



# INSIDE OUT 2 FROM A THERAPIST'S PERSPECTIVE: A LOOK AT TEEN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND EMOTIONS

If you're a fan of Pixar's "Inside Out," you're in for a treat with "Inside Out 2." This sequel dives deeper into the crazy world of teen emotions and brain development, and as a therapist, I can tell you it's spot on.

## The Adolescent Brain: A Work in Progress

Let's talk about the teenage brain. It's like a construction zone—constantly changing and developing, and during adolescence, the brain goes through massive reconstruction. The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and rational thinking, is still under construction. Meanwhile, the limbic area, the part of the brain that processes emotions, is in overdrive.

## Emotions in Overdrive

In "Inside Out 2," Riley is now a teenager, and we get to see how her emotions have evolved. Adolescence is a time when emotions can feel like they're on a rollercoaster. The emotion console is completely remodeled in the film and becomes much more complex. This mirrors how cognitive and emotional experiences expand for teens at this time. Beliefs are forming and are now expanded to a world of influence outside of family (which becomes a smaller focus- depicted beautifully in the film). The world of friendship is expanded, and so is the influence. In the film, we meet several new emotions that arrive during this expansion, which tend to be the main characters in this developmental phase:

**Anxiety** is a big factor during the teenage years due to changes taking place socially, physically, emotionally, and all around. It can feel overwhelming and anxiety can be a major influence on thought patterns. But before you write her off as a villain, remember that Anxiety is an important emotion that draws our attention to things that are important and matter to us. Finding a way to coexist with anxiety is an important part of this phase.

**Embarrassment:** Teen years are characterized by awkward embarrassing moments, and Riley's experiences are no different. Because the teenage brain expands to recognize perspectives outside oneself, teens become aware of others' perceptions of them. You can cringe right along with Riley as she meets Embarrassment several times in the film!

**Ennui**, or a sense of boredom or disdain, is common among teens. With a brain primed to seek out excitement and meaning, this emotion shows up when those aren't easy to find. Sometimes confused for laziness in this phase, it's actually an important part of the brain's development to establish ourselves as individuals, separating ourselves from things that we disdain or are bored by. This helps teens search for what they are all about and most connected to, building the foundation of their identity.

**Envy:** As the brain starts to expand its reflection on social interactions, Envy shows up in social comparisons. We see Riley compare herself to her peers and make decisions based on those comparisons.





### Pointers for Parents:

When watching Inside Out 2, you will notice that Riley's emotions can be intense, variable, and don't line up with rational thinking. Remember that the brain's remodeling at this phase starts from the bottom up (emotional areas), meaning the parts of the brain addressing rational thinking, problem solving and consequences are not being remodeled yet. (That part continues through the mid-twenties). Bearing this in mind, there are so many great elements about this phase and ways you can support your teen:

#### 1. Keep Talking:

- Encourage open conversations about your teen's feelings, knowing that you may do more of the talking as they learn to do this. Let them know it's okay to feel anxious, embarrassed, bored, or envious. Share your own experiences to show them they're not alone.

#### 2. Be Understanding:

- Remember, the teenage brain is still developing and this phase is meant to have more intense emotions. This phase can be emotionally and physically exhausting as major brain changes take place that rival (and in many ways exceed) early childhood brain development. Just as Riley experienced huge shifts from one day to the next, your teen may too.

#### 3. Create a Safe Space:

- Make your home a place where they feel safe to express themselves, and when they are doing so, listen deeply. Show genuine care for what they share with you. Be supportive and avoid overreacting to their emotional outbursts. Take time to take your own deep breaths, use grounding strategies, and seek your own support system to help you keep yourself even keeled and your home a safe space.

#### 4. Encourage Healthy Outlets:

- Help them find activities they enjoy. Whether it's sports, art, or writing, finding a healthy way to express their emotions can be incredibly beneficial.

### Tips for Teens

If you're a teenager reading this, "Inside Out 2" shows that you're not alone in feeling all the feels. Here are some tips to help you manage your emotions:

#### 1. Anxiety:

- Remember that anxiety helps us focus on important things. We want to have some anxiety (to help study for an upcoming test) but for it to be an amount that we can manage. When it builds up too much, do calming activities that help you calm your body or your mind, like deep breathing, journaling, meditation, exercise, talking to a trusted friend/relative/counselor.

#### 2. Embarrassment:

- Everyone has embarrassing moments. Be kind to yourself and try to focus on the positive. Think of what you might tell a friend experiencing something embarrassing and give yourself that same perspective.

#### 3. Ennui:

- Explore new hobbies or interests - this can also help you find friends who are interested in similar things. This is a time where you will be more in charge of some areas of your life, so setting goals for yourself can give you something to look forward to and keep you motivated.

#### 4. Envy:

- Focus on what you're grateful for in your own life and about yourself. Comparing yourself to others isn't fair—everyone's journey is different. Be especially aware of how you feel after using social media. If you don't feel uplifted or motivated, consider taking breaks or reviewing who you are following. Use envy as motivation to pursue your own goals.

"Inside Out 2" is a great chance for parents to remember that their teens are learning how to manage new (and big) emotions and for teens to remember that everyone around them is experiencing drastic and confusing changes. Embrace this time of life as one to strengthen your teen-parent relationship and know that each emotion brings you closer to becoming the incredible person you are meant to be. Keep talking, keep feeling and keep thriving.



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