

VIDEO REVIEW

Inside Out: Emotion Focused Therapy in Animation

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Inside Out is an intelligent, creative look at how humans emotions might look if they could speak and act. In fact, the main characters are the emotions of an eleven-year-old girl, Riley, and provide a “physical” view of Riley’s emotional self (Greenberg, 2015). Riley’s parents are also depicted with an inner group of emotions, but the main focus of the film is on the interaction between Riley’s emotions.

The movie shows how our identity is shaped by our emotions and also how those emotions shape how we view ourselves and others. What it also shows is how emotions can organise our thinking and help us to assess right from wrong. This idea is significantly different from the western historical view that emotions undermine our rationality (Damasio, 2011).

Of the five characters representing Riley’s emotions, Joy and Sadness are the real champions on the inside. The other three emotional characters who make up the team in Riley’s Emotional Control Centre are Fear, Anger and Disgust. Joy describes each of them as follows: “[Fear] is really good at keeping Riley safe”, “[Anger] cares very deeply about things being fair”, and “[Disgust] keeps Riley from being poisoned, physically and socially”. Initially, Riley’s character is defined by Joy, and Riley is a happy-go-lucky child. However, as the movie progresses Riley is confronted by a number of losses that Joy attempts unsuccessfully to overcome. The main emotional learning within the narrative occurs when Joy finally understands that she cannot help Riley in her experience of loss without allowing Sadness to take the lead role. Whilst the other emotional characters of Fear, Anger and Disgust have a role to play, the main action in the emotional development of Riley occurs in the interaction of Joy and Sadness.

The movie offers us an insight, in an informal and easily understood format, into the theory of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) that prizes both relationship and emotions. Whilst EFT works with secondary emotions, the focus is on the primary emotions. The work of the EFT practitioner is to help the client move from their secondary emotional

experience to their primary emotional experience, which in the experience of Riley is represented by her five inner emotional characters.

Riley's early core memories power different aspects of her life: the emotions associated with these memories have created what the film calls "Islands of Personality". This idea can be aligned with Greenberg's notion of schemes (Greenberg, 2015). When the joyful, happy memories are covered by sadness and fear, the personality islands collapse and their link by a bridge to Riley's Emotional Control Centre destroyed. However, they are able to be restored and strengthened by Riley's experience of sadness and then comfort, love and connection.

Presenting the emotions as characters can present its own difficulties. For example, the viewer is left wondering why all the emotional characters for Riley's mother are depicted as female and those of Riley's father as male, while for Riley, Joy, Sadness and Disgust are female and Anger and Fear are male. The movie deals with Riley's emotional characters even-handedly but the question remains why the adult emotional characters are gender specific.

It remains to make one critical point. Sadness is portrayed even from the beginning as a very inactive figure. She speaks of herself in these terms: "Crying helps me slow down and obsess over the weight of life's problems". As the experience of loss for Riley intensifies, Sadness becomes more and more lifeless, and is literally dragged by Joy as she attempts to find a way back to Riley's inner emotional control centre. On the contrary, what we know about the emotion of sadness is that, like other emotions, it is active and arouses a bodily response in expressing loss. In the movie Sadness appears to be depicted as being depressed rather than sad.

The film provides valuable learning for children and adults alike. Anecdotal evidence about children, even young children, watching the movie suggests that that they are quite capable of identifying one or more of these emotions in their own behaviour. While this is promoted as a children's movie there is no doubt that adults find its insights similarly valuable.

References

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