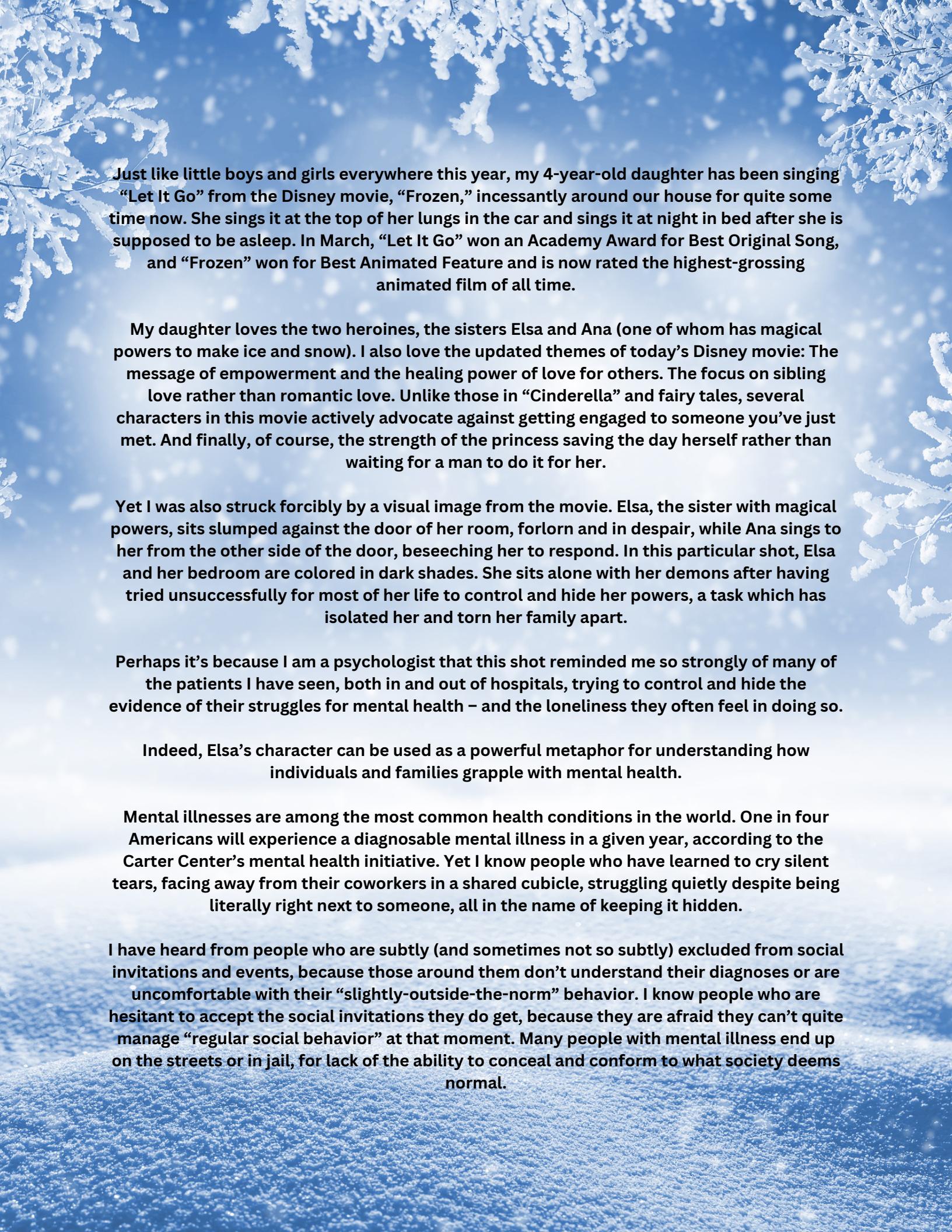


WHAT DISNEY'S FROZEN CAN TEACH US ABOUT

Mental Illness

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Just like little boys and girls everywhere this year, my 4-year-old daughter has been singing “Let It Go” from the Disney movie, “Frozen,” incessantly around our house for quite some time now. She sings it at the top of her lungs in the car and sings it at night in bed after she is supposed to be asleep. In March, “Let It Go” won an Academy Award for Best Original Song, and “Frozen” won for Best Animated Feature and is now rated the highest-grossing animated film of all time.

My daughter loves the two heroines, the sisters Elsa and Ana (one of whom has magical powers to make ice and snow). I also love the updated themes of today’s Disney movie: The message of empowerment and the healing power of love for others. The focus on sibling love rather than romantic love. Unlike those in “Cinderella” and fairy tales, several characters in this movie actively advocate against getting engaged to someone you’ve just met. And finally, of course, the strength of the princess saving the day herself rather than waiting for a man to do it for her.

Yet I was also struck forcibly by a visual image from the movie. Elsa, the sister with magical powers, sits slumped against the door of her room, forlorn and in despair, while Ana sings to her from the other side of the door, beseeching her to respond. In this particular shot, Elsa and her bedroom are colored in dark shades. She sits alone with her demons after having tried unsuccessfully for most of her life to control and hide her powers, a task which has isolated her and torn her family apart.

Perhaps it’s because I am a psychologist that this shot reminded me so strongly of many of the patients I have seen, both in and out of hospitals, trying to control and hide the evidence of their struggles for mental health – and the loneliness they often feel in doing so.

Indeed, Elsa’s character can be used as a powerful metaphor for understanding how individuals and families grapple with mental health.

Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the world. One in four Americans will experience a diagnosable mental illness in a given year, according to the Carter Center’s mental health initiative. Yet I know people who have learned to cry silent tears, facing away from their coworkers in a shared cubicle, struggling quietly despite being literally right next to someone, all in the name of keeping it hidden.

I have heard from people who are subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) excluded from social invitations and events, because those around them don’t understand their diagnoses or are uncomfortable with their “slightly-outside-the-norm” behavior. I know people who are hesitant to accept the social invitations they do get, because they are afraid they can’t quite manage “regular social behavior” at that moment. Many people with mental illness end up on the streets or in jail, for lack of the ability to conceal and conform to what society deems normal.



Even when help is available, it is not unusual for people to feel hesitant to reach out for it, for fear of the labels that might be attached to them, by employers, by friends, and even by family. Despite anti-stigma campaigns, including via the mainstream media, and despite many courageous well-known people coming forth with their own struggles (Billy Joel, Brooke Shields, Buzz Aldrin, and more) there remains a stigma in this and many other countries associated with having less than perfect mental health.

Elsa's song, "Let It Go," is itself a powerful metaphor for understanding our society's stigma around mental illness. Her words, "A kingdom of isolation and it looks like I'm the Queen," describe in one poignant lyric how so many people dealing with mental illness feel in their lives.

Elsa continues: "The wind is howling, like this swirling storm inside, Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried."

"Don't let them in, don't let them see, be the good girl you always have to be! Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know...."

All of these lyrics strike a chord with me in terms of the reality of mental health. My daughter asks repeatedly about another of the song's lyrics, "You'll never see me cry." "Why, Mommy?" she asks, "Why won't they see her cry?" And I struggle with how to answer. That many people view tears as a weakness? Why? That's not necessarily the message I want to send.

And then comes the part in the song that has called to so many people, the empowerment part, the part where you accept yourself for who you are: "Let it go! Let it go! And I'll rise like the break of dawn! Let it go! Let it go! That perfect girl is gone!" Elsa goes up to the mountaintop and comes into her own. She still has trials and tribulations and growth to face. Who doesn't? She still has society's stigma to face when she comes back down (they chain her in a dungeon, for starters). But she is a different human being from the one who first ran up the mountain. Elsa has accepted herself for who she is and is no longer afraid to let others see her, powers and all.

Why were her powers ever treated as a shameful curse anyway? The excuse given in the movie is that Elsa's magic injured her sister, Ana. But it was an accident, which when seen in context, was clearly as much Ana's fault as it was Elsa's, much the way that any two little children playing together might inadvertently get hurt.

Similarly, why do we treat mental problems as something more shameful than physical problems? Later in the movie, Elsa is literally chained in a dungeon because of her powers, much the way we used to treat patients with mental illness in asylums in this country. It is, of course, supposedly for both her and our protection. Thankfully, that particular practice isn't as common here in the United States anymore, yet the stigma continues.

To be sure, the analogy between "Frozen's" Elsa and mental health is undoubtedly not what Disney (or Hans Christian Anderson, who wrote the original "The Snow Queen" on which "Frozen" is based) had in mind when creating these characters and framing this movie. Nor, despite the rising toll of mental health in children, is the analogy something I plan to bring up with my own 4-year-old just yet.

However, for those of us older and more familiar with the mental health stigma in this country, the movie is encouraging for its depiction of Elsa's growing acceptance of herself and society's eventual acceptance of her as well. And although life is rarely as simple as the "happily-ever-after" of a Disney film, "Frozen" nonetheless stands as a case in which real life could stand to learn from art.