

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Coping With the Loss of a Spouse

Dr. Marco Coppola was just 33 years old when he lost his wife, Dr. Margaret J. Karnes, to breast cancer on May 4, 1997. The couple had been married almost 7 years.

"I used to think that it would be easier for me to have gone through a divorce, because I would think 'she's alive, and she's well, and she's happy,'" said Dr. Coppola, chair of the department of emergency medicine at Las Colinas Medical Center in Irving, Tex. "But no. Death is the ultimate closure. I don't know why it had to happen, but it did."

The couple met while attending the College of Osteopathic Medicine at Des Moines University in Iowa, and married in 1990; 5 years later, Margaret was diagnosed with a treatable form of breast cancer. Six months later, however, she faced a diagnosis of inflammatory carcinoma, "which carries a death sentence," Dr. Coppola said.

At the time of the second diagnosis, Margaret was an attending physician in the emergency medicine department at Scott & White Memorial Hospital in Temple, Tex. Dr. Coppola worked in the emergency medicine department at nearby Darnall Army Community Hospital in Fort Hood. Their main source of support was one another. "That made us grow together at an exponential rate," he recalled. "We really grew close. We had a dog, and we had our family. Her family was scattered across the country. My family was in New York. And we had our friends. I was in the military at the time," said Dr. Coppola, and "we military people really relied on the close support of our friends."

That support came in the form of prayer, visits, greeting cards, telephone calls, and having dinner with friends. "Margaret and I got in touch with God," he added. "We started improving our spiritual life and asking for strength."

But while Dr. Coppola was coming to terms with his wife's terminal illness, he was still trying to process the loss of his father, who preceded Margaret in death by 6 months. "After Margaret died, I had to grieve the loss of two people, because I really didn't have time to grieve my father's death," he said. "I couldn't be bothered with it because I had to take care of Margaret. I had to be there for her."

When Margaret died at the age of 34, finding support "became even tougher," he acknowledged. "The support I had was what support I could receive from my family. They were in New York and were dealing with the death of my father. Interestingly enough, [out] of all of the friends Margaret and I had before she died, only a handful are left. It's sort of like when

couples divorce," he said. "The friends that we had together as a couple didn't want anything to do with me now that I was single. They felt uncomfortable. Do I blame them for that? No, but that is the reality of the situation."

To take his mind off of things, Dr. Coppola took up model railroading, a hobby that he enjoyed as a child.

A year later, he changed jobs and moved into a new house, "which is something you're not supposed to do [soon after a spouse dies], but I had the job offer of a lifetime," he said. He was given the opportunity to work in the same emergency medicine department at Scott & White Memorial Hospital where Margaret ended her brief career.

He jumped at the chance.

He noted that his grief process may have been easier if he'd devoted more attention to the spiritual side of life after Margaret died. "I fell out of the church, and I wish I hadn't done that," said Dr. Coppola, who



Dr. Marco Coppola and his late wife, Dr. Margaret J. Karnes, still played golf after learning she had inflammatory carcinoma.

is Roman Catholic. "I started going back to Mass regularly when I served in Iraq this past summer. I just wish I had gone back to Mass sooner, because it probably would have helped me a lot more."

The Surgeon's Wife

Dr. Frank G. Moody lost his wife of 40 years, Maja, in December 2004. During the last 10 years of her life, she suffered two heart attacks and five strokes, the last of which rendered her paralyzed and unable to speak for 4 years. The Swedish native was 89 years old when she died.

"She was the ideal surgeon's wife because she always was a patient advocate," Dr. Moody said.

The couple met when he was 36 years old and she was 49. She had never married, and Dr. Moody had three children from a previous marriage. When they wed, his children were aged 9 months, 5 years, and 7 years. Maja was an artist, and primarily painted with oil on canvas.

"She was 1 of 11 children, so she knew a lot about how to take care of the home and the children," said Dr. Moody, professor and chairman of the department of internal medicine at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

Maja spent the final 4 years of her life on

Physicians Not Used to Losing Control

Three years ago, Mary Jo Rapini was lifting weights at the gym when she burst a cerebral aneurysm and collapsed to the floor.

"They couldn't find the aneurysm when they first did the angiogram because my head was so full of blood," recalled Ms. Rapini, a licensed psychotherapist in Houston who is married to a dermatologist. "I was in the ICU for a couple days. On the third day in the ICU, I got really sick and was probably 24-36 hours away from death. That's when I had a near-death experience. Basically, God told me I couldn't stay and had to return to earth. It was beautiful, wherever I was. I protested. I had a lot of grief coming back."

The brush with death shook her husband, Dr. Ronald Rapini, because as a dermatologist, "he knew nothing about cerebral aneurysms, yet since he was a physician, so many times the neurosurgeons did not explain things well to him because they assumed he [already] knew," Ms. Rapini explained.

She added that physicians "are so used to being in control that when they lose a spouse or a spouse is sick, they realize they're not in control at all," she explained. "So they go back to what they know. They go over forms. They do research on the Internet. They call their other colleagues and ask 'do you know anything about this? Can you help me with this?' They understand medicine, but they might not understand what their spouse is dying from."

She recommends that physicians who lose a spouse "take care of themselves, even though they are not used to doing that." Physicians "derive more satisfaction from taking care of other people," she said. "Grief is not something you can delve into ... and get over. Grief is something you have to go through, no matter who you are."

She offered these tips:

► **Maintain social ties.** "Usually if a spouse dies, the physicians work so much that they allow little time for

their social life," Ms. Rapini said. "The wife kind of brings the social people in. So if she's the one that dies, many times the physician is alone and he's not comfortable without his spouse. You may not see this if the female physician loses her spouse. Women seem to socially network more, and this very same network is very supportive in the event [of] a crisis or death. I would encourage [physicians who lose spouses] to go to dinners when they're invited out, to keep those social connections with their friends that they had together."

► **Take some time off from work.**

Ms. Rapini recommends at least a 2-week break from work, "just to get things kind of settled." She called grief "a complicated issue" that affects everyone differently. "A lot of how you grieve depends on how healthy your relationship was," she said. "The healthier it was, the less complicated grief you'll have. Many times people who were in a healthy marriage will get remarried quicker."

► **Be wary of making drastic changes.** Some people want to change their whole routine and residence right away. Others prefer to stay in the same house they shared with their spouse. "Usually what I tell people is, try not to change anything drastic, like your residence, or [marriage status], or quitting your job for at least a year," Ms. Rapini said. "Usually, within a year, you've come full circle and you have new understandings about yourself and you're more stable to make that decision."

► **Get professional help if you need it.** Signs that you may need professional help include irritability, insomnia, feelings of guilt or that you should have done more, significant changes in your eating pattern, and feeling like you're walking around in a daze. "Usually you do feel somewhat dazed, but if that lasts more than 4-6 weeks, I would talk to somebody," she said.

a feeding tube at the family's second home in Sandy, Utah, where a team of three nurses provided her with around-the-clock care. Dr. Moody continued to commute to his full-time surgery post in Houston.

"People kept wondering if I should be expending so much energy and working so hard because they couldn't identify [with] the fact that she was happy," he said. "She was happy to be alive. We had talked about this end-of-life scenario at some length before. The only thing she didn't want to do was have heroic care that wasn't going to be of any benefit."

That time came on Dec. 26, 2004, when Maja died in Dr. Moody's arms at a nearby hospital, with their children present.

All the while, Dr. Moody did not seek support for his bereavement, but shortly af-

ter Maja's death, he did discuss end-of-life care with a group during a retreat in Sundance, Utah. "It was cathartic to be able to speak publicly about her life and her death," he said. "She had 4 years of dying, or 10 years, really. I had to come to grips with this over a period of time. It wasn't a tragic thing that was devastating to me. It was a natural thing in life. We had wonderful years together. She had a fantastic life."

The most important thing for him was returning to work. "It helps, because [then] you don't dwell on things," he said. "At least, that was my style. I had to prepare myself over a 10-year period by keeping the routine. I kept working. I'm 78 years old, and I'm still full time." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau