



For Better or Worse

The death of a child can cause unparalleled marital strain—is divorce inevitable?

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By all accounts, Kerry and Margo Shatto had a good marriage. They supported each other, enjoyed each other's company and, after 22 years of marriage, they were still in love. And, like many couples, Kerry and Margo shared an unbreakable bond—their children.

Parents to three—Shane, Brady and Kelsey—the Shattos were proud and supportive of each of their child's endeavors, but they were particularly heartened by Shane's undertakings. At 18, Shane had become the youngest firefighter in Wyoming—a job for which he had such unabashed passion that he eventually managed to recruit his brother and father as volunteer firefighters.

By his sophomore year at the University of Wyoming, Shane had attacked training for cross-country running with such zeal and determination that he was awarded a spot on the university's cross-country team. Kerry and Margo could not have been more proud of Shane and his academic, professional and personal accomplishments.

So, when it came time for Shane and his teammates to carry out the university's long-held tradition of a road trip to bond as a team, Kerry and Margo were delighted for Shane and the friendships he was developing. It was September 16, 2001, when the team was headed back from their trip. Another student from the same college who was driving with a BAC of .18 percent hit the vehicle carrying the team, causing an explosion that instantly killed all eight young men, including Shane.

Since their son's death, Kerry and Margo's marriage has never been the same.

Grieving Together—and Apart

The death of a child is an intense grief that is virtually impossible to understand.

Bereaved parents face a long period of emotional struggle to reconstruct a devastated life—individually and as a couple.

Grief is an undeniably personal journey. The immense grief a parent experiences, coupled with differences in grieving and coping styles, can hamper a couple's communication, create misunderstanding and produce tension between marital partners.

"Some marriages may get stronger and some may get weaker," says Samuel Marwit, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. "It is important for couples to respect the different ways in which each other copes, and to be non-judgmental of each other's grieving styles. No two people grieve alike, and this is definitely true in marriages."

"Margo and I cope very differently, and it makes it very hard for us share our pain. I go to counseling and look forward to the





Tips for Grieving Couples

- Keep the lines of communication open.
- Assure one another of your commitment to the relationship.
- Share your thoughts and emotions with each other on a regular basis.
- Be mindful of each other's feelings and needs.
- Acknowledge each other's pain and accept your differences in grieving.
- Take time for each other.
- Hug, touch and hold hands—sometimes feelings of concern and caring can't be expressed in words.
- Find ways to have fun together—laughter can be healing.
- Maintain friendships and seek new ones both separately and as a couple.
- Find ways to remember and honor your child together.

grief counseling sessions. I also visit the gravesite frequently and have become very involved with MADD. All of these things are therapeutic and help me tremendously," Kerry says.

"Sometimes it is just too painful to talk about," Margo quietly states. "I tried counseling, but it was too intense for me. I cannot open that wound in that setting every week. It is also difficult and painful for me to visit Shane's gravesite. The results are the complete opposite for me. For me, these are not comforting measures. I don't grieve less than Kerry, just differently.

"Sometimes it is too painful and difficult to comfort each other because we feel the same inconsolable pain, so we tend to grieve apart from each other. It seems easier to cope apart rather than together," Margo says. "I do have a small group of friends whom I feel very supported by. I don't want to burden Kerry with my emotional pain when he has his own to deal with."

"We are struggling," Kerry admits. "It's difficult to meet each other's needs and to grieve apart. The two don't seem to mesh at times. Sometimes, I feel hurt when Margo shares her sadness with her friends, but not with me. We've been married for 22 years and our son's death has been devastating for us to cope with."

Dispelling the Myth

Kerry and Margo are grieving individually and in different ways. And, they are fighting to keep their marriage together. Given their personal and marital struggles, it appears that there is some truth to the perception—divorce is inevitable for a couple whose child dies.

"There is a definite myth that the death of a child leads to divorce, but it's time to dispel that myth," Dr. Marwit says, "because there doesn't seem to be evidence or research to prove it.

"Some bereaved parents are alarmed by the myth of a high divorce rate that they read about or hear from others. They fear that their own marriage is in jeopardy of breaking up in the aftermath of their child's death," he continues. "There is strong support that indicates that a child's death can strain marital relationships, but marital distress and divorce are two different things."

So, if marital distress does not automatically lead to divorce, what can Kerry and Margo do or continue to do to ensure their marriage survives?

Getting Back to 'Normal'

The profound grief that parents continue to experience is bound to affect their marital relationships, as well as other relationships in their life. It does not mean they will remain completely absorbed in their grief and suspend their life for an indefinite period.

Slowly, most individuals will attempt to "normalize" their lives and resume their daily routines, even though reluctantly and with great difficulty. The time that it takes marriages to resume a "normal pattern" varies greatly. There is no timetable for grieving, just as there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

"It is key for couples to understand and accept each other's grief and personal ways of coping. This not only paves the way toward reducing marital strain, but also strengthens the marital bond," Dr. Marwit says.

Tom and Mary Klotzbach have managed to do just that.

Their eldest son, Matt, was killed by a drunk driver while home from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., where he was fulfilling his lifelong dream of becoming a pilot. While Tom and Mary have experienced profound grief, they've found a balance in coping as individuals and as a couple.

"Tom and I strive for balance," Mary says. "Time to grieve individually, time together as a family grieving and time together as a couple grieving."

"Mary is more verbal with her feelings, while I tend to be more quiet," Tom explains. "There are some days that we can't talk about it with each other, but that doesn't mean we aren't committed to each other. Sometimes she calls me an 'old grump' when I don't want to talk, but we really try to respect each other's space.

"On occasion, I feel guilty because I was driving the night of the crash," Tom says of the night a drunk driver struck their car. "There are so many unbearable questions of 'Why?' and 'What if?' but Mary reminds me that it wasn't my fault."



Generally, I think we grieve separately, but we try to be aware of each other's needs, and come together to lift each other up when one of us is really down," he says.

Getting Through It—Together

Bereaved parents should remember that the journey takes longer than most people think, and it takes more energy than they can ever imagine. And, as a couple, it can thrust them into unknown territory, but there are things that can be done to help in healing.

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"Bereaved couples need to find ways to get through, not over, their grief and to reconstruct their lives," Dr. Marwit says. "The good news is that it appears that the majority of marital relationships survive the strain brought about by a child's death and may even be strengthened in the long run, especially if the marriage was reasonably strong before the death."

"We are being very respectful of the different ways in which we cope, but we are hopeful that in the future we will be able to communicate more openly with each other," Margo says.

"We have a strong commitment to ourselves and our family to get through it for the long haul," Kerry says. "Sometimes we get through it together and sometimes we get through it apart, but we always have love in our hearts for one another."

"It doesn't get easier, but you get used to it," Tom says.

"In some ways, Tom and I have a better understanding and appreciation of each other," Mary says. "Every day, we face the challenge of the enormity of life without Matt, which seems unbearable, but our faith in God is our hope."

Participate in Research to Understand a Special Kind of Grief

Samuel Marwit, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, is conducting research aimed at helping bereaved parents.

By identifying similarities and differences in the reactions of bereaved parents as they relate to the special circumstances surrounding their child's death and on ways of coping, his research could help future bereaved parents and professionals working with them.

If you are interested in being part of Dr. Marwit's research project, please contact the MADD national victim services department at 1-800-GET-MADD.

Dr. Marwit is a nationally known grief researcher whose work is directed at identifying avenues of constructive coping for parents bereaved by a variety of circumstances. His findings have been widely distributed in publications and professional journals.

Kerry and Margo, Tom and Mary, and thousands of other couples like them have learned that, yes, their marriage is not the same as it was before the death of their child. But, that doesn't mean it isn't better.

They have lost a child, not each other. Despite their fears and the myths, divorce after the death of a child is not inevitable. And if, as a couple, they are willing to respect each other's way of coping, practice patience as they grieve, and rely on each other for comfort and understanding, there is hope that they will come through it together...stronger than ever. ■