

TWIN STUDIES: ENHANCING EPIGENETIC EXPLORATION

When I first read about how epigenetic studies help identify significant differences in identical twins, I was thrilled for a number of reasons. First, I was hopeful that the nature/nurture controversy would finally be put to rest. In my view, nature and nurture are inexplicably linked from the time of conception going forward. Moreover, for personal reasons, I felt triumphant that finally there was evidence that identical twins are *not* a matching pair in spite of their duplicate DNA. Growing up as an identical twin, I longed for specific benchmarks and proof to help authenticate my individuality. Unfortunately, so many people believe that monozygotic twins are indistinguishable in every sense of the word and interpret “identical” quite literally when defining twin identity.

Renowned and dedicated scientists around the globe are committed to the study of epigenetics. They are enthused and energized by the contributions their research will make in unravelling and understanding the epigenetic basis of human diseases. Utilizing identical twin pairs from worldwide twin registries, they have made tremendous discoveries about how and why certain genes are turned on and off. This knowledge will eventually allow them to develop targeted treatments for diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and mental health disorders.

As a psychotherapist who specializes in twin issues, I am well versed in the subject of twin loss. The emotional impact of losing one’s twin is unlike singleton sibling loss. In my work with those who have lost their twin, I appreciate the value of epigenetic understanding in helping the surviving twin manage shattering bereavement and guilt. Recognizing, for example, that the epigenetic changes contributing to a twin sister’s terminal cancer are neither predictable nor foreseeable can help mitigate the living twin’s grief and helplessness. Research with multiples benefits multiples as well as the general population in unlocking, decoding, and treating medical mysteries.

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