

**Transcript**  
**Key: J=Jackie, S=Sophia, E=Emma**

J: Do our emotions control us? Is free will an illusion? Can we manipulate our emotions and turn them into vehicles for self-help?

(JINGLE)

S: Hi, I'm Sophia.

J: I'm Jackie.

E: And I'm Emma.

S: And this is "Picturing the Self," where we break down popular movies into tangible self-help tips.

J: Today we'll be talking about Pixar's 2015 animated film *Inside Out*. This film follows Riley Andersen, a hockey-loving 11-year-old who is forced to move out of her beloved childhood home in Minnesota after her dad gets a new job. But, this isn't your typical 'mad at mom and dad,' awkward pre-teen phase, coming-of-age story. Instead, we get an inside look at the workings of Riley's mind, where we are introduced to the plethora of emotions that control her consciousness: Joy, the yellow optimistic leader, Sadness, the blue self-deprecating pessimist, Disgust, the teenage portrayal of everything green (think jealousy and even the hatred of broccoli), Fear, the purple strung-out scaredy-cat, and Anger, a red block of rage.

S: Each emotion takes turns, and sometimes not so politely, controlling a switchboard in what the movie calls headquarters, and with a touch of a few buttons, Riley reacts. However, Riley struggles to adjust to her new life in San Francisco, and her emotions try to make sense of it all. Everything changes when Sadness and Joy leave HQ to save Riley's core memories from being erased, and Riley stumbles deeper and deeper into a depression.

E: In this episode, we'll be talking about the role of Riley and her emotions, how we can apply self-help theories to the movie, our final takeaways, and whether we recommend this film.

(JINGLE)

E: The first thing we need to bring up when talking about *Inside Out* is the question of whether Riley is really the main character of the film, or if her emotions are actually characters of their own - in which case, they could arguably be the main characters.

J: I'm going to have to posit that Riley is in fact the main character. Even though we see the emotions fighting over control of Riley's consciousness and her reacting in the real world as a result of their actions, her emotions wouldn't exist without, well, her. Our emotions don't define us, but they are a large part of us. I believe that the filmmakers made the emotions their own characters as a way for the audience to recognize that Riley's emotions are a critical part of her life and should not be suppressed. Riley is a culmination of all of her emotions, and they all feed into her behavior and personality. Put it this way - If I had to analogize this, I'd say that Riley's the captain of the ship of life, and her emotions are her somewhat annoying crewmates that can affect the ship's course, but

ultimately, Riley is in charge. And that agency is going to be a fundamental part of self-help for Riley.

E: I definitely think you made some really strong points, but I really feel like Riley's emotions are the main characters. While of course the film can be analyzed more metaphorically, from a straightforward perspective, Riley seems to be merely a victim of the will of her emotions. She's responsive to the actions of her emotions, which are shown to have their own independent thought processes and make their own choices, and seemingly she cannot act on her own as a singular entity. Joy specifically seems to be the main character of the film, as she is shown to be the leader of all of Riley's emotions. Joy also has her own character arc that she goes through, which actually takes up significantly more time than Riley's own arc. I actually think you can compare Joy's arc to other main characters in literature. For example, both Joy and Charles Dickens' Pip from his novel *Great Expectations* have misconceptions about how to be happy at the beginning of their respective stories, and through their experiences and personal growth, they eventually learn that they were wrong to some degree. They both find out that happiness is more nuanced than they originally thought. This is an interesting media comparison, but I also think it points to the importance of Joy's character arc.

J: Emma, I can totally see why you would think that Joy is the central character. Something interesting that I came across and think is relevant here is a study that found that our brains make decisions 7 seconds before we are consciously aware of them. In the study, researchers hooked subjects up to some strange brain machine - something I don't think I can explain to you with my humanities education - and asked them to press one of two buttons whenever they felt like doing so. The subjects fully felt like the button they chose was at their own will. But, the brain scan revealed activity in two parts - the [frontopolar cortex](#) and the [precuneus](#) - that predicted the button the participants chose 7 seconds before they even knew it. So what does this mean for free will? How much are we consciously able to control our actions and our lives? If we're all just subjects with zero agency, then self-help is pretty much useless, but from our podcast we know that self-help is valuable, so I'd like to think positively and say we do have agency, and so does Riley.

S: Emma, you make great points, but I have to say that I also agree with Jackie: Riley is the main character in that she is the driving force behind the very existence of her emotions. Without our physical and psychological selves, our emotions would not have any platform in the first place. Although we witness the emotions fighting for control of Riley's consciousness, her reactions in the real world are implemented and executed by her. The way you put it, Jackie, sums it up well: "Our emotions don't define us, but they are a large part of us." I think that this part of us can manifest in different time frames of life. So, I'd like to extend the question to you: what were you like at 11 years old? How did self-control, or a lack of it, factor into your life?

E: I think 11 years old was middle school, right? It's interesting, because for me it was a time when self-control became really important: I had more responsibility managing my own schedule, getting myself to and from school alone, that kind of thing. So self-control definitely became something that I was more aware of and was going out of my way to implement. That being said, I also remember some emotional outbursts, actually ones quite similar to Riley's outburst at the dinner table in the film. Sometimes, when all of those newfound stresses and swinging emotions combined in just the right way, my emotions would absolutely take over my behavior and start a couple fights. My parents love to talk about how they kept a National Geographic article that talked about how

teenagers' brains are so complicated and chaotic because they could use it as a rationale for some of my and my sister's seemingly irrational feelings and behavior.

J: Emma, that's really funny! 11 years old is such a throwback. I distinctly remember around that age when a boy pulled my shirt during lunch, so I got mad, and then I scratched his arm. You know, the most adequate response in my mind. Maybe I should add extra context that my nails were always really long as a kid, but hey, it was self-defense! Definitely something I wouldn't do today if someone pulled on my shirt, but I was 11, I really liked that shirt, and he shouldn't have had his hands on me. But, I guess that shows that emotions can overpower self-control as a kid and just knowing better sometimes.

S: When I was 11, my emotions were all over the place. I'm curious to know what my headquarters would have looked like back then! Like Riley, I was dealing with an interesting and confusing mix of joy and sadness, among many other emotions. Starting out middle school was very strange for me. So much of my day-to-day was unexpected and also out of my control: having lockers, new classes to navigate my way to, different social expectations as the pre-teen drama begins, all of that. And it seems like this is fairly universal. So I think we've all shed light on some pretty interesting situations. Can we agree that Riley is an amalgamation of her emotions? Is she "typical" in that her emotions uniquely affect her own reactions and conduct? The answer is yes. She is the manifestation of her emotions, but her emotions do not exist without her agency. As we age we get a better handle on coping with life's realities.

(JINGLE)

S: Let's move on: how can scholarly insights on self-help help us in interpreting the film's message? Though this is a movie that's arguably for kids, we think it's important to bring in context about personal autonomy and freedom in terms of our emotions. And who else should we turn to but Samuel Binkley for this context? Jackie, what are your thoughts on Binkley's neoliberal notions? How can we reconcile them with the events of *Inside Out*?

J: I think Samuel Binkley would have a very interesting perspective on *Inside Out* that's worth noting. And by interesting, I mean terribly cynical and bleak. In Binkley's "Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality," Binkley argues that freedom is actually in the control of the government, and we are all subjects in a system that does not care about us. This is definitely a pessimistic outlook on life, but can be applied to Riley's situation. Riley struggles with getting a handle on her emotions and this is especially apparent when she breaks down in front of the whole class on the first day of her new school. Her teacher brushes off her crying and simply says "it's tough moving to a new place," then immediately asks the class to turn to the next chapter in their history textbooks. This brings up an important Binkley-esque concept: Riley's teacher doesn't care about her whereabouts, and Binkley might argue that the entire school system doesn't either. Outside of the film, I think a lot of us can relate to this in real life, such as through high school or middle school experiences. It can be hard to reach out for help when the resources don't seem like they are there, or maybe they're not at all, and it feels like the world is against you.

S: Feeling like the whole world is against you is definitely a very human experience. Of course it is, right? Especially when you're a young person, with lots of social struggles and stressful situations to navigate. Jackie, the point that you made about Binkley stands out to me. Binkley's argument that freedom is actually in the control of the government is interesting, however it's the point that we are

all subjects in a system that does not care about us that stands out. This is a freeing interpretation because it means that we don't need to feel burdened or pressured by any sense of responsibility or guilt to the world. We exist for ourselves - self-improvement, self-doubt, dreams, insecurities - all of that is relatable and part of the human condition. Riley's struggle highlights the stigma associated with mental health as well. I think we can look at Samuel Smiles' reasoning. Samuel Smiles says that we must focus on building the interior to achieve happiness in life. Smiles would support Riley's return to her normal self once she fully taps into her emotions. In the time lapse, Riley becomes happy, energetic, and personable again. These characteristics make her a better person who is open to her parents and her friends. It relates to Smiles' emphasis on loyalty, on kindness. But by allowing in sadness, most of all, Riley works to strengthen her inner qualities.

E: I'd also like to compare the film's messaging to author Sheila Heti's argument of ugliness and beauty in her book *How Should A Person Be?* Heti's work explores the dichotomy between beauty and ugliness. This is clearest in her discussion of artwork and the Ugly Painting Contest. However, the theme can be applied to several different parts of her work, including how she talks about friendship, religion, and sex. In her book, Heti seems to come to the conclusion that ugliness and beauty can and do coexist, and that, unlike how we as people often think about them as two opposite entities, they're inherently mixed up with each other. This is interesting in relation to *Inside Out* because this relationship between ugliness and beauty mirrors the relationship between Joy and Sadness that *Inside Out* teaches its viewers about. One of the main arcs of the film is that Joy and Sadness have to work together, and that our experiences and memories can be both happy and sad at the same time. Both of these works show that our life experiences are inherently intertwined. We can't always separate joy and sadness from each other, just like we can't always separate beauty and ugliness. We have to accept that a lot of different parts of life intermix, and that that's not always a bad thing. It just, kind of, is.

(JINGLE)

S: Let's talk about the ending of *Inside Out*, in which Sadness and Joy return to the Headquarters in Riley's mind. Thanks to some teamwork, Anger and Disgust are able to help them get inside HQ. When they arrive, everyone seems to look to Joy to save the situation, but she does something different. She steps back and she lets Sadness take control. Riley is then in control of her emotions. She returns home to her parents after running away, and she begins to cry. After confessing that she misses her old home and her old life, her parents comfort her and speak with her. That memory is infused with both joy and sadness now, as it glows blue and yellow, and Riley begins to adapt to her life as it is now. Sadness finally finds her place among her fellow emotions. And after this, everyone can work together to help Riley lead a happy and healthy existence - all of this as she turns 12. Sadness is the trigger and the heroine for self-growth and bringing this feeling from the inside out.

J: And emotions are a pretty universal thing. So, let's get into the intended audience of this film and how it can have different messages for viewers of different ages. What's your take on this Sophia?

S: I would argue that kids are the movie's main audience demographic. Think of it: kids are dealing with a million thoughts at once. They're tasked with the job of listening, learning, processing, and growing up - all at once! *Inside Out* therefore enters this cinematic space as a modern day self-help for kids. And the message is this: let's help normalize thinking about, critically examining, and talking about emotions. If you're angry, then shout, if you're sad, then cry, but always explain the reason if there happens to be one. Sure, sometimes kids just want to shout and cry. Been there, done

that. But there can also be an underlying reason - like Riley's suppression of her own homesickness - and we should encourage kids to reach out to their parents and to the support systems that surround them. That's what I get from this movie. It teaches that having overwhelmingly bad feelings (arguably depressive episodes) is normal and that you can recover from them if you get help and express a willingness to help yourself.

J: As an animated Pixar film, I see your point that this appeals to children. But I think we can also imagine the intended audience to be even more inclusive and involve parents, too. At its core, this is a parenting film. Riley struggles as a child, and she needs the support of her parents to help her. And it's this aid at the movie's conclusion that allows Riley to get out of her depression. So, there's a lot of really great lessons here for parents about acknowledging your child's feelings and extending help to them. This movie opens up the perspective that children's feelings should be valued and respected. And in the context of self-help, parents can become better parents by recognizing that their children are dealing with complex emotional experiences and need full parental involvement, respect, and compassion in order to grow.

E: I definitely agree that *Inside Out* also has some really important messages it's trying to send to parents. I actually think that it encourages them to pay better attention to their children, because it shows that kids are more complex, and have more going on in their lives and in their heads than parents probably know. This in turn asks parents to show more empathy to their kids; what parents might see as "bad behavior" (like Riley's outburst at the dinner table) are actually normal emotional reactions to things parents might not know about. It also shows that kids aren't always in control of their emotions and their emotional reactions - sometimes they're just struggling with something. This might seem like something parents would know, given that all people were kids and teenagers once, but it's so easy to oversimplify kids' minds on a day to day basis. I nannied for about 3 years, and when parents get stressed out and really busy, it's so easy for them to chalk bad behavior or outbursts up to kids just being kids and, oftentimes, punish them for it. But if you actually take the time to break down kids' behavior and help them get to the root of their emotions, usually, any trouble that they make or tantrums they have are actually for a really good reason.

S: Riley and her emotions go through a lot; whether coursing through past memories or ruminating on future obstacles, there is never a shortage of angst to feel or trouble to contemplate. As a college student, I can relate. Sometimes you just feel drained. Like Riley's emotions, which have their own distinct personalities, I have various categories in my life that are clear-cut in the emotions they induce and the conflicts that they cause. Think academics, social life, family relationships, physical health, extracurriculars, mental health, free time, professional commitments. There's just so much I'm trying to either keep up with or improve on all the time. It's exhausting. Riley's story offers hope, if not just a respite from the usual rush of "what-should-I-do-about-this, how-should-I-react-to-that." The part that resonated with me most was when Riley let her emotions out. While we should certainly never underestimate a cathartic cry, we should also keep in mind that letting your emotions go inside out (pun intended!) can have long-term effects in making you more in tune with yourself.

J: I couldn't agree with you more, Sophia. If we had to strip this movie of all of its details, it's essentially a story of a young girl who struggles with mental health but gets better in the end. Mental health issues are so common in college, and Riley shows us the value of letting our emotions out and seeking help when necessary. Also, Riley shows that it can be hard to have those really bad days, but at the same time, they make the good ones so much better. We need sadness to have an appreciation

of life. I think that's what makes *Inside Out* so special and different from other Disney movies that preach the typical "it's all good and happy and a prince will come and bla bla bla." This movie instead is all about bringing those inner emotions into our external lives, even the negative ones, and accepting them and acknowledging them for what they are. I identify with Riley in a lot of ways, even though I'm ten years older than her. As a college student, it's really difficult to work through stress sometimes and get out of a depression hole. But when Riley adapts to her new life, she shows that there's a way for audiences to find happiness too, which is really key.

E: I definitely agree with you about identifying with Riley in the present moment, and I also think watching this movie was a really great way to encourage active self-reflection in the audience. I know that when I was watching it, I was considering how my own emotions function and also how our minds change over time, and how that's okay. This film definitely had me tearing up at a few moments because of just how applicable and personal it was. In my opinion, that's part of what makes this movie so great - it's general enough to apply to a really wide range of people, and yet personal enough to make an individual impact.

(JINGLE)

J: This movie has a lot of valuable messages in it. When we think about interpreting these takeaways, I think it's helpful to turn to Herbert Marcuse's "The Affirmative Character of Culture." Marcuse argues that art is part of the ideal world, separate from reality and material existence. Within the mind, people are free and can explore different moral and philosophical thoughts, without ever implementing them in real life. This causes a lack of action in reality and complacency with the way the world is and the way life is. Let's dive into whether *Inside Out* is an example of affirmative culture.

E: I'd argue that *Inside Out* is an example of affirmative culture. Nothing about Riley's life actually changes after she taps into sadness, only her attitude towards life does. Therefore the movie encourages a kind of complacency in children, teaching them to try to change their outlook rather than change anything physically about their lives. She doesn't get to move back to her childhood home or reconnect with her old friends. She just learns to deal with her emotions and the new life that was forced upon her.

J: You know, I disagree and actually think this movie is not an example of affirmative culture. Yes, it is true that Riley doesn't move back to her old home in Minnesota and is forced to adapt to her new life as it is. However, after Riley allows herself to experience sadness, she then makes external changes outside of the self. She reconnects with her parents and she opens herself up to her peers which allows her to make friends and even potentially get a boyfriend at the end. Go Riley! She's not complacent in society, she makes a change so that she can better enjoy her life. This teaches children to make changes when they're unhappy with something, and improve the self so they can better appreciate life.

(JINGLE)

E: So, let's come to a conclusion about what steps the film lays out for self-help. I would say firstly, the film encourages viewers to recognize that your emotions are an important and dominant part of your existence. You need to learn to work with them and not suppress them, because trying to run

away from them never works. Emotions are an inevitable part of life, so you need to find a way to try to build a healthy relationship with them.

J: Second, reach out for help when you need it. Riley is a great example of this. She cries and she lets her parents know how much she misses her old home, and it's only when she admits this that she can move on and work to better adapt to life. The film advocates to stay in touch with your emotions and share them when necessary. Help is always somewhere, even if it feels like no one cares.

S: Your emotions and good and bad feelings will be there forever: they're going to ebb and flow; it's your actions and your approach to handling them that makes your own life better. The important first step is to recognize and acknowledge them. We should never underestimate self-awareness. Just like Riley, assess what's going on "inside." It's impossible to act upon these emotions and thoughts if we don't at least have a sense of them first. Like Marcuse argued, within the mind, people are free and can explore different thoughts, without ever implementing them in real life. Regardless, this exploration is a necessary part of helping the self.

E: So, we've talked about a lot of different things in today's episode; what are our final thoughts?

J: I think this is a great movie and in the context of self-help, it offers so many valuable tips for kids, adults, and even us in-between childhood and adulthood college students so I would definitely recommend it.

S: Those are great points Jackie! Marcuse argued that art is part of the ideal world, separate from reality and material existence. *Inside Out* shows that this is false--although art can certainly be different from "normal life," it can also clearly lay out steps for us to better live in and navigate this "normal" life.

E: I have to agree with you guys - *Inside Out* is a beautiful film in its own right, but it's also really successful in articulating important messages about the self and how we can push ourselves along the path to happiness.

(JINGLE)

J: So, what are you waiting for? Go watch *Inside Out*, you won't regret it. This has been "Picturing the Self." Thanks for listening.

(JINGLE)