

Could YOU be a womb twin survivor?



Althea Hayton



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This article sets out some of the many ways in which womb twin survivors can identify themselves. There are two groups of statements, which relate to the physical evidence and the psychological evidence, respectively.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

I know my twin was stillborn or miscarried

In this case everyone will probably know that you once had a twin, but you may not have been told. It may be possible to establish this from medical records. If you have been told, your family may not realise what this loss has meant to you.

If your twin was lost as a result of an early miscarriage, it may not have occurred to your parents to tell you. It is possible that no one except your mother knows anything about it. If you have older siblings, they may remember your mother thinking she had miscarried the whole pregnancy, but remaining pregnant after all.

My mother had vaginal bleeding in early pregnancy

It is possible that your mother had more than one episode of bleeding, without passing anything recognisable. This may be a sign that more than one

embryo was lost.

Rosie was about eight weeks pregnant but started to have some bleeding so the Doctor advised bed rest. When the bleeding stopped she went for a scan. There was something still in the womb and a curettage was suggested. On the day it was scheduled, she called in at the doctor's on the way to the hospital. She had taken a sample that morning, so the doctor carried out a pregnancy test. It was positive. Her daughter was born seven months later.

I was conceived by IVF with multiple embryo implantation

It was once usual to introduce several embryos into the the womb at once, in order to increase the possibilities of an IVF pregnancy. Even today, more than one embryo is introduced as a routine. If you were conceived by IVF in the early days of IVF, the chances are that you are the survivor of a multiple pregnancy. The incidence of twinning, both identical and fraternal, is increased by IVF.

It may be also that a multiple pregnancy achieved by IVF was reduced to twins by means of selective foetocide and you are the survivor. A twin pregnancy may be reduced to a singleton birth by this method, especially if one of the twins has a congenital abnormality. The bodies of any embryos selected for foetocide remain in the womb until birth.

The incidence of monozygotic twinning following assisted conception procedures is higher than in the

general population. As “pregnancy reduction” is a recent development, most of the survivors of this procedure are children of less than ten years old - they are all womb twin survivors.

I have an ultrasound scan image showing a “vanished twin”.

If you were conceived before 1980, it is unlikely that a scan would have been made. If one was made, you may have been given the scan picture, or it may still be in your parents’ possession. It would be worth seeing, if it still exists. For instance, Ali was told about her twin when she was a young child. In her parents’ photograph album there is a picture of the first scan, that shows a vague image of Ali’s lost twin. She often wonders why she was the one chosen to live.

Donna was about 6 years old when she overheard her mother telling a friend that Donna was a twin but the other embryo just vanished. Donna never thought about it until ten years later, when she did some research and learned about ‘vanishing twins’, then all of a sudden some things made sense.

A fetus papyraceous was found attached to my placenta at birth

If you were born before 1980 it is very unlikely that the presence of a fetus papyraceous would have been noticed, registered or spoken of to your parents. However, there may be something in your birth records.

I have one or more growths containing the remains of my twin

Dermoid cysts and teratomas containing bones, teeth and hair have been found in all parts of the body, even the brain. These are probably all that remains of an identical twin, who died and was absorbed into the survivor's embryonic body as it was being formed.

Sheila was always fascinated by twins from a very young age and would pretend she had a twin. When she was little, she always wanted a sister and would beg her mother to have a sister. It felt like something was missing. When she was 13 she started getting a bad pain on her lower right side.

As she got older the pain got worse. After she graduated from high school, the pain got so severe that she went to the hospital. They took out a dermoid cyst a little bit bigger than a softball. They said it had contained teeth and hair. That was the first time she had ever heard about the vanishing twin theory, but it explained a lot about her.

Another tiny amniotic sac was found attached to my placenta at birth

These days the placenta is examined carefully and the parents informed of any signs of a "vanished" twin. The sac is usually empty but may contain some remains of a twin.

My mother took drugs to stimulate ovulation

When drugs have been taken to stimulate ovulation, the chances of conception are greatly increased. However, the chances of a multiple pregnancy are increased also. This may be undetected if the other embryos die away and “vanish” shortly after implantation or before the first scan was made.

A failed attempt was made to abort the whole pregnancy, but I survived

Before the 1960s, the most common method of abortion was to puncture the amniotic sac and trigger a miscarriage. Alternatively, various chemicals were applied to the cervix to induce a miscarriage. Otherwise, the mother may have been given some medicine to drink to trigger a miscarriage. The usual method today is either a hormonal drug which induces miscarriage or a surgical operation using a suction tube which removes the contents of the uterus.

There have been several such cases where a twin has managed to survive and has been born alive with no physical ill-effects, but understandably the survivors don't wish their stories to be made public. From their stories, it seems that there may or may not be bodily damage to the survivor, but there is invariably some significant psychological trauma.

My placenta was abnormal in some way

Placentas vary in size and shape. If a placenta is very large and thick, it is possible that two placentas have become fused. When the placenta is examined, there are sometimes marks on it or nodules attached, which

are clues to the existence of a lost twin. It takes expert knowledge to diagnose a “vanished” twin from this evidence. These days, histologists examine placentas carefully after birth and a surprising number of “vanished” twins are being discovered in this way.

When Jade was born her placenta was remarkably large and thick. Jade’s mother Ina has always wondered if she had been carrying twins. Ina was very large at an early stage of pregnancy but because this was her third pregnancy, she put it down to weakness of her abdominal muscles. Jade is developing into an exceptional person in many ways and is quite different from her siblings. It is possible that Jade is a womb twin survivor.

There are fraternal twins in my family

If there are fraternal twins in your family, the chances of a twin pregnancy are greatly increased. Fraternal twinning does run in families. Where twinning appears to miss a generation it may be that there was a twin pregnancy but only one survived. There can be whole families of womb twin survivors who know nothing about it at all! Now you have realised this about your own birth, other members of the family may become interested enough to find out for themselves.

Liza has fraternal twins and identical twins on her mother’s side of the family. Her mother had some bleeding early on in pregnancy and this is a sign

that Liza may be a womb twin survivor. She has always been a tomboy, which leads her to believe that her twin was male. Taking on certain gender-specific characteristics of a womb twin of the opposite sex is quite common among womb twin survivors.

I have some signs and symptoms of cerebral palsy

Cerebral palsy has been very closely related to being the survivor of an identical pair. In fact if one examines the prevalence statistics for cerebral palsy - which are scanty and impossible to verify - it seems as if a great many monozygotic womb twin survivors have some signs of this condition.

I have one or more birth defects

Any kind of physical defect may have been caused by twinning in the womb. That may include neural tube defects and epilepsy.

Kyla was born with a propensity toward seizures. Even today she is not sure what the root of the problem is and the neurologist still questions it. The seizures didn't begin until she was 19 years of age, but she has been told that her type of epilepsy is usually a familial thing, meaning that there was probably some fault present from birth.

When my mother was pregnant with me, twins were diagnosed by a doctor without ultrasound.

Doctors can diagnose twins in the early months when they hear two heartbeats or simply by feeling the size of the uterus by palpating the abdomen. Before ultrasound, twins were often missed, even until later in pregnancy. An X-ray was the only way to be quite sure how many babies were present.

Alice was told about womb twin survivors one day by a friend, who thought it might be the answer to her long-term health problems of chronic fatigue, depression and anxiety. The idea struck an immediate chord with her because her mother had previously told her that the doctor thought that she might be carrying twins. She had an x-ray which showed only one baby, but Alice now thinks there may have once been two babies there and one died.

I was born prematurely and very small for my gestational age

The death of a twin in pregnancy can put the whole pregnancy at risk, especially if the twins are an identical pair. The surviving twin may be born early.

Audrey was born prematurely. She has both identical and fraternal twins in her family, and the doctors told her mother that she was having twins. She delivered a placenta three months early

- and nearly delivered Audrey, who just managed to hang on in the womb for another six weeks. She was very small at birth but she was called a "real survivor" by the nurses in the ICBU. She grew very rapidly to a normal weight and height. For her whole childhood she felt strongly that she was a twin, and at thirteen her suspicions were confirmed.

There are identical twins in my family

Identical twinning is quite random and does not tend to be inherited, but there has been an increase in the number of identical twins in the last twenty years, associated with artificially assisted reproduction. It is widely thought that left-handed people are identical womb twin survivors who lost a twin.

Cathy is left-handed, and can mirror write as well as write the correct way. She has no idea where that gift came from, but she was doing it at a very early age and can take dictation backwards as well.

I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia or autism

As we have seen, bleeding in pregnancy is strongly associated with the loss of a twin. Pregnancy problems have been put forward in various research reports as the possible cause of many serious psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia and autism.

Bleeding in pregnancy has been mentioned in

several of these reports, but none that I have been able to find so far has mentioned the loss of a twin in the womb as a cause of these disorders.

According to a study carried out in the 1970s, about 1% of the population of the world has been diagnosed with schizophrenia at sometime in their lives. This report makes clear that schizophrenia affects people of all races, classes and cultures, but then it would, if it originates before birth. Characteristically, schizophrenics do not expect to live very long and hear voices in their heads.

Sue had a dermoid cyst in her knee, that was surgically removed. After the operation a little voice in her head, that she had always assumed was her twin, fell silent and never spoke again.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS

I am hypersensitive, both physically and psychologically

Womb twin survivors are often extremely sensitive to their environment, especially certain chemicals, foods or stimulant drugs such as caffeine. They have acute hearing and general awareness and are easily distressed by too much activity, stress or stimulation going on around them. It seems as if their characteristic preference for privacy arises out of the need to recover from over-stimulation.

Womb twin survivors tend to be psychologically sensitive. They are acutely aware of other people and very sensitive to their moods, particularly where

this involves sadness or hurt. They react strongly to the atmosphere generated within a group of people. They use their acute sensitivity to others to cool down a tense situation. They appear to be “difficult” because they are oversensitive, over-anxious and even neurotic.

Hilary tells me that she is extremely sensitive to people, to the point that it startles her sometimes. She does love crowds and people but can get overwhelmed and soon has to back off. She is much bolder now and more confident but still recognises her fragility as a person.

I am highly intuitive and very empathetic

An outworking of this characteristic hypersensitivity is strong intuition and empathy. One cannot exist without the other. Intuition is the ability to constantly scan other people in such minute detail that an enormous quantity of data is being gathered every second. As a result of this stream of available data, womb twin survivors can make an instant assessment of whether anyone is to be trusted or if they are in any personal difficulty.

Empathy, on the other hand, is the desire to reach out to another person and make some kind of connection with them by entering into and sharing their psychic space. Empathy is a complex skill, consisting largely of the desire to make a continual series of intuitive guesses about the other person’s experience of being themselves. As the relationship deepens, the empathy is informed by more and more

data, gathered by means of intuitive awareness.

Womb twin survivors have an uncanny ability to “read” a room or a person, which can be unnerving for those present. In a group, they are acutely aware of the subtleties of any power games being played out. They can often predict trouble before it starts and make a pre-emptive move to avoid it.

Like so much in the life of a womb twin survivor, highly developed empathy is both a blessing and a curse. Womb twin survivors get tangled up in other people’s lives because of their ability to “pick up” on the feelings of another person. They slip easily into co-dependent relationships. They can end up as unwitting vehicles for the unexpressed, unacknowledged feelings of other people, unless they stay alert to their own propensity to take other people’s feelings upon themselves. Without a considerable degree of self knowledge, they are easily scape-goated and become very vulnerable to abuses of power.

I believe that twins in the womb communicate by intuition and empathy, and womb twin survivors get a crash course in building an intimate relationships over many weeks or even months, before they are born. This consists of continual intuitive guesswork, because there is no language or even full awareness, and delicate negotiation of the shared, cramped womb space. The longer the twins are together in the womb, the deeper the empathetic union becomes and the greater the loss for the survivor if it all ends in tragedy.

I think a lot about death and dying

Womb twin survivors are very concerned with death.

This is not at all surprising if we consider that their first formative experience was being in a very intense, intimate relationship with Someone Else in the womb who died. In later life, womb twin survivors will inevitably be confronted with death or loss once more. At that point, the hidden memory of loss is triggered.

The most traumatic bereavement for an womb twin survivor is the death of a person with whom they have had a very close bond and an intimate relationship. Faced with too many deaths at once, some of them find it hard to cope without some emotional support. They grieve deeply and often for a very long time.

Bereavement counselling is of great value to womb twin survivors. In the private intimacy of the counselling relationship, they are able to grieve intensely. It may not be death that does it: divorce, disability and redundancy are all losses that can trigger deep distress, despair and depression.

I am a very emotional person

Womb twin survivors can be rather histrionic in the way they express their feelings. They can go "over the top" with emotions. They may weep excessively at a film that leaves others just a bit tearful; they may get terribly hurt by a small slight or be very easily provoked into anger. As babies they may cry a lot about nothing; as toddlers they may be afraid of being left alone, especially in the dark. As children they may suddenly become withdrawn and feel a dark mood of despair, a fear of death coming upon them for no particular reason. They may seem "moody".

As teenagers they may hide away, weeping for hours for some invented reason, not really knowing why. As adults they may be plunged into "black dog" depression that comes and goes with no apparent cause. The whole demeanour of womb twin survivors changes with their moods, which can oscillate wildly between despair and joy over a short period of time.

I am always very busy and get exhausted

Womb twin survivors feel driven by some inner force to live life to the full and overflowing. They do not always recognise this as survivor guilt. However, they are very aware of the fleeting nature of time and the shortness of life. They often have two or more jobs, or have several part-time occupations at once. They always have some new idea or project in mind. They are bursting with new ideas that demand creative expression.

They become exhausted, not only by their busy lives, but by the added demands they put on themselves. The worst thing in the world is to let anyone down. They spend a lot of time helping other people. They start new projects with great gusto but quickly run out of steam. They often do not carry things through. They are great initiators, as long as someone else can come and take over at a later date and bring the whole thing to fruition.

I love two-ness

Womb twin survivors love to be one of a pair. As children they may show a preoccupation with twins, or frequently point out "two things the same."

They may seek out opposite extremes to complete their lives. In partnership they may prefer to work with someone who is the opposite of themselves, or be deeply attracted to someone born on the same day.

They seem to have a split personality, and may joke about it. The two-ness they need is expressed inwardly in the way they live and behave. For example, they may be very different at home and among their family from how they are at work. This may be confusing for them: they seem to have two very contrasting sides to their personality and cannot be sure which is "me" and which is "not me". It is characteristic of a womb twin survivor to complain: "I don't know who I am!"

I have a strong, imaginary inner life

In their frantic rush through life, womb twin survivors can still find it remarkably easy, if necessary, to sit still and quiet, drawing on a little-used part of themselves to do this. They can be impatient people with a strong capacity for endurance and survival in difficult conditions. They may talk about "a strong inner life" that enables them to endure pain, long periods of forced inactivity or solitude.

I have some kind of problem with food and eating

Many womb twin survivors have a problem with food. This is such a strong association that I am tempted to believe that all people with a food problem are womb twin survivors! Problems with food include sensitivity to various food ingredients, eating disorders and

obesity. Some womb twin survivors gain a lot of weight by “eating for two” and change shape entirely as a result, and then struggle to lose it again and “become another person.” This may be repeated several times over a lifetime. I believe that there is a very special, coded message in weight gain and loss that goes far back, to the time before birth.

I feel different from other people

It doesn't take womb twin survivors many years to realise that they see the world differently from other people. Other people may notice this too, and many womb twin survivors are seen as “strange”, “the odd one out” or even “weird”. If they want to fit in, they may pretend to be the same as everyone else, but they do often wonder why other people do not see the world the way they do.

Laura was always considered peculiar, strange, different, unique or unusual. She was regarded as having a “colourful existence”. Her strangeness attracted people to her, but they seemed to be in awe of the way she was. That held them always at a distance, so she was isolated in her strangeness.

I have been told I have a “personality disorder”

Just because womb twin survivors think differently, that doesn't make them crazy. Some womb twin survivors have been diagnosed with a variety of psychiatric “disorders” such as “obsessive compulsive

disorder” or “clinical depression”. These labels suggest some kind of sickness or mental instability. I believe that when the concept of womb twin survivors is introduced into the diagnosis, then things become more rational and clear.

Jo resisted the idea that she may be a womb twin survivor for a long time. She has seen a doctor about her anxiety and insomnia; a spiritual director about the sense of meaninglessness in her life and a healer about the despair and emotional pain that has tortured her every day. When I told her that there may be a simple and logical reason for how she has always felt, she wept with relief.

The idea of a “personality disorder” is quite a neat way to categorise the way so many womb twin survivors feel, but I believe they are not crazy : the way they think is a perfectly rational and logical response to a strange and relatively unusual prebirth experience.

I find it hard to let go

Letting go is a major womb twin survivor concern. Some womb twin survivors have certain beloved possessions that they could not live without. As parents, womb twin survivors find it hard to let go of their need to feel close to their own children. They seem to suffer more from any lack of emotional contact with them than the average parent might.

They can survive if necessary on minimal emotional contact with loved ones, but a complete

absence of contact causes extreme emotional pain: this is just too much of a reminder of the loved one who was lost forever.

I know I am not fulfilling my potential

Womb twin survivors are trying to be two people at once (and maybe three!) and its impossible to do this without compromising one's life somehow. If you feel you are wasting your life, you could be right : perhaps you are deliberately sabotaging any chance that you will ever make anything of your life. Sadly, there are many millions of people who, despite the passing of the years, remain immature and never seem to learn. There may be a sensible and logical reason for this bizarre behaviour - they are womb twin survivors.

I know that my deepest needs are not being met

Since 1954 we have been told that humans have a hierarchy of basic needs that must be met if we are to live a balanced and happy life. Womb twin survivors may deliberately choose not to meet their physical needs. They may starve themselves, not drink enough or rob themselves of sleep.

Then there are safety needs such as a secure home or job : womb twin survivors may choose to upset their parents, landlords or employers, so they get thrown out of their home or fired.

Thirdly, there are social needs, such as a sense of belonging to a group, and the giving and receiving of love: womb twin survivors may choose not to engage in close relationships. They will give love, but have a

problem receiving it.

Fourthly, there is the need for self-respect and recognition by others: womb twin survivors lower their own self-esteem with self-hate and choose to hide away from the world.

Lastly, there is the need to attain one's full potential as a human being: womb twin survivors take steps to sabotage their lives so this will never happen.

Sally has moments of very deep despair and a great sense of aloneness. Since a very small child she has buried herself in painting. She is not sure whether she does this as an escape or just because she loves to paint. This self isolation rules her life. She does not feel at all normal. When she looks at all the happy human beings in the world around her, she knows they do appear to lead far more balance lives than she does.

I know I avoid getting close to other people

Womb twin survivors crave closeness and intimacy, but they have a problem allowing themselves to have it.

Debbie's twin sister was stillborn, strangled by the cord. Debbie remained an only child, and desperately wanted siblings. As a young girl she used to talk to her twin sister at night in bed, in her head. She says that there is no lasting psychological pain, just a deep sadness and an overriding sense of loneliness. She is now married with children of her

own, but she has always been a loner, and treasures her time alone. When she is denied it for too long, she craves some private space.

Womb twin survivors like Debbie lack trust and tend to withdraw. After all, if your first-ever relationship in the womb ended in abandonment, then you would avoid intimacy too.

I feel as if I am a “suffering survivor”

Womb twin survivors live a life of deeply-felt distress that they cannot understand. They may express their sense of being different by means of antisocial or eccentric behaviour. Their strange behaviour makes sure that they are not liked and have no friends. To be the sole survivor is to be alone.

In early adolescence womb twin survivors develop an abnormal obsession with the shortness of life, their own death and the sensation of dying. They tend to be suicidal, not because they are sick, but because their womb twin died and they naturally want to be dead too.

Their pain and distress is not always evident, for they may find ways to anaesthetise it or conceal it. They may manage to fool themselves and others that they are really enjoying life to the full. They probably have to work very hard at being happy, for life itself is a real burden. Their little lost womb twin - perhaps even more than one - is now gone, leaving a lonely and wounded suffering survivor to go on living alone.

Other writing by Althea Hayton

BOOKS

Two Little Birds

Wren Publications 2012

ISBN978-0-9557808-1-3

An illustrated story for young womb twin survivors aged 4-7

A Healing Path For Womb Twin Survivors

Wren Publications 2012

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A pathway to healing for womb twin survivors in thirty steps.

Womb Twin Survivors: the lost twin in the Dream of the Womb

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A comprehensive review of the Womb twin Survivors research project, headed by Althea Hayton

A Silent Cry: Womb twin Survivors tell their Stories

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A collection of sixty personal stories in their own words, written by womb twin survivors

Untwinned: Perspectives on the Death of a Twin Before Birth

Wren Publications 2007

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An anthology of papers about the death of a twin during pregnancy or around birth.

E-BOOKS

Poetry for womb twin survivors (e-book)

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