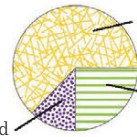
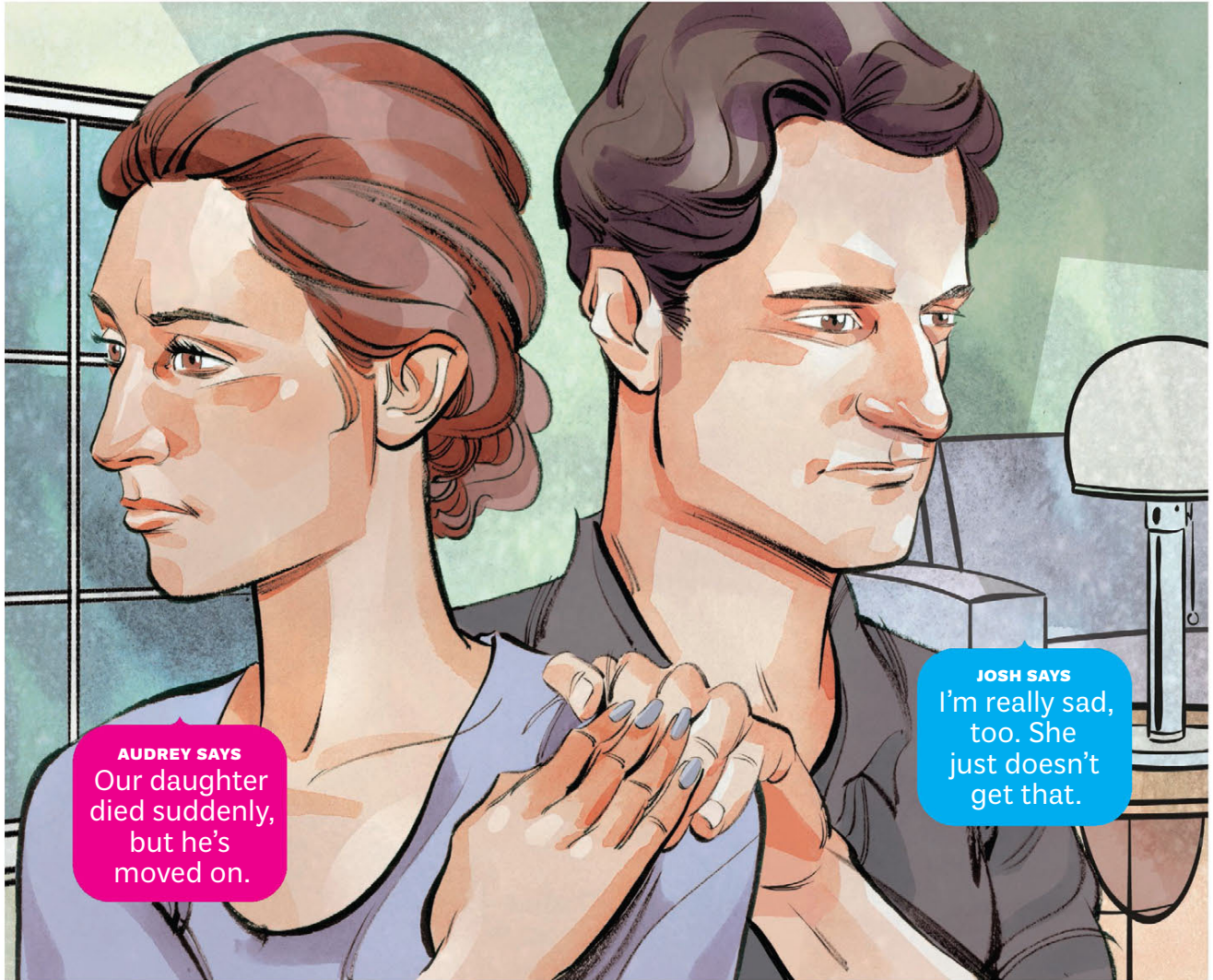


LHI POLL
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Can This Marriage Be Saved?

BY JONATHAN SMALL



AUDREY SAYS
Our daughter died suddenly, but he's moved on.

JOSH SAYS
I'm really sad, too. She just doesn't get that.

THE COUPLE

Audrey: 38, stay-at-home mom

Josh: 40, chef

Married: 15 years

Kids: Sawyer, 5, and Phoebe, 2

THE COUNSELOR

Chandrama Anderson

Palo Alto, California

THE BACKGROUND

Audrey and Josh's lives were shattered when their 2-year-old daughter died suddenly. Their different ways of coping threaten to destroy their marriage.

♥ **AUDREY** I'd always wanted to adopt a child, and the huge number of abandoned girls in China really moved me. We've been blessed with a biological son, so Josh and I thought it would be wonderful to give him a sister. We traveled to China to pick up Grace when she was 9 months old. The connection was immediate. She wanted to be with us all the time and really loved her big brother.

♥ **JOSH** Things were great until just after Grace's first birthday when she got sick and had a febrile seizure. We

rushed her to the ER and, much to our relief, the doctors told us this type of seizure was not uncommon in children under 5 and that some young kids have multiple seizures over the course of a few years. A few months later the seizures returned, but they were much more intense, which really scared us. The doctors had to put Grace in a medically induced coma to calm down her brain. She was in the ICU for several days and it was incredibly stressful, but the doctors were hopeful that she would wake up and that we'd have a better diagnosis of the problem.

☛ **AUDREY** But Grace never woke up. Her brain stopped functioning, and we took her off life support 24 hours later. Looking back on that awful day, I see that Josh and I started grieving differently right away. We each held Grace in our arms to say good-bye, but I didn't want to let her go. I held her for over two hours while Josh just paced around—he wanted desperately to get out of that hospital room.

☛ **JOSH** To me, the baby lying there that day just wasn't Grace. I understand sitting in the hospital with someone who's sick, but she had already passed on. Sawyer was waiting for us at home and we needed to be there for him.

☛ **AUDREY** I'm still shocked at how he reacted. Putting Grace down and leaving that hospital room was excruciatingly painful, but Josh didn't seem to be affected. He was already on to the next thing, trying to find something life-affirming and redemptive in her death rather than being there to grieve with me.

The next few months were absolutely horrible. I didn't want to get out of bed. I didn't want to talk to anyone. The only thing that kept me going was my son, Sawyer. Josh tried to explain to me how he was coping, in hopes, I guess, of making me feel better. He told me how

chaos. Yes, what happened to Grace is absolutely terrible, but I can't undo it so I'm going to utilize all this sad energy and try to create something good. One of the things I've done is connect with friends who have also suffered a traumatic loss. Talking about Grace with them has been helpful. I want to be inspired by someone who has lived through this kind of tragedy.

Meanwhile, Audrey has become obsessed with finding out if we did all the right things for Grace: Was our treatment plan correct? Should we have done more? Did we do too much? She's constantly questioning our decisions, going online to research seizures and talking to pediatric neurologists. We met with the doctors from Grace's hospital for two hours, and they answered all her questions, but as soon as we got back home she thought of about 10 more questions she wanted to ask. I said, "Our daughter is dead. We loved her so much but we can't bring her back. Even if we find out that the doctors screwed up and made the wrong decision, are we going to take them to court? How is finding out more going to solve anything?"

☛ **AUDREY** It's important for me to understand what happened to get a sense of closure. Josh talks about finding the good in the bad, but it seems

I'm feeling may not seem logical, but does that make it any less real?

☛ **JOSH** Everything is so black and white with her. In Audrey's mind, if you say that Grace's death had meaning, that's the same as celebrating her death. Audrey just wants to ruminate on all the bad things, to somehow reverse engineer what happened so she can make sense of it. I feel completely disconnected to her. It's like I've lost Grace and now I've lost my wife, too. Audrey has always had trouble expressing her feelings but now she's become totally withdrawn. We don't talk and our sex life is nonexistent. It's only been a few months since Grace died, but we're already so distant that I've convinced her that we need to get couples counseling.

THE COUNSELOR

When I first met Josh and Audrey, they were completely disconnected. I had an idea of what they were going through, since I've also lost a baby. To start, I met with them once as a couple, and then once individually to get a feel for who they are without their partner around.

Audrey was grieving in a very deep, introverted way. After Grace died, she believed that letting go of her pain would somehow be letting go of Grace—a betrayal she couldn't bear. She was depressed and cried a lot, and she resented Josh for not feeling the same way. The day Grace died, Audrey felt guilty for letting her go and walking away from the hospital. She tortured herself about this constantly, wondering if there was something else she could have done. She wanted answers, which is common for many parents who've lost a child.

Josh's approach to grief was more action-based. While Audrey coped by withdrawing, he needed to talk about his problems with other people, move on with his life, and keep busy. He talked about being grateful for Grace and Sawyer. But that same gratitude was also a defense mechanism he learned as a kid to avoid confrontation. He was scared to feel such strong emotions and when he saw Audrey in that kind of pain, his reaction was to try and fix it, which just made her even more withdrawn.

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grateful he was to have had Grace in our lives and what a gift she was because she showed us how much we have to be thankful for. That made me even angrier and more withdrawn. I don't want a gift. I want Grace back! The more Josh tried to make everything okay, the more I resented him.

☛ **JOSH** Audrey just wants to wallow in sadness, and I can't do that. I have to find something positive in all the

like he just wants to make himself feel better. He took a self-help workshop a few months after Grace died and when he got home he told me how great it was. Good for him, but those meetings just aren't for me. They seem really self-indulgent. Josh would rather run away than face his feelings honestly, because that would be too painful. So he's always trying to reason with me, trying to logically explain my dark thoughts away. Yes, I can see that what

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Share / Relationships

After our individual meetings we continued with couples therapy. The ultimate goal was for Josh and Audrey to understand that they're not alone, and that their similarities are just as powerful as their differences. I wanted to teach them to really listen to each other and to respond with empathy—not criticism or judgment. For the first few months I simply gave them the space to talk, cry and tell their story over and over again. I mostly listened but every so often I'd interject with some gentle guidance. For example, Audrey would shut down and drift off at times so I would say, "I understand that this is very painful but can you come back and tell

Audrey for his father. He interpreted his wife's silence or anger at him as a personal failure. Now that he's more aware of this, he's working on having a little compassion for himself. He doesn't take Audrey's grief as personally as he once did. We also worked on his fear of expressing intense feelings, and he was able to have a few emotional breakdowns during our sessions, which were definitely therapeutic.

Audrey's mom was a Holocaust survivor who was depressed all her life. As a result, Audrey was expected to raise herself, tiptoe around her mother and not show any feelings or she'd risk triggering a manic episode.



us how you're feeling?" Josh, on the other hand, would try to fix her grief immediately, so I'd tell him, "I know it's really painful to see your wife this way, but don't give suggestions. Just breathe and let her know you really hear and understand her."

A lot of their negative reactions to each other were rooted in how they were raised. Josh grew up with an emotionally distant father who rarely gave him any attention. He assumed that his dad was angry at him all the time and, as a result, he was always trying to fix things and make him happy, and then he would hate himself for not succeeding. In therapy he began to realize that he was substituting

This led to tremendous anxiety that she carried into adulthood. Her response to any stressful situation is to freeze and then shut down.

I also noticed that Audrey seemed depressed. She wasn't sleeping and had no interest in seeing her friends. Since mental illness runs in her family, I was especially aware of the warning signs. She started taking an antidepressant and an anti-anxiety medication, which helped a great deal. She also began to open up more, especially once Josh stopped trying to micromanage her problems and just listen to her. This made her feel safer. We also worked on her need for concrete answers about Grace's

THE ULTIMATE GOAL WAS FOR JOSH AND AUDREY TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEY'RE NOT ALONE, THAT THEIR SIMILARITIES ARE JUST AS POWERFUL AS THEIR DIFFERENCES. I WANTED TO TEACH THEM TO REALLY LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.

death. She began to accept the truth that it's not rational for children to die before their parents, so she'll never get a rational explanation.

With my guidance, Josh and Audrey come up with rituals that they share to honor Grace's life. For example, to cope with the anniversary of her death, they visited the emergency workers who brought her to the hospital, went to the cemetery where she is buried and had a quiet lunch in Chinatown to celebrate her heritage. They both found this to be so healing that they plan to repeat the tradition every year.

Even more importantly, and completely on their own, they decided to adopt again. They wanted Sawyer to have a sister and felt strongly that another child is what they needed in their lives, too. So they returned to China and adopted an 11-month-old baby girl named Phoebe. Even though it was hard for Audrey and Josh to go back to the place where they first met

Grace, it was also an incredibly healing and comforting experience.

Audrey is engaged in life again, and she's really connecting with Josh. Josh is the happiest I've ever seen him. They respect each other's differences and have let go of their resentments. And they've both found wonderfully positive ways to remember Grace. Audrey volunteers as a grief counselor at the hospital where Grace died, and she and Josh speak at seminars for parents who've experienced the loss of a child. "I feel so much closer to Josh now," says Audrey. "I don't take the way he grieves as a personal affront anymore. He cares as deeply as I do—I've learned that we just show it in different ways." **5**

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