

Declaration of interest

At the time of submission all authors were employees of Janssen-Cilag Pty Ltd (a part of the Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson, which developed and markets esketamine nasal spray (Spravato®)) and are stockholders of Johnson & Johnson.

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Psychiatry in movies

Inside Out 2: the adolescent mind and the role of anxiety

Harry Barker 

Inside Out 2, Pixar's 2024 coming-of-age sequel, continues the exploration of 13-year-old Riley's mind as she navigates the challenges of adolescence and begins high school. On the eve of ice hockey camp, Riley's 'puberty alarm' triggers a comedic overhaul of her brain's control centre. The original emotions from *Inside Out* (2015) – Joy, Anger, Sadness, Fear and Disgust – are joined by new additions: Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment and Ennui. These emotions bring fresh conflict to Riley's emotional landscape, as the control console becomes more sensitive, intensifying her reactions and leaving the original emotions struggling to maintain balance.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Inside Out 2* is Pixar's nuanced portrayal of anxiety during adolescence. Anxiety, depicted as hyperactive with messy hair and an eager smile, is not a villain but a well-meaning force. The film cleverly distinguishes between fear and anxiety – Anxiety explains, 'Fear keeps Riley safe from the things she can see, I keep Riley safe from the things she can't see. I plan for the future'. Initially, her obsessive planning for every potential outcome seems helpful, as it pushes Riley to impress the older girls on the ice hockey team, reflecting the natural fear of social rejection – a common concern as peer relationships gain importance in adolescence.

However, Anxiety quickly becomes overwhelming, operating Riley's imagination like a frantic office, with workers endlessly sketching out worst-case scenarios. This culminates in a powerful depiction of a panic attack, with Anxiety swirling chaotically around the control console, desperate to maintain order. At the centre of this storm is Anxiety herself, immobilised and powerless, a tear rolling down her cheek. Through this portrayal, the film demonstrates how anxiety, left unchecked, can spiral into a paralysing force. Anxiety's eventual realisation that she cannot control everything – mirrored by Joy's own admission – offers an insightful reflection on the challenges of emotional regulation during adolescence.

By presenting Anxiety as both a protector and a source of distress, the film educates viewers on the dual nature of this emotion. It normalises anxiety as part of life while highlighting the importance of managing it effectively. In the film's resolution, Anxiety is assigned a specific task and given a calming cup of tea, symbolising that while anxiety will always be present, it can be controlled and channelled positively when managed with care. This message is important for young people given that anxiety disorders often emerge in early adolescence, although there is a clear distinction to be made between anxiety as a normal emotion and clinical anxiety.

Inside Out 2 again makes emotional education both accessible and engaging, encouraging children to understand their emotions and talk openly about them. By portraying the turbulence of adolescence, the film normalises psychological distress as a natural part of development. Through its creative storytelling and use of metaphor, it opens essential conversations about mental health, helping young audiences recognise that emotional challenges are common – and that learning to navigate them is a key part of growing up.

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