

Film Analysis: *Inside Out*

Four of the movie's main insights into our emotional lives, along with some of the research that backs them up, include:

1) Happiness is not just about joy.

When the film begins, the emotion of Joy helms the controls inside Riley's mind; her overarching goal is to make sure that Riley is always happy. But by the end of the film, Joy—like Riley, and the audience—learns that there is much, much more to being happy than boundless positivity. In fact, in the film's final chapter, when Joy cedes control to some of her fellow emotions, particularly Sadness, Riley seems to achieve a deeper form of happiness.

This reflects the way that a lot of leading emotion researchers see happiness. Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of the best-selling *How of Happiness*, defines happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, *combined with* a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”

For example, in a pivotal moment in the film, Riley allows herself to feel sadness, in addition to fear and anger, about her idea of running away from home; as a result, she decides not to go through with her plan. This choice reunites Riley with her family, giving her a deeper sense of happiness and contentment in the comfort she gets from her parents, even though it's mixed with sadness and fear.

Inside Out's creators made a smart choice to name the character “Joy” instead of “Happiness.” Ultimately, joy is just one element of happiness, and happiness can be tinged with other emotions, even including sadness.

2) Don't try to force happiness.

Riley's mother tells her to be her parents' “happy girl” while the family adjusts to a stressful cross-country move and her father goes through a difficult period at work.

June Gruber and her colleagues started looking at the nuances of happiness and its pursuit. Their findings challenge the “happy-all-the-time” imperative that was probably imposed upon many of us. For example, their research suggests that making happiness an explicit goal in life can actually make us miserable. Gruber's colleague Iris Mauss has discovered that the more people strive for happiness, the greater the chance that they'll set very high standards of happiness for themselves and feel disappointed—and less happy—when they're not able to meet those standards all the time.

So it should come as no surprise that trying to force herself to be happy actually doesn't help Riley deal with the stresses and transitions in her life. In fact, not only does that strategy fail to bring her happiness, it also seems to make her feel isolated and angry with her parents, which factors into her decision to run away from home.

What's a more effective route to happiness for Riley (and the rest of us)? Recent research points to the importance of “prioritizing positivity”—deliberately carving out ample time in life for experiences that we personally enjoy. For Riley, that's ice hockey, spending time with friends, and goofing around with her parents.

3) Sadness is vital to our well-being.

Early in the film, Joy admits that she doesn't understand what Sadness is for or why it's in Riley's head. She's not alone. At one time or another, many of us have probably wondered what purpose sadness serves in our lives.

That's why many love that Sadness rather than Joy emerges as the hero of the movie. Why? Because Sadness connects deeply with people—a critical component of happiness—and helps Riley do the same. For example, when Riley's long-forgotten imaginary friend Bing Bong feels dejected after the loss of his wagon, it is Sadness's empathic understanding that helps him recover, not Joy's attempt to put a positive spin on his loss.

In one of the film's greatest revelations, Joy looks back on one of Riley's "core memories"—when the girl missed a shot in an important hockey game—and realizes that the sadness Riley felt afterwards elicited compassion from her parents and friends, making her feel closer to them and transforming this potentially awful memory into one with deep meaning and significance for her.

With great sensitivity, *Inside Out* shows how tough emotions like sadness, fear, and anger, can be extremely uncomfortable for people to experience—which is why many of us go to great lengths to avoid them. But in the film, as in real life, all of these emotions serve an important purpose by providing insight into our inner and outer environments in ways that can help us connect with others, avoid danger, or recover from loss.

4) Mindfully embrace—rather than suppress—tough emotions.

At one point, Joy attempts to prevent Sadness from having any influence on Riley's psyche by drawing a small "circle of Sadness" in chalk and instructing Sadness to stay within it. It's a funny moment, but psychologists will recognize that Joy is engaging in a risky behavior called "emotional suppression"—an emotion-regulation strategy that has been found to lead to anxiety and depression, especially amongst teenagers whose grasp of their own emotions is still developing. Sure enough, trying to contain Sadness and deny her a role in the action ultimately backfires for Joy, and for Riley.

Later in the film, when Bing Bong loses his wagon, Joy tries to get him to "cognitively reappraise" the situation, meaning that she encourages him to reinterpret what this loss means for him—in this case, by trying to shift his emotional response toward the positive. Cognitive reappraisal is a strategy that has historically been considered the most effective way to regulate emotions. But even this method of emotion regulation is not always the best approach, as researchers have found that it can sometimes increase rather than decrease depression, depending on the situation.

Toward the end of the movie, Joy does what some researchers now consider to be the healthiest method for working with emotions: Instead of avoiding or denying Sadness, Joy accepts Sadness for who she is, realizing that she is an important part of Riley's emotional life. Emotion experts call this "mindfully embracing" an emotion. Rather than getting caught up in the drama of an emotional reaction, a mindful person kindly observes the emotion without judging it as the right or wrong way to feel in a given situation, creating space to choose a healthy response. Indeed, a 2014 study found that depressed adolescents and young adults who took a mindful approach to life showed lower levels of depression, anxiety, and bad attitudes, as well as a greater quality of life.

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Islands of Personality

In the film *Inside Out*, 11-year-old Riley holds several ***islands of personality*** in her brain. These islands were created from her past core memories, experiences, interests, and passions.

Positive and negative core memories create these islands that make up our personality or sense of self. Riley's included Family Island, Friendship Island, Soccer Island, and Goofball Island. Our brains form islands of personality (or islands of self) because of our interests, relationships, experiences, and how others in our lives have affirmed, supported, or possibly weakened our thoughts about who we are and our ever-developing life purposes. Our islands are always changing based on our interests, passions, affirmations, experiences, relationships, and perceptions. Change is life, and much like real islands, our islands can grow healthier or diminish and weaken.

The more that students know about themselves, the stronger learners they are. Self-reflection and self-observation are the building blocks for cognitive and academic growth.

Train of Thought

In *Inside Out*, we watched Riley's train of thought run through her mind during the days and stop or slow down when she was sleeping. We saw fear take over Riley's train of thought on her first day of school, followed by anger and sadness. Her changing feelings were distracting headquarters (the prefrontal cortex) in her brain and therefore her train of thought was derailed a few times.

Paying attention and being focused are prerequisites to sustainable learning. Sustained attention and working memory are executive functions that are not fully developed until early adulthood. If a child or adolescent has experienced some form of daily ambient trauma, these executive functions can be underdeveloped or stagnant. We know that emotions drive attention, and that many students walk into the classrooms in a hyper-vigilant brain state, constantly scanning the environment for feelings of safety and familiarity. Brain architecture is intimately affected when an individual is experiencing chronic levels of stress.

Questions:

1. When does your train of thought run smoothly with few stops?
2. When does your train of thought struggle? Why?
3. What can be done in the class to help your train run with great speed and accuracy?
4. What can you do to help your train of thought stay on the tracks and reach its destination?
5. Where is your train heading right now? Is this where you want to go? What are two changes in planning this journey that you could make today?