

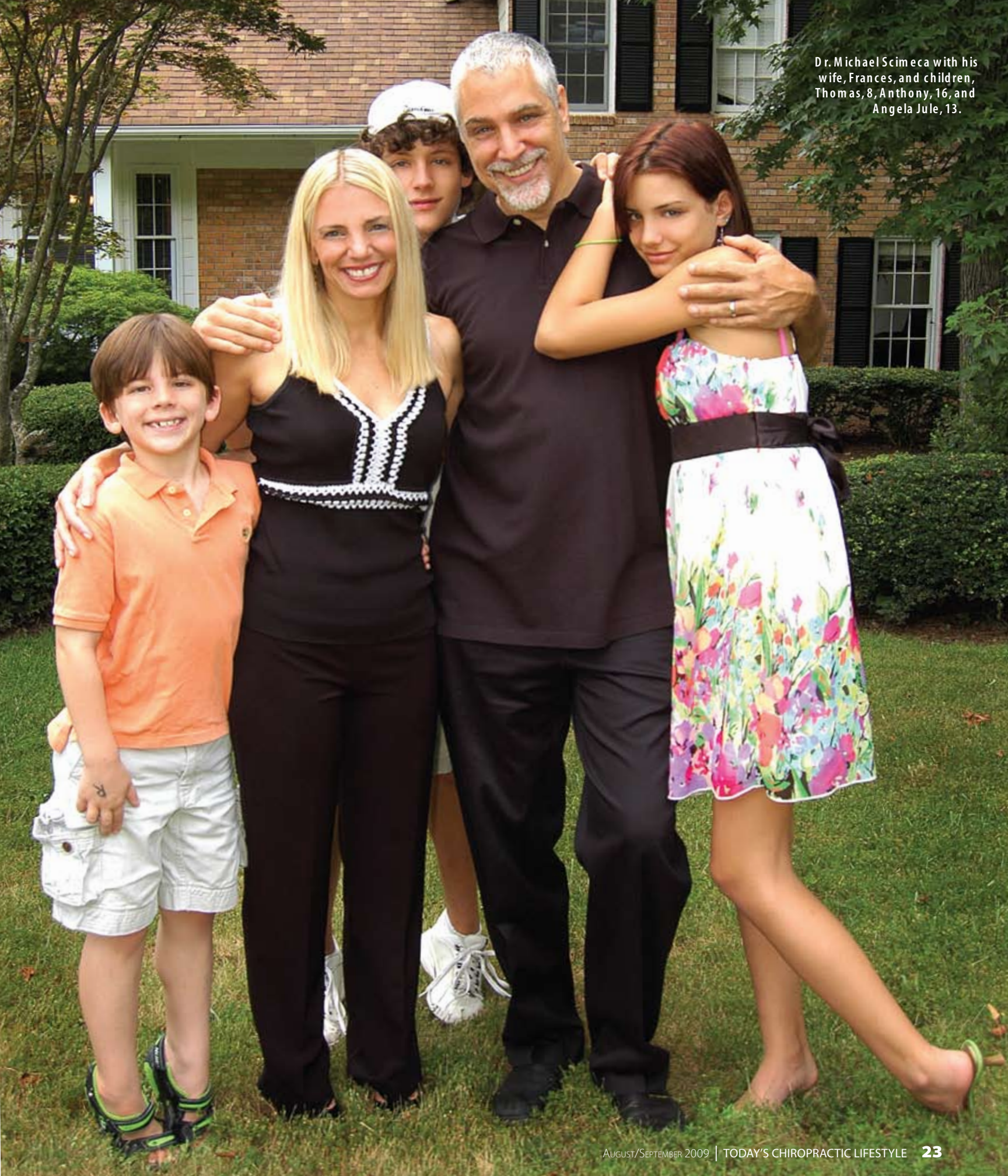
Big Loss, *Bold* Recovery

How to heal after a devastating setback.

In December 1998, Michael Scimeca's life changed forever when his wife, the mother of his two children and chiropractic partner, Allison, died. "This beautiful woman had come into my life," Scimeca, D.C., recalls. "We shared a love of chiropractic. We shared a love of natural living. And then she left. I was left with these two children just looking up at me like, 'OK, Dad, now what?'" He didn't know the answer—but it didn't take him long to figure it out.

"I realized at that point it was all about the kids," Scimeca says. "I felt that taking care of them the best I could was a sacred trust that I had inherited. It was an opportunity for me to honor our connection, our love and what it was all about."

Dr. Michael Scimeca with his wife, Frances, and children, Thomas, 8, Anthony, 16, and Angela Jule, 13.



Every day, we face devastating setbacks that shake us to our core: the loss of a job, a limb, a practice, a loved one. Some, like Scimeca, know right away what they have to do; others feel helpless as they struggle with their grief. The old adage that time heals all wounds holds some truth, but for many living with a loss it takes more than that. The core question becomes: How do you feel like you again? In Scimeca's case, intense soul searching led him to determine what truly mattered in his life.



Dr. Michael Scimeca with his two children.

THE EARLY STAGES

Anyone who has lived through a crippling loss will tell you those first days are the hardest. Many people will also experience the Kubler-Ross five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Another issue that often arises in the midst of grieving is one of timing. That is, what happens if you get “stuck” in a stage, such as denial or anger? How long do you give yourself in the grieving process? These are questions that Dr. Cherry Collier, a life coach and adjunct professor of psychology at Life University, has faced often in her line of work. And while she acknowledges that each person has to take his or her own path to healing, Collier also believes that some truths are universal.

“The faster people come to grips with their loss and not just brush it under the rug, the stronger they’ll actually be,” she says. “The flip side of that, however, is that people shouldn’t have to talk about it until they’re ready, because I firmly believe the unconscious mind presents information when we’re ready and not before. That doesn’t mean they aren’t processing things in a way that’s helpful for them. For some people, the more they talk about it, the more the situation still lives within them.”

In the early days after Allison’s passing, Scimeca admits he ran on auto pilot. “I was functioning,” he says. “I had a good face on.” But he could not ignore a simple truth: His children, ages 5 and 2 at the time, needed their father. So he shifted his focus completely to them.

“How I behaved was going to be a significant lesson for them on how to live,” he says. “So I tried to be as human as I possibly could—to express what I was experiencing, be honest with them and spend as much time with my kids as I possibly could until I really had to go back to work.”

That time came two months later, when Scimeca returned to his practice on a part-time basis, and slowly began to rebuild a life without his partner.

A JOURNEY OF HEALING AND SELF-AWARENESS

In an attempt to make sense of the blow they’ve been dealt, people will turn to a number of methods to heal. For his part, Scimeca found that writing was the best conduit to understanding life as it now stood. In fact, he penned a book called “The Guardian Within.” He calls it “a natural consequence of my experience and having to answer some very core questions just to be able to maintain my own existence. It was my way of making sense of this profound experience of my wife’s passing and being there for my children.”

Collier encourages her clients who are experiencing a loss to write. “I strongly suggest that people write letters to themselves, and to keep writing to get out what they’re feeling,” she says. “In the beginning, you start out with your true emotions. With every letter, you’re releasing the emotion around it. After you’ve written that letter many times, you clear that pain.” What’s more, the process can lead to a sense of thankfulness for the gifts given to you by the one you lost.

The process of healing and grieving can also bring about a sincere evaluation of priorities. “As

all this happened, I started to put things in proper perspective,” Scimeca says. “Things that mattered, mattered, and things that didn’t, didn’t. If something seemed negative, it paled in comparison to the mission I had to raise my kids, to help other people through chiropractic.”

In addition, Scimeca examined his value system. “Sometimes we hold certain values, but we watch our behaviors and it looks like our values are somewhere else,” he says. And although his values didn’t necessarily change, “I would say

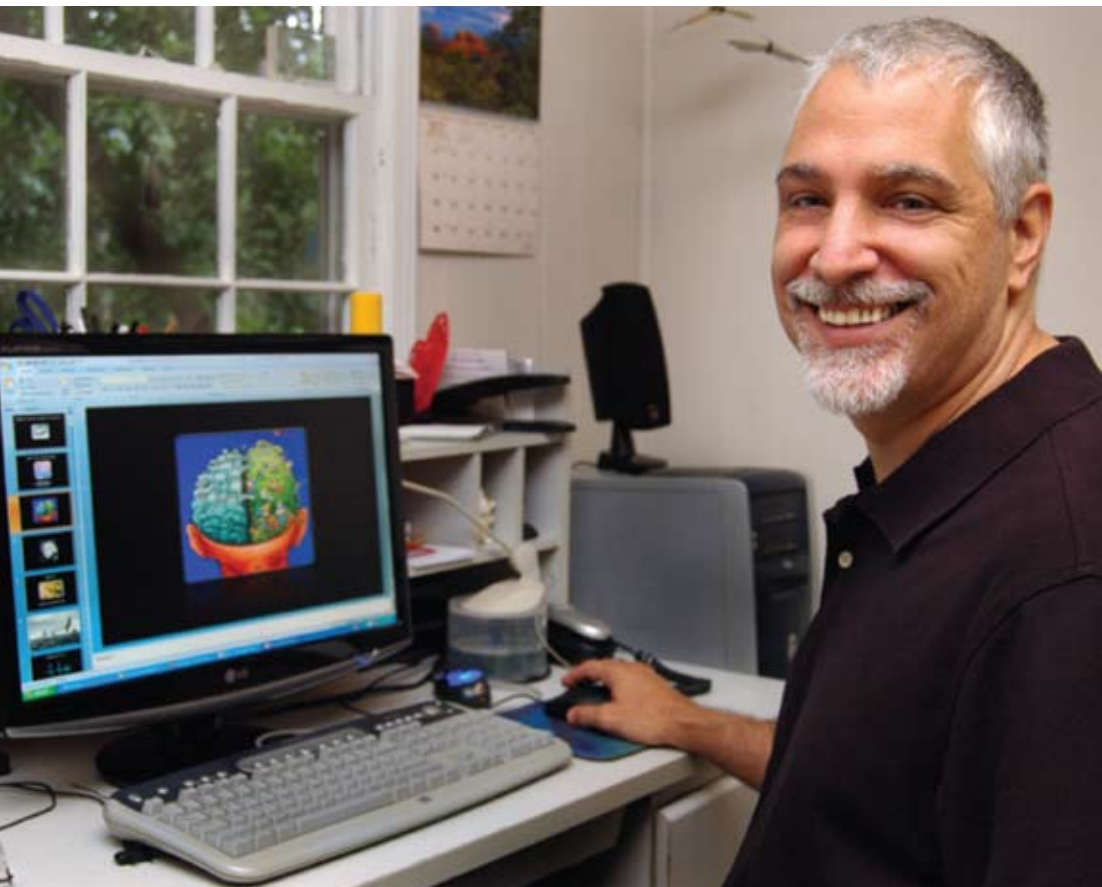
mind that the philosophy of chiropractic supported me because it helped me recognize that innate intelligence is present,” he says. “It made even more sense when I was trying to find my footing after the rug was taken from underneath me. Chiropractic helped me go on because I needed things to be truthful, and it was one of the most honest things that I knew. And if I didn’t have something as powerful as chiropractic in my life, I can’t say for sure that I would have been the same person who responded [to my situation] as well as I did.”

The people who surround us play a major role as we cope with a loss. “The research is overwhelming that social support is one of the greatest benefits to healing in any capacity,” Collier notes. “One of the most important things is to decide strategically who you need to talk to and when you need to talk to them. You want to surround yourself with individuals who are giving you what you need, because there are what I call ‘toxic’ people who will keep you down longer than necessary.”

Scimeca found his support network from his patients—or participants, as he calls them. “Most of my participants and I have become friends,” he says. “We socialize and are sharing our love of chiropractic. We are living this mystery of life together. There is something really incredible about sharing this journey with people who are truly looking to better themselves. I was serving them all these years, and they showed up for me. You start to see the best in people at the worst of times.”

Sometimes, people experiencing loss need to step outside themselves to heal. That is, depending on the type of loss, they’ll consult a professional. Collier says that this support from an objective third party can facilitate progress on the road to healing. “I ask my clients to really look inside and ask themselves, ‘What are the gifts that I have?’ she says. “As a life coach, I help people to remember and celebrate who they are, to see their beauty and inner strength.”

Over the past 11 years, Scimeca has used all the tools available to help him emerge a stronger person. His practice—Roswell Family Chiropractic in Roswell, Ga.—is thriving. His two babies are now well-adjusted teenagers. In 2007, he welcomed two new additions in his life: his second wife, Frances, and her son, Thomas. Through it all, Scimeca has developed a guiding principle: “I look more closely at myself in the mirror and make sure that what I am doing reflects the person I would like to be.” **TCL**



Dr. Scimeca in his home office.

that I got more honest about them—and more honest with myself.”

The journey toward healing, of course, is not without its bumps. “You start to beat yourself up on so many levels when you go through situations like this,” Scimeca says. “I would look in the mirror and ask, ‘Who are you? Are you really a good person, or are you a façade, a mask? Those questions are very cold showers, but you start asking them of yourself because you want to do and be your best.”

FINDING SUPPORT

Support can come in a variety of forms. Scimeca credits his profession for the path he followed after his wife’s death. “There is no doubt in my