

We Lost Our Baby, but We Didn't Want to Lose Our Marriage

Men and women tend to grieve differently; understanding those differences helped us make it through.

[Tanisha Garnier](#)

My husband and I tried to conceive for a year before seeking medical help. I was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), and we began preliminary fertility treatments. During that time, I was in such a pit of despair. The wait brought out the very worst in me. I balked at the mention of God's sovereignty and refused to open my mouth to sing of his goodness. Instead I countered, *It is not well. He is not good. He will let me down.*

In the midst of my hopelessness and anger, the Lord was gracious with me. Over time, my affections grew for him once again as he tore down the lies I was clinging to with the truth of his Word. I chose to believe that he is good, even when it seemed he was withholding good from me. Later, God performed a miracle in my heart, and then in my womb, when I became pregnant in May 2016 after my third round of fertility treatment.

During the majority of pregnancy my body did exactly what it was created to do. After a bleeding scare at 10 weeks was resolved, I hoped for an uneventful remainder of the pregnancy. But everything came to a screeching halt one evening while cooking dinner when my water broke at 21 weeks and 2 days. Two days later, we met our son, Xavier Lawrence, who lived ten short, sweet minutes.

When Grief Threatens a Marriage

For many couples who deal with infant loss, the early stages of grief are merely about surviving. Surging emotions pull mourning parents in and out like the tide. While trying to tread the waters of postpartum recovery and infant loss, I became gripped by another fear: losing my marriage. My husband was the one person I wanted—*needed*—to be with me deep in the trenches of grief. When it started to seem like he wasn't fully there with me, fear started grasping at my throat. I felt jealous of his ability to compartmentalize the loss; he could keep his grief in a neat box while my grief was strewn all about and consumed my every thought. I was hurt, lonely, and tempted to believe the one person who knows me better than anyone else did not understand my pain.

With my background in marriage and family therapy, I know too well the history of research that supports this fear, with early statistics for divorce among bereaved parents as high as 90 percent. Subsequent studies have now [debunked this high claim](#); needless to say, I was still terrified. While the 90 percent figure may not be accurate, the effects of infant loss can certainly have a detrimental impact on marriages and many couples do face the risk of divorce.

In light of this reality, it is no wonder my emotions were in such a downward spiral. Like a shark following the scent of blood, the Enemy pursued my thoughts and whispered lies about my motherhood, my role as a wife, and my femininity as a whole: *You're not ready to be a mother.*

You've failed your husband. He could find a better wife than you, someone to give him living children. I have since learned to silence these lies with truth, but in the early days of grief, they wrecked me—mind and soul.

What has been especially helpful in combatting my fear of losing my marriage is recognizing the unique ways men and women may grieve and express lament. As I began to observe the ways my husband and I were processing the loss of our son, I realized I wasn't alone after all. My husband was hurting too, but he displayed it in a completely different way.

Gender and Bereavement

Men and women tend to differ significantly in their experiences of and expressions of grief. We err if we think the obvious expressions of grief like crying, talking with others about sadness, and depression are the only signals that mourning is taking place. This assumption can limit our purview of those who are bereaved, especially fathers. Oftentimes their signs of grief may take on a more internalized, physical nature. Gastrointestinal issues, chronic pain, changes in blood pressure, insomnia, changes in appetite (significant increase or decrease), addiction/relapse, and [other physical symptoms](#) may signal complications in processing grief, especially for men.

While every person is unique and these generalizations are not true in all cases, here are three key ways men and women tend to grieve differently:

Different sense of connection with the child. In her book [Empty Cradle Broken Heart](#), Deborah Davis points out that during pregnancy, mothers and fathers often feel quite different levels of connection to their child. Fathers tend to have a more abstract perception of the baby until after birth. Mothers, on the other hand, get to feel the baby growing inside of them and experience all the symptoms of pregnancy (such as morning sickness, uterine stretching, pregnancy cravings, and so on). This difference is made even more stark by infant loss as bereaved mothers experience both the pain of grief and the abrupt hormonal changes that come with the end of their pregnancies. It is common for women to deal with heartbreaking continued lactation postpartum as their bodies continue to produce milk for babies who won't need it. Stretch marks are daily reminders of the babies that were once housed in their wombs, postpartum bleeding seems to never end, and fluctuating hormones only exacerbate an already emotionally tumultuous time.

Bereaved fathers, on the other hand, don't experience those physical changes that take place as a result of the loss. They also typically dive back into work quicker than their partners. That does not mean they are unfazed. The ways men engage the emotions of grief are sometimes in stark contrast to their partner's behaviors. Instead of continuous tearfulness, they may become fixated on completing a project in the home, delve further into obligations at work, or choose to escape through television, physical activity, or, worse, through maladaptive addictions.

Cultural expectations regarding emotional expression. A lot of what we see in male-female differences in grief is due to cultural socialization. Davis emphasizes the cultural expectations that allow women to exhibit a wide a range of emotions, while men are typically socialized to be stoic and strong. Therapist and social worker Thomas Bekkers takes this point further, [stating](#), "These conflicting gender messages can carry through one's entire life and may cause

misunderstandings between males and females who are grieving. This can lead to frustration, anger, and feeling isolated in one's grief for both genders.”

In her book [Coping with Infertility, Miscarriage, and Neonatal Loss](#), psychologist Amy Wenzel points out that while women often feel a guilt of perceived failure (“I failed my husband by losing this baby”), men feel guilt of perceived helplessness (“I couldn't do anything to help her or stop it from happening”). This closely mirrors our experience. I was riddled with guilt for “making” my husband deal with this; I grew to hate my body for losing his son. Simultaneously, he was beating himself up for not being able to keep our baby safe in my womb. The guilt manifested differently in each of our experiences; however, with the passage of time, we both recognized the errors of our thinking and became better at identifying when the Enemy was pitting us against one another. The more we leaned into the truth of God's Word and embraced his sovereignty in our lives, the easier it became to let go of the guilt.

Differences in seeking support. As is the case with most high-stress situations, social support is a key factor in coping with infant loss. Wenzel agrees, asserting that social support “is crucial in managing your distress and may even promote growth and healing.” In the first few weeks after Xavier's delivery and death, Victor and I had the support and help of our family and many local friends. Though making it to church every Sunday was difficult, members of our church body intentionally sought us out week after week, which helped us remain rooted despite our inconsistency. We were so very well taken care of in the early days. As time moved on, I was able to connect with other “[loss mamas](#)” who were integral in my healing; they were a source of comfort and hope. I became more involved with online groups and grief forums, even starting a blog around the anniversary of Xavier's birth. I was determined to have healthy support connections.

My husband, on the other hand, was more of a lone ranger in dealing with his pain. I wanted—and even urged—him to find his own tribe, to reach out and find support like I had done. But once again, I was face-to-face with gender differences in how men and women tend to seek support. Bereaved mothers are more likely to connect over [sharing stories](#), talking about our losses, sharing pictures of our babies, and telling our birth stories. Bereaved fathers, on the other hand, are often more private and less inclined to share about the loss even when solicited. As much as I want him to experience the joy of connecting with others who understand, I cannot force these relationships to develop. I've learned to give him the grace to grieve in his own way, and, slowly but surely, he has started opening up more to the men God has placed in his life.

The Answer Is Always ‘Yes’

Last year we traveled to a quiet beach town the weekend that would have marked Xavier's first birthday. We packed a [birthday lantern and candle](#) and shared a memorable night on the balcony of our hotel, overlooking the sea. My heart was content with my husband at my side. As the candle flickered in the night, the deepest question of my broken heart crept up once more: *Lord, are you really good?* I heard him answer me as each wave crashed against the shore: *Yes. Always. In all ways.* Gentle yes after yes after yes pounded on the shoreline of my heart. Today I can close my eyes, think back to that night, smell that vanilla-sweet candle, hear the waves, and cling to that truth. As bereaved parents still awaiting the joy of getting to parent a child here on

earth, it is my prayer that we shine like that candle and display to the world how the light always conquers the darkness.

People regularly say they are amazed at our strength. We are not strong. We are imperfect individuals. Since losing our son, we've hurt and recoiled from one another countless times. At our worst, we are broken, fearful, and self-centered. But as we lean in toward each other with Christ as our center, he continues to hold everything together. In our own strength, we cannot keep our marriage secure after experiencing such a tragedy. But through taking on the attitude of Christ, as we love each other well in these dark places, we can give each other the grace to remember our son in meaningful ways.

Infertility and infant loss are only two sources of grief that many of us will face in this life. Others among us may grieve the loss of a marriage, an estranged parent-child relationship, missed job opportunities, failing health, or a loved one's suffering. Many men and women mourn as they endure a long season of singleness, longing for a spouse. Though each situation is different, a common thread is that feeling of being out of control—that life isn't working out the way we hoped or thought it would.

Just as there is no guarantee that I will mother a living child on this earth, we are not promised a joyous marriage, obedient children, or even perfect health. But there is one promise Christ offers on which we can always rely: the promise of himself. Though we all mourn in some manner, we mourn not as those without hope (1 Thess. 4:13)—and what a hope we have in Christ! It is this hope that collects each tear (Ps. 56:8), comforts each heart (Ps. 34:18), and sustains us through the deepest, darkest valleys (Ps. 23:4). We can confidently trust and put every drop of our hope in a God whose love is vaster than the oceans and who is always—yes, always—good.

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