

SHRINKING

THINKING ABOUT SHRINKING THE MANY FACES OF GRIEF

Jonathan Williams

Child Grief Specialist, Highmark Caring Place

NOTE: Shrinking (rated TV-MA) is a television series that is streaming on Apple TV. All episodes from Season 1 are currently available. Season 2 had its premier in the fall of 2024.

The story centers around Jimmy Laird, a therapist who is attempting to cope with the death of his wife. He is confronted with reminders of her everywhere he turns... photographs, music, furniture. His grief permeates into the workplace, leading him to be brutally honest with his clients to shake them out of their current life situations. Though his methods are sometimes unconventional, Jimmy discovers that by helping others he might just be able to help himself.



One of those patients is Sean, an Army veteran who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Sean is routinely angry and prone to fighting, so Jimmy connects him with a healthy outlet for violence: mixed martial arts. As Sean begins coping with his own grief, he



unexpectedly becomes homeless. Jimmy provides an empathetic solution by allowing him to move into his guest house. By being immersed in the world of his court-mandated therapist Sean learns more about his story, including that he has a daughter.

Meet Alice. At seventeen she is struggling to make sense of things following her mother's death in a car accident. She is perpetually mad at her dad, blaming Jimmy for countless failures as he has focused on his own needs rather than hers. Alice is reluctant to allow herself even a single moment of happiness, feeling instant regret for cracking a smile. She has moments of rebellion and others where she desperately wants to belong. And even though her father is a therapist, she has no interest in talking to him. But thankfully, there is someone else who is there for her.



Enter Paul, who is Jimmy's boss and mentor. He has been secretly meeting with Alice to provide support. Free from the formalities of a traditional session, the two often share a park bench and snacks to discuss the challenges of each new day.



Paul has his own struggles related to having an estranged daughter and grandson he barely knows. He is grieving the loss of that connection and has regrets from his past. And Paul is also dealing with another loss, as he begins to lose control of his body after being diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. As a precaution he gives up driving, which necessitates a ride from a coworker (preferably one with similar taste in music).

Gaby is the other therapist who works at the practice with Paul and Jimmy. She was also best friends with Tia (Jimmy's wife). Gaby approaches the world with humor and confidence while still mourning the death of her friend. She even keeps a silly picture of the two of them on her desk so they can always chat. Her journey of grief is further complicated by the demise of her marriage, as her divorce contributes to moments of pure joy and utter sadness. As Gaby is navigating the loss of a relationship, another hopes that asking a question will change his life.



Brian is Jimmy's best friend. Or at least he used to be. Following the death of his wife Jimmy took a break from their interactions. Brian always says, "everything goes my way," which is the last thing that Jimmy wanted to hear. Both were grieving the



loss of their friendship and reconnected through a difficult but honest conversation. This prompted Brian to finally propose to his partner (Charlie), though the potential fear

of losing the person he loved was crippling. Sometimes even the possibility of grief can be enough to prevent us from moving forward.

The only people absent from this story so far are the neighbors. Liz and Derek live next door to Jimmy and Alice. Liz stepped in as a surrogate parent to Alice following the death of her mother and became one of the few people she could depend on. As her own children have left the nest Liz desperately missed being needed. She



found that purpose again in caring for Alice, but then had to deal with her own feelings of loss as Jimmy took back the mantle of parenting. Liz struggles to fill the void her grief has left, finding solace with the rocks (literally) in her life.

The beautiful stories of these characters intertwine throughout the season. Sometimes life is about showing up, like when Jimmy attends his daughter's soccer game or Paul surprises his daughter by being at his grandson's play. Other times it is about the road less traveled, as Sean discovered how hard it was to deny the impulse of aggression after being bumped into on the street. And then there were things that just seemed to help, like drinking water or taking fifteen minutes to immerse yourself in grief to focus on every feeling and memory before continuing the day. The support found in their relationships and friendships made a profound difference.

At its core, *Shrinking* is about second chances and new beginnings. The grief of

each person has many faces, and everyone has discovered their own unique ways of coping. By the end, these characters are in a better place than when they started. Jimmy has become the father he needs to be. Alice found her smile (and her mother's shoes). Paul made amends with his daughter. Gaby discovered a greater purpose in teaching. Sean became an entrepreneur. Liz and Derek rediscovered their love for each other. And Brian and Charlie live happily ever after (hopefully).

Things are far from perfect, but everyone rose to their challenges in life rather than *shrinking*.

Grief is messy. So is life. Just like the rest of us, these characters are left with a lot of questions.

- *Who am I now?*
- *What comes next?*
- *Why did this have to happen?*

Teens and young adults are striving to find their place in the world. The grief of experiencing the death of a loved one only adds to those challenges. With it comes the possibility of changing locations for school or work, which may disrupt their support systems. Guilt and regret for things that were said and done (or never said or done) inevitably occurs. A sting can be felt when comparing themselves to others who have never endured such a loss. Even the daily financial and societal pressures will further compound those feelings of sadness or anger.

As adults grow older, they may share several of these same experiences. Questions about their own mortality will likely arise, especially as more deaths occur or if they begin to face health complications themselves. Fear about

what happens to the family and friends they leave behind is also common as thoughts about their own legacy persist. In the end people try to do the best they can. Mistakes are made. Victories are achieved. And ultimately trying to balance the past with the present and the future becomes the hurdle for everyone touched by grief.

Some of the therapeutic techniques Jimmy utilizes may not be considered best practice, so on the next page is an activity to help support you and/or your family as you continue to travel this grief journey.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jonathan discovered *Ted Lasso* during the pandemic and appreciated the optimism the show provided. A number of the same creative minds are also behind *Shrinking*, which seems evident in the characters and storytelling. Jonathan is a Child Grief Specialist and School Services Coordinator at the Highmark Caring Place in Erie, PA. He enjoyed watching *Shrinking* every week with his wife, often for the second time as he was unable to wait (*please no one tell her*).

ABOUT THE HIGHMARK CARING PLACE

Founded in 1996, the Highmark Caring Place provides support for grieving children and their families. Site locations are in Pittsburgh, Erie, Camp Hill, and Warrendale, Pennsylvania.

Thousands of community members are helped by the Highmark Caring Place each year at no cost through peer support programs, education, consultation, and referral services. In addition to our in-person programming, we also provide virtual young adult groups, *Journey to Hope*. These groups are open to individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 who live anywhere across the United States.

To learn more about *Journey to Hope*, visit highmarkcaringplace.com/youngadult.

MEMORY ROCKS ACTIVITY

Just like the ones that Liz collects throughout the show, gathering rocks can be a way to help remember those who have died. Here is what you will need to complete this activity.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Rocks (*all shapes & sizes*)
- Sharpies or Paints
- Clear Container (*if applicable*)

Find a rock that you would like to use. You may choose to write the name of someone who died or a special memory on it. You can also draw something that reminds you of that person. The rocks may be kept together in a jar (or another clear container), so they are able to be seen. You can also put them outside or in other special locations. New stones can always be added. Others may want to make one, too.



Remember that even when you feel lost in the maze of your grief there are places you can go to find support. Please visit www.highmarkcaringplace.com for information and resources.

