

Breakaway

The Truth About Divorce After The Loss Of A Child

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If any of you have ever played sports competitively or recreationally or simply have become sports enthusiasts over the course of your life, you will be very familiar with the term breakaway.

It is one of the most thrilling moments in sports. You break away from the defense and face the goaltender one on one; it's a fight to the finish. It's a dual between you and their last line of defense. You fly in full speed and make your move. A hush comes over the crowd. It's all or nothing for both teams. A goal or save ensues in the flurry that follows and it either results in the crowd raising to their feet in applause or falling to their seats in disappointed groans.

Breakaways are pivotal moments when the fate of the game rests in your hands, it's a make or break moment.

All too often we hear people quote grief principals, give advice or simply say things that are quoted as truth but facts and experience do not support the statements.

One of these misconceptions that needs to be broken away from was expressed to us during our follow up meeting with the physician at the hospital after Rachele's death.

The physician was a kind, compassionate man that was very highly respected and very experienced in pediatric leukemia. We were so

glad to have him in charge of Rachele's care and we know he did everything possible to fight the disease.

It was part of the hospital's protocol to meet with parents after the death of a child to explain details about the treatment and to answer any questions or concerns parents might have. It was while concluding our time together that the Doctor ended by warning us that 8 out of 10 marriages fail after the death of a child. It was a disheartening way to end a very difficult day.

Through the years we have heard a number of health care professionals quote this statistic and have found a number of websites reporting divorce rates among bereaved parents to be between 40%-80% (without documentation).

Many bereaved parents that have sat with us over the past 27 years have shared those statistics about divorce and feared they would become part of that statistic. From our earliest days in working in supporting the bereaved we have heard this so called conventional wisdom spoken.

There is no question that relationships face additional pressures after the death of a child. Some parents have described the feeling as being in a pressure cooker. For those that have not lost a child there may be an intuitive sense of how stressful relationships can become; all of which may perpetuate this misconception.



In a study conducted on behalf of Compassionate Friends, 72% of couples that had lost a child remained married. Of the 28 % left, only 12% ended in divorce, the remaining 16% percent lost a spouse through death and only one in four indicating that the impact of the death of a child contributed to their divorce.

In another study conducted by Murphy, Johnson and Lohan in the State of Washington they found that the 5 year divorce rate of bereaved parents was 9%, while the statewide divorce rate hovered around 60%.

In our own experience in sitting with hundreds of couples over the past 27 years we have observed that only three of these couples that we know of, have divorced and in each case there were pre-existing complications that existed in the marriage. This emphasizes the need for bereaved parents to seek support and understanding of their individual challenges in the loss of their child.

It is quite possible that Rachele's attending physician had read some early studies on the divorce rate of bereaved parents or, as so many have done in the past, picked up society's messages about grief and loss that are just not true.

We left the Doctor's office that day with a great deal of fear in our hearts, thinking that not only had we lost Rachele but now we have a high probability of losing each other.

Information promotes understanding but wrong or inaccurate information can sidetrack us on our journey of grief and intensify the fear and anxiety we feel as bereaved parents who are struggling to learn to reconcile our grief and begin to live our lives without the physical presence of our child.

It is truth that promotes understanding and it is truth that will inevitably set us free to mourn in healthy ways; giving ourselves permission to acknowledge our differences without judgement while honoring the unique relationships that we individually had with the child we have lost.

So we want to break away from some of that old way of thinking that perpetuated the myth that after the death of a child marriages are doomed to fail. Instead we move to understand that even in the midst of our pain, with the support of those around us, relationships can flourish and deepen if we choose to mourn well. Like a breakaway in a game these are pivotal moments in grief. "If we mourn well we can live well and love well again" (Dr. Alan Wolfelt) and in our search for meaning discover a whole new depth of love and understanding for those that are closest to us.