen as shaming. The twin relationship is paramount and far more important than the social attitude, so the male remains compliant, at least when in a close relationship with his sister.

A Unique Bond

Attachment to others is characteristic of all social animals, and that includes humans. Social psychologists see attachment bonds as essential to survival. For it is only when bonded into close-knit groups that humans are enabled to survive in times of stress and disaster. This is evidently an inbuilt instinct, for we can observe a trainload of commuters, each of whom may have travelled alone for years in the same train, without ever acknowledging the presence of

anyone else, suddenly gelling into a group when the train is late, derailed, or in some way under threat. In World War Two in London, neighbours looked out for each other and helped each other to survive; despite the trauma and terror of these days some people still look back with nostalgia to that time, when communities were closer-knit.

Attachment to one's twin also helps twin pairs to survive: badly abused twins claim that they were enabled to survive because of the constant presence of their twin. However, for twins their bond is not all about survival. The twin-twin relationship is a matter of habit - one's co-twin has always been there - since the very start.

The Intrauterine Twin Attachment Bond

The twin bonding attachment that is formed in the womb is not created by playing together, or even interacting (although that does happen of course), and can be observed on ultrasound (**Piontelli et al., 1997**). It seems possible to view intrauterine twin bonding as a kind of 'foetal assumption': that the co-twin has always been there and has become part of The Way Things Are for the other. What is required to create this attachment bond is not so much interaction as simple consistent presence: just being there. Each co-twin has become part of what Parkes and Stevenson-Hinde called The Assumptive World of the other (Parkes, & Stevenson-Hinde, **1982**, p. 298). On this very early base many other assumptions may be built. Among these are the following: 'I have always been a twin and I always will be'; 'My twin and I were born together and will die together'. Clearly, the co-twin is an easily accessible playmate and partner for every activity. No twin need ever spend time alone, as their singleton peers may have to, but of course there is a paradox: that each co-twin needs a little space to discover his or her own individuality, even while his or her entire sense of self is based on the concept of 'I am a twin' and 'I am half of a whole and cannot be complete without my twin'.

In the first year of life, twins can be observed as paying little attention to one another, and only begin to interact with each other at the age of about three (**Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975**) However, not only in the womb but also since birth, they have always been together in the same space, often sleeping together in the same cot. Twins often take this preoccupation with each other into adulthood.

A Preoccupation with Twinning

Segal, who heads the Twin Studies Centre of California State University, has a fraternal twin sister, and has studied the twin bond for many years (**Segal, 2000**).

It is common for twins to study other twin pairs, or be involved with twinning or multiple births in some way. For twins, the whole idea of twinning itself is a major preoccupation, with particular emphasis on their own pair. Identical twins sometimes end up marrying another set of twins and live very close to each other, so they can continue to share their lives in this extraordinarily intimate way. Clearly, only another twin would understand and empathize with the need to speak to one's co-twin several times a day, at the expense of one's spouse!

The Twin Survival Struggle

The twin survival struggle seems to be strongest between identical twins, who tend to identify with each other and copy each other. Meanwhile, in opposition to this, each twin is extremely careful to maintain some sense of his or her own individuality within the twin pair. This is a kind of paradoxical intimacy. In this article I will refer to this paradox of the twin bond as 'the twin survival struggle'.

Nowhere is this more of a struggle than with identical twins. In the book *The Silent Twins* **Wallace (1993)** writes about two identical twin sisters who were so taken up with their twin survival struggle that they lived separate lives as a pair. They had their own language and spoke to hardly anyone else. They tried to maintain some kind of equality between them, but Jennifer was born ten minutes after June. This created a lifelong problem, for as the first-born Alpha twin June assumed dominance within the pair. This quest for equality versus individuality can be a difficult, fine balance to maintain, and requires intense moment-by-moment concentration on the state of the twin bond, often to the expense of other relationships. Jennifer was always the less dominant Beta twin and, exhausted by a lifetime struggle with her sister, she died of acute myocarditis aged twenty nine. June was left with a mixture of deep grief and yet a sense of freedom. She wrote: 'At long last I am all June, not a part of Jennifer. Somebody had to break the vicious circle. We were war weary: it had been a long battle. We were both a burden to each other' (Wallace, **1993**, p. 273).

A Question of Identity

Identical twins are often referred to jointly as 'the twins' by their parents and other family members, as if they were two halves of a single whole. This concept is quite appropriate in fact, because identical twins began life as a single *conceptus*, which then splits to form two distinct individuals. This is lived out in the lives of identical twins, who share most of their lives and live like clones of each other. This extraordinary similarity between identical twins

has caused some people to ignore the differences between them, which can be quite marked, and tend to increase as the twins grow older, by a process now known as 'epigenetics' (Bird, 2007).

The Breaking of the Bond

Throughout the history of civilization, twins - and, in particular, the extraordinary bond between them - have featured as the central theme in myth and legend. However, nowhere can the strength of the mythical twin bond be seen as clearly as when it is irrevocably broken by death. In the ancient study of astrology, the sign of Gemini describes fraternal twins: Castor who is mortal and Pollux who is immortal. When Castor is killed in battle, Pollux is so lost in grief that he is prepared to surrender his immortality in order to join his brother in death. Zeus takes pity on them and lifts them both to the heavens, where they shine as the brightest two stars in the constellation of Gemini. Gemini is one of the brightest constellations in the heavens and has guided generations of sailors to safety. This is stirring stuff, and rightly so: the grief that twins experience when one twin dies is without equal anywhere in the field of human relations, for nowhere else in human life is the attachment bond so strong, the love so deep, and the grief so overwhelming.

When it comes to grief, zygosity matters. In a study conducted by Segal and Ream for California State University (Segal & Ream, 1998) it was found, predictably, that identical twins take longer than fraternal twins to get over their grief after their twin has died, which is perhaps not so surprising, for the identical twin bond is so strong.

The grief of a twin is more complex than that of a singleton: for an identical twin, the one person who made you feel whole is no longer there. You can never feel whole again. For a fraternal twin, there will always be a gap where that companion, who was always there from the beginning, once existed, and remains only as a sense of Something Missing. Your twin knew you from the very start; knew you better than any lover or friend ever could. A lost twin is truly irreplaceable. This surely is an unhealable wound: or so it may seem, at first. To find a way forward, we need to go back to the time before birth and the attachment bonds that were created then.

Woodward, a psychoanalyst whose identical twin died when she was three years old, was motivated by her preoccupation with twins to carry out a study of bereaved twins, as she herself was, which led to the creation of the Lone Twin Network (Woodward, 1988). This group meets regularly and is a vital form of help for lone twins in the UK. In her study she interviewed over 200 lone twins and collected their stories and impressions. The feeling of being 'just half', which was mentioned frequently, is perhaps predictable enough,

but the real surprise came when Woodward discovered that the loss of a twin before the age of six months was the most devastating loss (**Woodward, 1998**). It seems that, if one has lived with one's twin for years before they die, that is a huge loss, but to lose one's twin near to birth, and consequently to be forced to embark into born life alone, seems to be far less bearable.

Death before Birth

When the breaking of the twin bond occurs before birth, this creates a special kind of grief. In the last decade there has been an increasing realization that our time before birth is not spent mindlessly waiting to be born, and a newborn baby has a mind of its own (**Chamberlain, 1998**). The womb time is a busy and active period of learning - even learning to talk (**Childs, 1998; Truby, 1975**) - during which every experience, however short-lived, leaves some kind of impression (**Verny & Kelly, 1981**).

To be silenced and pathologized as a bereaved twin increases the isolation and pain that comes with the death of one's twin (**Dawn, 2007**). It helps a lot to put a name to your pain and to have it affirmed as a normal reaction by others. It helps to spend time with others who have known for themselves the tragic breaking of this unique bond.

The Breaking of the Twin Bond before Birth

If a twin was lost before birth, until a few years ago there was not even a name for the survivor. Now they are known as 'wombtwin survivors' and they are my special concern, as I am a wombtwin survivor myself. When I realized I was a wombtwin survivor in 2002 I found little support. All I had was a crazy feeling that would not go away but which this new revelation simply and perfectly explained: I had started off life as a twin but my twin died. Two facts came into play almost at once: one was a widespread incredulity that the loss of a twin before birth can in any way have a real psychological effect in the born life of the survivor; the second was that for me my twin was absolutely real.

Healing the Wound

As I struggled to come to terms with this new and difficult idea, which was met with incredulity - or worse - by the people I told, I gradually recognized that I was moving in the direction of what I have called 'healing'. This has for me brought about a resolution of the broken bond. I have now communicated with many hundred other wombtwin survivors through my web site and we do

seem to agree that healing is possible. The seemingly unhealable wound of twin loss can be healed.

Attempts to Restore the Twin Bond

Sole surviving twins try in a variety of ways to restore the original attachment bond, which is so crucial to their sense of identity. If they have siblings, then the sibling of the appropriate sex will be singled out as the surrogate twin. This may help a little to ease the sense of isolation and abandonment that lone twins experience.

Anna, who has recently recognized that she lost a twin before birth, told me:

My sister and I (she is younger than me) have always had a very close relationship. People always comment on how close we are. But I have felt like I'm trying to make up for something lost with her. Or like I love her more and want to be closer than she does. I share everything, every detail.

Some lone twins link up with others and make a special connection, which meets the needs of both 'halves'. This may be a same-sex connection at a deep, almost spiritual level.

Nora, a wombtwin survivor, told me:

My best friend is also a single twin. We are two different sides of the same coin in every way possible. Before we met, our lives travelled such similar paths, eventually leading us to one another. And no matter how long we would go without seeing each other, something drove us back together. She is my soul-mate. We are each other's gift from God, a piece of what we lost, so long ago.

The 'twin soul' or 'twin flame' concept is commonly used in New Age publications, relating the idea to reincarnation (**Todeschi, 1999**) or past lives (**Burney, 1995**). This is probably a misunderstanding and the sought-after twin soul is in reality the lost twin. The idea is also used in connection with co-dependent couple relationships.

It can also be found in enmeshed parent/child relationships. Enmeshment echoes the twin-twin relationship, in that one partner employs the other to provide a sense of identity, whereby one's existence within the relationship becomes the definition of oneself. Instead of seeing an attachment as having two people present, the enmeshed couple becomes one identity. Enmeshment is present when our entire sense of wholeness comes from another person. This is the kind of relationship into which lone twins and wombtwin survivors quickly become entangled. In a twin soul attachment they lose their sense of individuality, but then for the surviving twin this is, after all, the whole purpose of the enmeshment.

In her book *My mother/My self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* **Friday (1997)** described the relationship between mother and daughter as 'symbiotic'. This is certainly not every daughter's experience, but a survivor of a same-sex twin may become excessively dependent on her mother as the closest approximation to her twin that she is ever likely to have, and grieve excessively when her mother dies. In one remarkable example of this known to me, Susan lived with her mother until her mother was one hundred and two and she was seventy one. Despite Susan's large and supportive family, the death of her mother cast Susan into a total physical and nervous breakdown which was characterized by a total inability to be left alone. She spent the rest of her long life living just with a carer, whom she paid handsomely to be present twenty-four hours a day. This expense took up almost all of Susan's income. She refused a place in a residential care home which would have been much less expensive, for she preferred to remain in her own private space with her carer: just the two of them, as it had been with her mother, whom Susan has described as her soul twin.

Acknowledging the Loss

It is very hard for twins to completely acknowledge the loss of their twin. In 1975 Engel, who was a psychoanalyst and whose identical twin Frank died suddenly as an adult, wrote extensively about the psychological effects of his loss at a time when this was little understood (**Engel, 1975**). He told a story of how he had been mistaken for Frank at a congress, and just for a moment it felt as if Frank had not died. His son Peter later dismissed this hallucination as an 'illusory memory' (**Engel, 2001**): but clearly it was a momentary and comforting vision, born out of love and longing no doubt, and completely natural in the circumstances. My own research seems to suggest that holding on is associated with a lost twin: clinging to representational artefacts or personal belongings is a way to keep one's lost twin alive.

Solitary surviving twins find it painful simply to be alive without their twin. They describe the pain in their lives as 'a wound that does not heal, however hard you try'. This is reasonable, but this pain of loss may be kept alive by choice, as if one was 'picking at a sore'. The pain of any loss can gradually diminish with the passage of time, but not so twin loss. Even to allow the pain to fade may be experienced as an act of betrayal to the memory of the lost twin. Reasons to feel hurt are piled one upon the other: a parent's bad treatment or emotional unavailability; bullying at school; broken relationships. These can happen in anyone's life, but for the surviving twin painful memories act as a resting place for the original pain of loss, and the memories are kept active by constant rumination, often in night-time darkness and accompanied by insomnia.

Sharon, a wombtwin survivor, admits this self-abuse: 'I take emotional risks. I take the bullet emotionally for other people and wind up feeling abandoned.'

Only when these artificial means of keeping the lost twin alive are recognized as self-defeating, does an improvement begin to occur. Simply to know that the pain is being kept alive by oneself, and it is not being visited upon you, is a great relief. Then the solitary twin can begin to realize to what extent he or she is responsible for the pain.

Saying Goodbye

Wombtwin survivors have a real problem with goodbyes and other separation experiences. In Greenfield's PhD thesis (2007), entitled 'An exploration into the vanishing twin syndrome and its possible psychological influence on the surviving twin - a phenomenological analysis of the behaviours of a three-year-old during therapy', she wrote about her work with a three-year-old boy Sam, who was the survivor of a 'vanishing twin' pregnancy. Sam's twin had probably lived for just a few weeks in the womb. It seems that one of the most telling aspects of his initial behavioural problems was a problem with separation. By the end of their time together, when they had worked through his feelings of loss with play therapy, this had changed.

She writes:

... at the very end of his last session, Sam exhibited what seemed to be a newfound capacity and willingness to face, participate in and integrate our final moment of goodbye. This was extremely significant because of his historic avoidance of those kinds of moments. (p. 207)

Mourning and Memorial

Laura, a lone twin, told me:

I am finding myself looking for that closeness in other friends that I shared with my twin. I realise that it really is not possible because non-twins just don't understand what we had - even good friends. Your twin just knows you in a way that is unique and special. I am still coming to grips with the whole thing. It is tough. The important thing is to learn from the experience and move forward.

Mourning is an expression of grief and the depth of mourning varies with the strength of the original bond. It may be that if the twin died in later life, there was a funeral and a period of mourning, but this may not have been enough and may have to be revisited, in order for healing to be achieved. Twins lost at a very young age or before birth may not have been fully acknowledged,

may have been denied, or may never have been known, depending on the circumstances of the loss.

It is very hard to mourn for someone who is ‘half of you’ and who consequently is in a way still alive in your life. The first step towards mourning is to create some tangible evidence of death as a focus for grief. It is known that people who lose their loved ones at sea or in a fire have no tangible remains or a grave. This blocks the normal mourning reaction. For a solitary twin, the first step towards mourning has to be to achieve some kind of separation between the survivor and the lost twin. Naming the twin helps to begin a sense of separate identity. Once the lost twin is experienced as separate and having had a completely different life path, which has been cut short, then mourning can begin.

When the lost twin has been named, recognized as a separate entity, and fully grieved for, then it is time to say goodbye.

Anna, a wombtwin survivor, told me: ‘I could never understand why counselling helped but never seemed to reach the really deep parts. I know it is now time to let go of my twin and not let my attachment to him decide my life for me’.

I have participated in several of these rituals of mourning and remembrance in the last few years. The general idea is to make some physical sign of the twin and to use that symbol as part of the farewell ritual. In one ritual, a scarf became the symbol of a lost twin, sent down a mountain stream on a separate and mysterious journey to an unknown and unknowable destination (Nicholas, 2008). In another ceremony, which I attended, a large candle was lit to represent the strong Alpha energy of the survivor. Close by, a tiny Beta candle was lit and allowed to burn for a while. After some words of farewell to her little lost twin sister, the survivor and myself had a surprisingly strong sense of Someone moving on, as the little candle was extinguished, leaving the larger candle burning alone. The survivor described this experience as ‘transformational’, and, indeed, her life has been radically transformed since then.

Conclusion

This exploration of the attachment bond with a lost twin has been intended to illustrate how early in life our attachment bonds are created. More and more research is being published about the lives of wombtwin survivors (**Gibson, Ungerer, Leslie, Saunders, & Tennant, 1998; De Pascalis et al., 2008**) and this is revealing a probable explanation for attachment difficulties that has not yet been fully explored. When separation anxiety, enmeshed relationships, and co-dependency become a source of extreme pain and difficulty for individuals, and this is resistant to therapeutic intervention or help, it is possible that, even

at considerable personal cost, they are keeping alive Someone special and extremely precious, who died a very long time ago. Once the truth of the lost twin is acknowledged, then the healing journey can begin.

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