The NBC drama *This Is Us* has given us great stories, relatable characters, and mostly accurate portrayals of unfortunately common negative life experiences. If you are unfamiliar with this show, it is available on Hulu. This post will be centered on the experience of one-third of the Big 3, Randall Pearson. Randall Pearson is one-third of the unconventional triplet siblings from the Pearson family. Rebecca and Jack Pearson adopted Randall in an unconventional situation: they were due to have triplets, but unfortunately, they lost one of the babies during delivery. Randall was dropped off at a fire station by his biological parent and was born on the same day as the Big 3. In the pilot episode, the viewer witnesses a dramatic and moving conversation between Jack and their doctor, which results in Jack and Rebecca taking Randall home with them to have the triplets they were meant to have.

In the following episodes, the show jumps between timelines of the Big 3 as children, teenagers, college students, and currently, in Season 4, as adults in their late thirties. Although the show is about all the Pearson’s, their trials and tribulations, and how they have come to be who they are today. One thing the show is desperate for viewers to know is that Randall has anxiety.

The origin of his anxiety? Ask ten mental health professionals, and you will get ten different answers. There is a thought among some specialists about the correlation between adoption and anxiety, as it is discussed in the concerned literature (Hussey, Falletta, and Eng 2012). There is much literature in the world about trauma and anxiety. What we are beginning to see in Season 4, and what I have complained about since the show’s inception, is the family system in which Randall existed/exists and the role Randall has played as a child and continues to play now.
Randall, as Jack once said directly to his face, has always been the “easy child” among the three siblings. As a matter of fact, Randall was the one receiving good grades, going to prestigious schools, and not having any huge meltdowns or typical teenage issues. He did not cry much as a baby and has generally been a second anchor to his family behind Jack. Some would say that some adopted children may be concerned about being a burden for the family or feel the necessity of doing as much as they cannot cause them any problems. These behaviors can stem from anxiety and/or guilt about being brought into a family and possible fear of being given back (Nowlan 2017). The possibility of being a burden to the family can be fearful and may drive the adopted child’s behaviors.

That being said, it is clear the role Randall plays in his family’s system is reinforced by the other family members, maybe because it is convenient for them. What is often ignored is the fact that Randall is not fine. He has had crippling anxiety since he was a young child. The majority of the time, Randall expresses his anxiety in socially accepted and celebrated ways, so it goes unaddressed. Of course, until he reaches his breaking point and ends up on the floor in the bathroom or his office or his dorm room or the hospital, needing professional help that he had been unwilling to receive.

When Jack died, Randall assumed the ‘man of the house’ position. He made sure his family was okay, he fixed things around the house, got his mother a job, chose to go to a college near home, and frequently visited his home to monitor his mother. It is important to remember, this a child we are talking about; Randall did all of this, and his mother and siblings allowed it to happen. They, of course, were all grieving and managing the loss in their own ways. However, Rebecca, the adult in the situation, saw what was happening and not only did nothing to stop it, but she also praised it, and this continues to happen even at Randall’s adult age of 39-years-old. The phenomenon described here is what psychologists call the parentified child (Earley and Cushway 2002).

Parentified children have to be the parent because, for varying reasons including death, grief, substances, mental health, etc., their parent is unavailable to be the parental figure. This situation results in the child growing up too fast and taking on roles that are inappropriate for their social context. In North American societies, we typically expect children not to assume as much emotional, financial, and physical responsibility for their families. When they do, it is considered atypical and may cause unwarranted stress to the child’s life (Earley and Cushway 2002). Some have even labeled this phenomenon as a form of emotional abuse (Barnett and Gordon 1998).

Some adults who were parentified children experience a grieving process of the childhood they were not able to have. Randall was unable to be a free, fun, spontaneous, worry-free child. There are some moments of laughter and fun that we do see in prior episodes, so it is not always black and white, but there is more. There was a moment in the episode “A Hell of a Week Part 1” (season 4, episode 11) that
really brought this home. Young Randall cannot sleep because he is afraid of what may come in the night on his first night in his big boy bed in his big boy room all alone. Jack, as usual, does all of the right things and helps Randall go to bed. However, it does not work, and in his honest and non-malicious frustration, he says something to Randall that really stuck with him and helped solidify part of his personality. Jack tells Randall that he has to be the “easy kid” because his siblings are the troubled ones. Jack asks Randall to agree to be strong for his family, and this is the catalyst for the beginning of the end. Randall internalizes this message and goes through life being the “strong” and “easy” one who fixes everything and never “burdens” anyone else with his problems. He also does not learn to deal with his problems.

**Parentified children grow up to be compulsive caretakers**

As a matter of fact, Randall steadily continues to take care of his mother. Throughout the episodes, he went on a well-meaning and positively life-changing quest to find and take in his birth father. However, he ended up being a caretaker for him as well after he fell ill and eventually died from cancer. Randall also decided to get into foster care and adoption to continue to caretake for others. When that was not enough for him, he decided to become a city councilman to care for an entire city. Each of these actions is socially acceptable, good, applauded. It is lovely that he cares for his family, he cared for his father, he brought in Deja a foster child whom he eventually adopts, he wants to help his father’s city to grow and change. No one, besides his wife Beth, notices these behaviors are slowly killing Randall. Channeling anxiety into productivity can be a good coping strategy, except when it is at the cost of your wellbeing.

At the time of writing this post, this week’s episode, *Clouds* (season 4, episode 15), has not come out yet. However, it will be exciting to see how it goes when Randall finally enters therapy. Surely, it will be bumpy, and he will have to address some harsh realities that he is definitively not ready to deal with, but hopefully, he has a good therapist who can help him get there.

It is important to remember this is a TV show, so there are generalizations and assumptions put onto these characters because they are not full people. Also, although there were some psychological patterns and themes that were discussed here, they obviously do not apply to all people who may be black, adopted, and have anxiety (any combination or neither).
BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


This is us. 2016–present. Created by Dan Fogelman. NBC.