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The original "Inside Out" followed 11-year-old Riley as she navigated new and uncomfortable emotions that arose from her family's cross-country move. The sequel picks up with Riley on the cusp of puberty and dealing with newfound anxiety. (Walt Disney Studios)



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Anyone who's experienced puberty will benefit from Disney/Pixar's latest masterpiece, "Inside Out 2."

While not touted as a spiritual film, "Inside Out 2" is a spiritual experience, as Disney/Pixar films tend to be. On the surface, the film presents itself as a coming-of-age tale of Riley Anderson, a young girl learning how to handle her emotions. But the movie's themes tend towards the existential and can help us reevaluate the foundation (or lack thereof) we have in the Divine.

The original "Inside Out" followed 11-year-old Riley as she navigated new and uncomfortable emotions that arose from her family's cross-country move. Joy, Sadness, Disgust, Fear and Anger were personified by endearing characters at her inner "Headquarters" who sorted through her memories, personality, friendships and real-time experiences. By the end of the film, the crew — and by extension, Riley herself — learned that Joy was not the only valid emotion.

The newly released sequel picks up with Riley on the cusp of puberty. Joy tells us that in her maturity, Riley has begun to create a new dimension of herself. She now has a "Belief System," physically depicted as luminescent threads deep in Riley's mind that can be plucked to hear its particular resonance: "I am a good person," "I'm kind," "Mom and Dad are proud of me." The threads of these beliefs ascend into Riley's Headquarters and form her seemingly spirited and positive "Sense of Self." To help ensure that the "Sense of Self" remains strong, uplifted and inherently good, Joy regularly sends Riley's negative thoughts to the "Back of the Mind."

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As we all know, this picking and choosing cannot be sustained. Soon puberty hits, causing chaos and destruction in Riley's head. Suddenly, the core gang is infiltrated by new emotions: Envy, Embarrassment, Ennui, Nostalgia and the "villain" of the story, Anxiety.

Anxiety is a take-charge gal. She presents herself at first as a positive force in Riley's life. She plans for the future. She lays out scenarios Riley may face so that she can be better prepared when the time comes. She takes it upon herself to break Riley's standing "Belief System" and announces to the other emotions that with Riley entering high school, she needs a new and improved, more complex "Sense of Self."

While this seems to work temporarily, soon Anxiety takes charge of Headquarters and her unhelpful traits dominate. She uses Riley's imagination against her, creating literal "projections" of worst case scenarios, which eventually culminates in Riley's "Sense of Self" becoming a repeating drone of "I'm not good enough." Anxiety is in full throttle, and Riley's mental health becomes victim to a ground-breaking depiction of a teenage anxiety attack after a particularly pivotal hockey penalty.

At this point, only Joy can break through the tornado of confusion, pleading with Anxiety: "You need to let her go." Anxiety realizes that despite her best efforts, she cannot control Riley. The collective gang of emotions come to understand that trying to sway the outcomes of life does not make the bad go away, it only causes more trouble.

As wholesome as Joy's intentions were in shielding Riley from heartache and embarrassment, her interaction with Anxiety forces her to see that hiding all of Riley's more difficult experiences or shortcomings was actually unhealthy for the girl's "Sense of Self."



In "Inside Out 2," Maya Hawke joins the cast of personified emotions as Anxiety. Amy Poehler lends her voice as Joy, Phyllis Smith as Sadness, Lewis Black as Anger, Tony Hale as Fear and Liza Lapira as Disgust. (Walt Disney Studios)

This is where the message of "Inside Out 2" can invite us into a deeper insight into our relationship with God. Many of us in faith-based struggles can see ourselves in Riley. From the beginning of our spiritual development we are told to seek joy, to "

[not let our hearts be troubled](#)," to cast all of our anxiety onto Christ, for we mean more to him "[than many sparrows](#)." But surrender is not easy. Many of us Catholic Christians find the course treacherous — and for those predisposed to anxiety, cultivating a relationship with God can be an even more formidable task.

We tend to start on a positive note. As young children in faith formation, the focus is primarily joy: We are taught that God is love and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. But soon enough we are introduced to the concepts of sin, eternal damnation and camels passing through the eyes of needles. If catechesis is misguided, the emphasis might lean too heavily on what we are forbidden to do, as opposed to what we are called to do. That disconnect can create "Belief Systems" and "Senses of Self" that are built on rocky soil, despite the best intentions.

The internalized message, much like Riley's, morphs from "God loves me" into "I am not good enough." We might begin to question our worth or battle with scrupulosity. Even saints like Ignatius Loyola and Thérèse of Lisieux struggled with characteristics of this mental health condition, akin to obsessive compulsive disorder. These conditions can completely blind us to the beauty that is God's mercy.

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God calls us to be our full selves. And as much as we hate to admit it, our full selves are a mix of good and bad. I am a good person — and I am selfish. We have become so accustomed to the binary (light and dark, good and evil, heaven and Hell), that we fail to see that humanity lies somewhere in the middle. We can use the knowledge of our weaknesses and acceptance of our complexities to move the needle closer to God.

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God does not expect perfection. As C.S. Lewis so eloquently wrote in *Mere Christianity*: "Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having." After all, who wants to receive love from someone doing it out of obligation or anxiety?

As "Inside Out 2" so vibrantly demonstrates, human nature comes with a spectrum of emotions: Sadness, Fear, Disgust, Anger, Ennui, Anxiety and Embarrassment, just to name a few. But in God, the core of our "Belief System" can be love and fullness of self; and knowing we are loved and accepted, flaws and all, can help lighten the yoke of our mental health struggles.

That's a lesson Riley — and all of us — eventually will learn.

This story appears in the **Oscars 2025** feature series. [View the full series.](#)

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