

# Disney Movies Encanto and Frozen. An REBT and Cinematherapy Perspective

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**ABSTRACT.** If you are a parent, then you must have seen those two cartoons (Encanto and Frozen) a dozen times. And if you are not a parent, then you certainly heard of them, because they are some of Disney's best and largest projects, and not just in terms of box office income, which was huge (close to 3 billion dollars, combined). Financial aspects aside, the two productions are amazing because of their powerful educational messages. In this article, we analyse the educational messages and behaviours anchored in the Rational Emotive Behaviour Theory, a form of psychotherapy that focuses on helping individuals identify and change irrational beliefs that lead to negative emotions and self-defeating behaviours. We also analyse the two movies from a cinematherapy perspective. We conclude and recommend that the two movies can and should be used by parents, educators, and counsellors all over the world to educate their children about some rational attitudes (unconditional self-acceptance, unconditional other-acceptance and life acceptance, self-awareness), as well as important values (family, friendship, honesty, courage) and also as therapeutic instruments from a cinematherapy perspective.

**Keywords:** Encanto, Frozen, Disney, cartoons, educational messages, rational emotive, cinematherapy

## Introduction

Ten years ago, in 2013, the world was again positively surprised by a beautiful cinematic production from Disney, called Frozen. The story is about two sisters, both princesses, that have to overcome all sorts of challenges, but

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mostly get out of their own comfort zones. The story is inspired from “The Snow Queen”, by Hans Christian Andersen and tells the story of Princess Anna, who sets out on an epic journey to find her older sister Elsa, whose powers have caused an eternal winter in the kingdom of Arendelle. Along the way, she meets an ice harvester named Kristoff and his reindeer Sven, as well as Olaf, a snowman brought to life by Elsa’s magic. The film was a huge commercial success and won two Academy Awards, one for Best Animated Feature and another for Best Original Song for the hit song "Let It Go". It also became one of the highest-grossing animated films of all time, and spawned several merchandise products, as well as a hit soundtrack and a sequel, "Frozen 2," which was released in 2019. "Frozen 2" amazes the audience with an impressive production that shows a mature story, excellent graphics and proves that the time between the two appearances has been well spent. In 2021, Disney strikes again, with a movie called "Encanto", about a Colombian family that finds refuge in a remote mountain area and controls everything in their lives, through magic, except for the family connections and communication. The film is set in a magical Colombian village called Encanto, where a young girl named Mirabel has to save her family and their magical powers. Along the way, she discovers the power of unity and family, and learns that true strength comes from being true to oneself. The film features a star-studded voice cast and a soundtrack filled with catchy and upbeat songs that will have you tapping your feet along to the rhythm. "Encanto" has received positive reviews from audiences and critics alike, with many praising its heartwarming story, vibrant animation, and upbeat music.

Following the line of Disney stories, these two have beautifully written texts, with very healthy messages. In this article, we analyse the texts that appear in the soundtrack songs of the two movies (Frozen and Encanto), from the viewpoint of the Rational Emotive Behaviour Theory (REBT) developed by Albert Ellis in 1955, one of the most renowned and prolific psychologists and psychotherapists.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a type of cognitive-behavioural therapy that was developed by psychologist Albert Ellis in the 1950s. REBT is based on the premise that our emotions and behaviours are largely influenced by our beliefs and attitudes (Ellis, 2005). According to REBT, when we experience psychological distress, it is often not because of the events that happen to us but because of the irrational beliefs and attitudes that we have about those events. The goal of REBT is to help individuals identify and challenge their irrational beliefs and replace them with more rational and healthy beliefs. This process involves a three-step process of disputing irrational beliefs, developing a more rational perspective, and then acting on that new perspective (Ellis, 2019). REBT also emphasises the importance of acceptance and unconditional self-

acceptance. This means accepting ourselves and others, even with our flaws and limitations, and recognizing that our worth as a person is not dependent on our achievements or failures (Ellis, 2002; 2010).

Analysing the texts in those movies, you will notice that they are “by the book”, first irrational and then very rational and educational.

The two movies, Frozen and Encanto, can be used from a cinematherapy perspective. From a psychology perspective, cinematherapy is an innovative therapeutic approach that uses the power of film to promote emotional healing, personal growth, and psychological well-being. Rooted in the principles of narrative therapy and psychotherapy, cinematherapy harnesses the inherent psychological impact of cinematic storytelling to facilitate introspection, empathy, and insight. Unlike traditional therapeutic methods, cinematherapy encourages individuals to engage with carefully selected films as a means of exploring their own emotions, thoughts, and experiences. By immersing oneself in the narrative arcs, characters, and themes depicted on screen, individuals can establish a unique and deeply personal connection with the cinematic material. This connection serves as a catalyst for self-reflection, allowing viewers to project their own struggles, conflicts, and aspirations onto the characters and situations depicted in the film.

Cinematherapy operates on the premise that stories and characters presented in movies can act as mirrors, reflecting the viewer's inner world and providing a safe space for emotional exploration. Through identification with characters, viewers can gain a deeper understanding of their own psychological challenges, develop empathy towards others, and find comfort in realising that they are not alone in their struggles. By witnessing characters navigate their own psychological journeys and overcome obstacles, individuals can glean valuable insights, coping strategies, and perspectives that can be applied to their own lives. The therapeutic process of cinematherapy involves a collaboration between the viewer and a trained mental health professional, such as a psychotherapist or counsellor. Together, they select films that resonate with the viewer's specific therapeutic goals, personal history, and psychological needs. Through guided discussions, analysis, and reflection, the viewer is encouraged to explore the emotional impact of the film, identify parallels between the characters' experiences and their own, and extract meaningful lessons and insights. Cinematherapy can be used in various therapeutic contexts, including individual therapy, group therapy, and even self-help practices. It can be particularly effective in addressing a wide range of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, trauma, grief, relationship difficulties, and personal growth challenges. By engaging with films in a purposeful, reflective manner, individuals can harness the transformative power of storytelling to gain a fresh perspective,

enhance self-awareness, and cultivate positive psychological change. It is important to note that cinematherapy is not a substitute for professional mental health treatment but rather a complementary approach that can augment and enrich the therapeutic process. It is always recommended that individuals seeking psychological support consult with qualified mental health professionals to ensure a comprehensive and personalised approach to their well-being. Cinematherapy can use a wide range of children's movies to facilitate therapeutic processes and promote emotional well-being, and *Frozen* and *Encanto* are two of the most iconic ones.

*Frozen* and *Encanto* align with the core principles of cinematherapy, harnessing the transformative power of film to promote emotional healing, personal growth, and psychological well-being, through the following aspects:

1. *Emotional Engagement*: Both films deeply engage viewers on an emotional level, captivating them with compelling storytelling, relatable characters, and evocative visuals. *Frozen* and *Encanto* draw viewers into the characters' emotional journeys, allowing them to connect with and experience a wide range of emotions. This emotional engagement is a fundamental aspect of cinematherapy, as it provides a safe and immersive space for viewers to explore their own emotions and experiences.

2. *Identification and Reflection*: *Frozen* and *Encanto* present characters who face relatable challenges, struggles, and self-discovery. Viewers can identify with the characters' experiences, dilemmas, and emotional arcs. By reflecting on the characters' journeys, viewers can gain insights into their own lives, beliefs, and emotions. This process of identification and reflection is a central aspect of cinematherapy, as it facilitates self-exploration, personal growth, and the development of empathy.

3. *Symbolism and Metaphor*: Both films employ symbolism and metaphor to convey deeper psychological and emotional themes. *Frozen*'s icy powers serve as a metaphor for Elsa's emotional isolation and fear of self-expression, while *Encanto*'s magical gifts represent the pressure to conform and the search for self-acceptance. These symbolic elements provide rich material for discussions and analysis in cinematherapy, as they invite viewers to explore the deeper meaning behind the story and relate it to their own lives.

4. *Catharsis and Emotional Release*: Both *Frozen* and *Encanto* elicit powerful emotional responses from viewers, allowing for catharsis and emotional release. The climactic moments, poignant musical numbers, and emotional resolutions provide opportunities for viewers to release pent-up emotions, experience a

sense of catharsis, and find emotional relief. This cathartic process is a crucial aspect of cinematherapy, as it enables emotional healing and promotes emotional well-being.

5. *Therapeutic Discussion and Insight:* Cinematherapy involves guided discussions and reflections on the film's content and themes. Frozen and Encanto provide ample material for therapeutic discussions, allowing viewers to analyse the characters' experiences, motivations, and growth. These discussions facilitate insight and self-awareness, as viewers gain new perspectives, challenge their beliefs, and apply the lessons learned from the film to their own lives.

6. *Personal Empowerment:* Both films empower viewers by showcasing characters who overcome obstacles, embrace their uniqueness, and find strength within themselves. Frozen and Encanto inspire viewers to believe in their own abilities, challenge societal expectations, and pursue personal growth. This empowerment aspect of the films aligns with cinematherapy's goal of fostering personal agency, resilience, and positive change.

In summary, Frozen and Encanto embody the core principles of cinematherapy by engaging viewers emotionally, facilitating identification and reflection, using symbolism and metaphor, providing catharsis and emotional release, fostering therapeutic discussions and insight, and promoting personal empowerment. These films exemplify the transformative potential of cinematherapy, offering valuable tools for emotional healing, personal growth, and psychological well-being.

## **Frozen**

The two main characters in both Frozen 1 and 2 are Elsa and Anna, two sisters that became orphans, as their parents drowned somewhere in a southern sea. Forced to grow alone, they also grow apart, as Elsa, the elder sister, feels guilty about injuring her younger sister, back when they were kids. Because of this, Elsa decides to hide from the world and conceal her powers. On her 18th birthday, reluctantly, she has to open the doors to the realm called Arendelle, as it is her coronation day. The first song that reveals this scene is called "For the First Time in Forever" (Anderson-Lopez & Lopez, 2013), and it is a parallel in the thoughts and actions of the two sisters. Anna is joyful and cannot wait for the coronation day to arrive, while Elsa is reluctant and fearful. This song beautifully shows how the same event can be interpreted differently, by two different characters (Anna and Elsa), which is somewhat the base of REBT. REBT is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) that aims to help individuals identify and challenge the irrational beliefs that lead to dysfunctional and

maladaptive negative emotions and behaviours (Matweychuk, DiGiuseppe & Gulyayeva, 2019). REBT (Ellis, 2005) states that an individual's belief system is the one that causes emotional and behavioural consequences. In the previous example, the two sisters experience the same event differently because they have different beliefs. Anna is hardly waiting to experience the opening of the doors of the realm that has been closed for the entire world. She then gives the explanation for this behaviour and excitement, saying that for the first time ever she will be able to dance all night and enjoy the music. The focus is on the idea of not being alone anymore, for the first time in forever, because her sister, Elsa, has left her alone when she hid herself in one of the rooms of the castle. Anna even tries to understand her emotions and, although she cannot exactly pinpoint them, she places them somewhere between elated and gassy.

Elsa, on the other hand, is anxious about the entire event and wishes everything could go away, because she has to be very careful not to show her powers to the world. Her words have double meanings, stating that she wishes she should not have to let them inside the realm and the castle, and also in her world. She then continues by reminding her that she has to be someone else, to conceal her powers and emotions, so that the others will not see just how powerful she can be. Although we do not know yet at this stage, the story will later tell us that Elsa can actually control her powers, if she allows herself that and if she knows herself better. This will later be revealed when she arrives on a far, remote mountain, similar to other stories, where the character gets out of her comfort zone and grows in knowledge and power.

Elsa experiences emotional reasoning, when she believes that, if she feels guilty (for accidentally injuring her younger sister Ana, when they were kids), she must be guilty. This is a concept often found in REBT (Dryden, 2012), that shows an error in judgement. Elsa uses emotions instead of reasons, which leads her to believe she is guilty, because she feels guilty. Only later in the movie, towards the end of it, she realises and accepts that there were accidents (both injuring her sister and freezing the realm of Arendelle), which then leads to a change in her, from the feeling of guilt to regret. Guilt is seen as a negative dysfunctional emotion in REBT, while regret is still negative, yet functional. Functional means that it helps you achieve your goals, while dysfunctional prevents you from reaching your goals. In Elsa's case, her guilt stopped her from living a normal life, where she would accept her for who she was. She also experiences an internal demand that she must be perfect. In REBT it is called a must or a should (Hutchinson & Chapman, 2005), and it can be directed to self, others or the world. In Elsa's situation, she directs her musts and shoulds towards herself, demanding from her nothing less than perfection.

The four lines in the 12th paragraph of the song are epic in their power to show just how different the same words can mean such different things. Elsa

says that “it’s only for today”, meaning that she only has to be careful one day, and then everything can get back to normal (her normal), while Anna says the exact same words (“it’s only for today”), with a totally different meaning, being sort of upset that the entire event will only last a day, while she would wish it would never end. The same approach is with the last two lines from the four, when Elsa says that “it’s agony to wait”, meaning it is agony for her to wait until it happens and then agony while it happens, as she needs to be very careful not to reveal anything about herself and her powers. Anna repeats the same words as her sister, “it’s agony to wait”, meaning that she can’t wait for the event to happen and unfold in front of her. Elsa’s emotions are those of anxiety and dread, while Anna is feeling a joyful expectation and elation.

Probably one of the most famous songs in *Frozen 1* is “Let it Go” (Anderson-Lopez & Lopez, 2013), which depicts the scene where Elsa has run away from her kingdom, following an incident where she got angry and could not control her powers anymore. Because of that, she accidentally froze the entire kingdom (this being her power - the ability to control water, in all forms and shapes), so she runs away, to protect herself and her sister. She arrives on a remote and lonely mountain, where she decides to remain forever, thus isolating herself from the rest of the world and passively accepting that she can never change. This is not a healthy approach, in the view of REBT, because it only solves the problem in the short term. In the long run, however, her problems are still there, besides the fact that she lost her sister and her kingdom. The scene is beautifully described in the first lines of the song and it takes you there, even if you do not see the images. From the first lines we discover that the scene looks like an isolated kingdom, where the wind howls, and she feels like a storm would spiral and spin inside of her, which she tried to keep it in but failed. She then repeats herself the same message as in the previous song, like a mantra, but without success, telling herself to conceal her feelings, so that the others will not see how she feels. From the last line of this verse, we find out that she feels guilty for not having succeeded to hide her feelings, so the isolation makes even more sense.

She then decides to leave everything and everyone behind, to let it go, which is the central theme of the song and also the title. Because she cannot control her powers and emotions anymore, she decides to leave in rage. She also mentions that she does not care anymore about what others might say, and this is the turning point where other people’s opinions become less important to her, although she does not know it yet. She ends the idea with a decision that brings her peace of mind, namely that she will remain in her kingdom of ice, where cold does not bother her. The concept of storm has double meaning too, one being a real storm as a natural phenomenon, the other being what people think of her.

The turning point in her thoughts, where her rigid thinking starts to become more flexible, is when she decides to distance herself from everything and make big problems seem smaller, and also lower her fears. In REBT, this is called perspective taking (Vernon, 2019) and it involves distancing yourself from a problem long or far enough to actually see how insignificant it can be, because you make a problem big or small. This way, you begin to realise that you are in control of what you think, feel and behave (Vernon, 2006b).

When she finally realises that she is in control, she promises to test her powers and see what she can do, without the limitations she imposed herself so far. This way she becomes free.

Then the allegory continues and she repeats the same words as the title, "*let it go*", yet this time with a different approach, the one of freedom and acknowledgement of power. After this realisation of power and control, she makes a statement to settle there, leave the past in the past and accept her powers and limitations.

The transformation is complete in the last verse, where she claims that the perfect girl she used to be is gone, and that she is now the queen of ice.

After that, Anna enters the scene and travels to the remote mountain, to find her sister and ask her to come back to Arendelle and return the kingdom to its former state. Along the way, she receives help from Kristoff, an ice expert that will later become her friend, from Sven (Kristoff's reindeer) and from Olaf, a magical creature in the form of a snowman, created by Elsa when they were kids, and when she accidentally injured her sister, while playing. The scenes are funny and also educative, as they show a lot of moral values such as self control, friendship, social care and responsibility (Widyahening, Nugraheni & Rahayu, 2023). Anna's concern and love for her sister is also something to be valued in this movie, as she travels far away and faces dangers and challenges to help her sibling. After a longer debate, Anna convinces Elsa to return to her kingdom, take control of her powers and assume leadership of the realm. In the final scene, we see again the dedication of the two sisters for the wellbeing of the other. While Anna is on a frozen lake, shimmering from the cold and almost killed by a villain that wants to take over the kingdom, Elsa intervenes and protects her sister, at the cost of her own life. Elsa uses her powers to freeze herself entirely and destroy the sword the villain has raised upon her. The sword shatters when touching Elsa and thus both sisters are protected. Anna recovers from the cold and sees her sister frozen, but manages to bring her back to life with her tears.

As expected, the movie has a happy ending, with Elsa and Anna back together in Arendelle, which is now ruled by Elsa, who has accepted her powers. The conclusions of the first part of Frozen are summarised in the following ideas:



- 1) With power comes responsibility, which needs to be assumed. Elsa's power has always been present in her, but she needed to understand and control it. Only then she managed to make amazing things possible.
- 2) Running away from problems only postpones them, and they will come back harder, when you least expect it.
- 3) When you stop caring obsessively about what others might think of you, you begin to have control over your thoughts, emotions and behaviours.
- 4) Sometimes it helps to use the technique called perspective-taking and distance yourself from the problem. This way, you have a better chance to see the solution.
- 5) True friends will go to the end of the world for you, to help you. It also helps to let them be of assistance and not shut them away.

Frozen 2 (Anderson-Lopez & Lopez, 2019) goes to a whole new level with the educational messages and moral values. We discover the two sisters a few years later, still best friends, sharing happy moments in Arendelle. One of the first scenes depicts the main characters (Elsa, Anna, Kristoff, Olaf) playing charades in one of the castle's rooms, and Kristoff building up courage to propose Anna into marriage. While playing, Elsa hears something indistinctly and then again while sleeping. She follows that voice into something that will become yet another adventure for her and everyone else. It is very interesting how the creators of the movie and songs go about the messages in one of the first songs, called "Into the Unknown", showing Elsa's struggle to resist temptation and avoid hearing something that will become a new challenge. We know from Elsa's own words that she can hear the voice, but she makes a conscious decision not to follow it, at first. She wants to move on with her life, ignore the whispers and let them go away, which is something all of us want to do with problems and troubles.

She then continues by trying to convince herself that what she hears is nothing but a ringing in her ear, which she will ignore, because she took the decision to settle in her castle, once and for all. The antithesis between the words "*if I heard you*" and "*which I don't*" shows her struggle to resist the calling, which will make her follow the voice into the unknown. She tries to convince herself that she has everything she needs and everyone she loves just around her. Although these lyrics seem convincing and portray a character that feels satisfied with what she has, we are next revealed that, in fact, she is still seeking something new, because she feels that she is not where she is meant to be. She feels and knows that she is different and still has not yet found her place among others, and we discover that her powers keep growing and that she longs to go again into the unknown. This is something inheritably expected for humans, the

need to discover themselves and new places and people. From an REBT point of view, this is a healthy expression of Elsa's desire for self-discovery and growth, as opposed to the feelings of fear and self-doubt. Step by step, we discover Elsa as she challenges her irrational beliefs and fears that she cannot pursue her true identity because of the unknown. Facing this uncertainty and her fears, Elsa shows a willingness to take calculated risks and live a fulfilling life, full of sense and meaning, which is an essential part of REBT.

The next song in the movie is "Some Things Never Change", which is about some of the things that matter in life, such as family, friendship and trust. The main idea in this song and these lyrics is that what matters is the fact that they are all together, so family and friendship matter. The things mentioned by Anna, such as the way they all get along just fine, or how she's holding on tight to everyone, are the certain certainties that give them peace of mind, and with this, the movie characters invite children and adults alike to enjoy every moment, to see them as precious and, instead of trying to freeze them, to try to seize the day.

The next song ("When I am Older") with lots of rational ideas is the one sung by Olaf, the snowman, which sings about the things that will make sense later, when you are older, and the lyrics express feelings of comfort and security in the face of uncertainty and change. The invitation is to be patient enough and wait for when you will be older, and many things that might have been scary or strange, will make sense later in life. Olaf also translates the process of growing up as adaptation (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007) and understanding the world and how you fit in it. From an REBT point of view, these lyrics promote an adaptive belief system that helps to counteract feelings of anxiety and fear about change. Focusing on the things in life that do not change, people can feel more secure and confident, even in the face of uncertainty.

The last meaningful song in Frozen 2 is "Show Yourself", depicting Elsa in a strange new world, where she is searching for the truth about her past and her identity. This is the place where she discovers her true self and learns to truly accept who she is and how powerful she can be (come). The lyrics highlight the theme of self-discovery and the importance of facing fears and insecurities, to find true happiness and fulfilment. From an REBT perspective, the song invites you to challenge and overcome your self-imposed limitations, and strive for self-realisation.

Overall, the lyrics in Frozen songs are full of rational messages, or they become rational as the movie progresses, thus educating children and viewers into having a rational approach to life. They cover topics like self-discovery and self-acceptance, facing fears and disputing irrational thoughts, to achieve fulfilment and happiness.

## Encanto

The second movie in this analysis is Encanto (Miranda, 2021), also a Disney production from 2021, about a Colombian family that has to flee from dangerous bandits and hide in the mountains. The head of the family is killed and his wife is left alone with three small babies. When all hope seems lost, she receives a present in the form of an Encanto or a charm that allows her to protect her family and everyone else around. She gathers her strengths and builds a community, helped by the magical powers she receives. Then, all of her children and grandchildren receive magical powers, as depicted in the first song, The Family Madrigal. The main character of the movie is Mirabel, and everything revolves around her, despite what she said in the first song, that her grandmother runs the show. Mirabel's grandmother, or Abuela, is the one that was given the miracle, when her husband was killed by bandits. Then, the song takes us through the powers of each character. Pepa (Mirabel's aunt) controls the weather. From an REBT perspective, Pepa is the perfect example of what happens when we do not control our thoughts - when we get angry or upset, we release rain or a hurricane around us. Of course, this is presented in a stylised form, and teaches us that, if we control our thoughts, we can also control the way we feel and behave (Banks, 2011). Then comes Mirabel's uncle, Bruno, which for some reason is not talked about until later in the movie. Mirabel's mother has the ability to cure people with her food, a reference to her powers as well as the idea of comfort food cooked with passion and love. From these lines, we get a first glimpse of the pressure Mirabel feels in such a powerful and magical family. At the end of the song, we discover that, unlike the rest of her family (direct descendants of her grandmother), she did not receive a power gift, on the day she was supposed to. Only at the end of the movie do we realise what her gift really is.

What is important and impressive from an REBT point of view is that Mirabel claims she never feels left outside or frustrated for not having a super power like her family. Instead, she feels perfectly normal and truly happy to be part of the amazing Madrigal family, which shows self and other-acceptance, two major REBT concepts. Later on, we will discover that things are not exactly as presented in the beginning. Then the song continues with the description of Mirabel's sisters and cousin. Her cousin Dolores has the amazing ability to hear everything, even a pin dropping, her cousin Camilo can shape shift, her cousin Antonio is about to receive a new gift that day, her older sisters, Isabela and Luisa, one is super strong and the other is very graceful and perfect. Recent studies (Convoy, 2022) focus on the intergenerational trauma when analysing Encanto. Although this is present in the movie, we are more focused on the communication problems that exist between different generations (especially

between the grandmother and her children and grandchildren). We will discuss these issues later on in the article, and we state that these communication issues reside in the exaggerated expectations Abuela has concerning her family. Everyone has to be perfect in everything they do, and this is, according to REBT, an irrational belief and attitude, that leads to many subsequent problems. Although well intended, Abuela allows for no margin of error in everyone around her. Although this has not always been the case, she has decided to toughen up after her husband was killed and she was left alone with three small babies. In REBT, this demandingness for perfection is considered to be irrational and dysfunctional (Ellis, 2002), because perfection can never be achieved.

Striving for perfection is a source of frustration and regret, and this becomes obvious in everyone's behaviour. Abuela clearly states these ideas within the song and while her intentions are good and honourable, she misses the whole point of the miracle she's been given and forgets who it is for actually. She is helpful for the miracle she was given and for that she swears to always keep the community close. It is her firm belief that, through work and dedication, they will earn the miracle and be worthy of it. Of course, these behaviours are commendable, provided she would not put so much pressure on everyone to be and behave perfectly. In doing so, she puts people in second place.

Mirabel then sings again about her two sisters (Isabela and Luisa), one beautiful and graceful, the other one very strong. Isabela is the graceful, beautiful sister from whom everybody expects nothing less than perfection. She can control flowers around her and make them grow whenever she wants. She is expected to marry Mariano, a handsome young man from the village, in an arranged marriage, despite the fact that she does not want that. On the other hand, Luisa is so strong that she can move mountains and churches and everyone asks her everything related to carrying super heavy stuff. In a nutshell, this is the Madrigal family, a complex and intricate Colombian family living in a beautiful and magical place called Encanto. Or, as Mirabel calls them, a flawless constellation, where everyone can shine.

Perhaps one of the most obvious songs from an REBT perspective is "Surface Pressure", whose main character is Luisa, Mirabel's older sister. This song shows the two sisters (Luisa and Mirabel) singing about the pressure Luisa has to bear. The images and the words are extremely well chosen and show the pressure she endures daily, which drives her close to burn out. From these first lines, we discover that she is the strong one in the family and that she is not nervous, although at the same time she states this, her eye is twitching, which can sometimes be a sign of nervousness and fatigue. She then continues with the idea that she is super tough, and that she glows because she knows what her worth is. From an REBT perspective, this seems very rational, because when you discover your strengths you can feel confident. Unfortunately, she believes

that she can only be worthy as long as she is powerful enough to help everyone else and “move mountains and churches”. Because of the daily pressure (that she and everyone else exerts), her strength starts to crack. This is the tipping point that shows us that anything or anyone can break at a certain point, when enough pressure is applied. In Luisa’s situation, the unrealistic demands from her grandmother become a rule for everyone, including herself. Luisa continues her description as being super strong, comparing herself to diamonds and platinum (although platinum is half the hardness of diamond). From her own words we find out that she never asks how hard it is what she has to do, she simply does it, because her surface is indestructible. The word that really helps us understand just how thin the thin red line is, is *surface*, which simply covers anything that might be problematic. On the surface, she seems fine, but she is actually not, as we uncover from her words. Luisa compares her feelings with what a tightrope walker might feel in a circus, and then quickly jumps to another statement that cancels her feeling, asking and arguing with herself if Hercules ever refused to fight the Cerberus (creatures from the Greek ancient mythology, where Hercules is a demigod fighting evil, and Cerberus is the hound of Hades, the god of the Underworld). In REBT terms, what Luisa says reveals the entire problem, when she questions her worth if she cannot help others. With this, Luisa acknowledges that her worth, her value, is given by the fact that she can be of service. And, under the surface, when she starts to believe that she can no longer be helpful to others, the cracks begin to show into her self-trust and confidence. REBT clearly states that a person’s value is given not by what he/she does, yet simply by the fact that he/she exists (Ellis, 1996).

Luisa gives one of the most descriptive explanations on pressure that we or others put on ourselves, in the same song “Pressure”, when she describes how it all accumulates, day by day, bit by bit. This explains that pressure does not appear all of a sudden, instead it gathers slowly, through small flaws and cracks. She then continues to lower her self-worth by asking herself what her value is and who she is, if she cannot deal with heavy stuff, with problems and pressure.

Then she reveals where she hides all this pressure, namely under the surface, as if she was wearing a mask. She is apprehensive that something might hurt the family, so the pressure increases furthermore, and she feels even more responsible for taking care of everyone. This is counterproductive, because REBT clearly states that each of us is responsible for the way one thinks, feels or behaves (Dryden, 2003). Luisa tries to somehow preserve a balance in her life, by lining up the domino pieces and trying to stop the many tasks in her life from tumbling. She somehow fails in doing that, because of the pressure and perfectionism she experiences.

Next, Luisa suggests a possible solution to all this pressure that adds up. She realises that all the pressure she experiences is because of the expectations she and others have about her, and she wonders whether shaking those expectations would not give her joy, which is in tune with REBT (Ellis, 2021).

Because of this pressure, no mistakes are allowed (Dryden & Newnan, 2013). In fact, she truly believes that if she makes no mistakes, no pressure will appear. Again, she compares herself to her behaviours and powers, which is seen in REBT as a mistake (Anderson, 2002). The conclusion of this song is that we put pressure on ourselves by listening to others and by allowing them to control our thoughts and lives. In Luisa's case, she allows her grandmother to control her, because she wants to be perfect and loved by her. This adds a daily pressure that eventually cracks the surface and explodes.

In the next song called "What else can I do?", we discover Mirabel's other sister, Isabela, who is considered to be perfection itself. Her gift and power consist in the ability to control and create flowers, which is eventually a gift for others to enjoy. This has also made her perfect in the eyes of everyone and has increased the expectations about her. In this song, she sings about the joy of discovering the new things she can do. We see again the need for perfection in her words, saying about the new flowers she created that they are not perfect nor symmetrical, yet they belong to her. She rejoices because she finally has something of her own, that she can keep and enjoy, even though it is now symmetrical or perfect. In REBT, perfection is considered to be an irrational attitude (Ellis, 2002), because it only leads to frustration and suffering, as it cannot be achieved.

The song continues to describe what Isabel does daily, which might seem very appealing and attractive, but in reality it is fake to her. She creates miles of roses, to keep everyone satisfied and she practises a fake smile and pose, to look perfect. She is also demanded perfection, just like her sister Luisa, but on a different approach, one of grace and beauty. Her self questioning continues on the same idea of what she could do and be if she should not be perfect and she would be allowed to be herself. There is proof that Isabela knows about the demands for perfection that her grandmother and everyone else has concerning her, and she is contemplating change. From an REBT perspective, becoming aware of a problem and contemplating change is a healthy approach, because it can lead to a more adaptive thinking style (Ellis, 2010).

The closing lines of the song go further and mention another concept, the one of being present and being in tune with yourself. The theme of perfectionism combines here with the idea of self acceptance as an imperfect person. This is also in tune with REBT, which states that accepting one self is very important, because it leads to a more fulfilling life (Davies, 2006).

The song entitled "We don't talk about Bruno" is about Mirabel's uncle, Bruno, that nobody talks about. When Mirabel asks why that happened, everyone

replies that they simply don't talk about him, because it was dangerous for them to do that. The song details what happened to many people, when dealing with Bruno, who is seen as someone that brings negative things and bad luck. This is contrary to REBT, which states that we are in control of what happens to us, and not others or some external element (Vernon & Bernard, 2006). The first to talk about Bruno is his sister, Pepa, who can control the weather, but cannot control herself and her powers. She blames Bruno for ruining her wedding day, when he appeared with a mischievous grin. This led to her feelings of insecurity, and negative thoughts flooded her brain. It is clear from her Pepa's lines that she has a huge need for control, allowing nothing to escape her control, not even the clouds in the sky. Instead, she should take responsibility for her thoughts and actions, as REBT suggests (Ellis & Dryden, 2007). The same things are exemplified by other members of the community, which lay blame on Bruno's prophecies, instead of looking at the reality. Bruno is being accused that his prophecies have brought the death of a fish (which has a very short life span, anyway), or that other villagers would lose hair or grow a gut (which, again, are natural phenomena that happen in certain cases and at a certain age). These people too show an irrational attitude towards the understanding of reality, but in the end change it, when they accept Bruno as part of their community and come to help the Madrigal family build their house again. Bruno's story is a great example of how people use their own fears as an excuse to stop doing the things they love and blame it on others or external factors.

After we are presented with all the members of the Madrigal family, we once again get confirmation that most of the things in the family lie on the surface. And that there are major issues with everyone's feelings. Mirabel confirms this in the song "Waiting for a miracle", where she admits that, although she is happy for her family members and the miracles they can perform, she is still not fine. This is the first admission of regret from Mirabel and the fact that she is not fine with her not shining, while everyone else does. In REBT and psychological terms, this is the equivalent of denial (Spörrle & Welpé, 2006) and after Mirabel acknowledges that, she can begin to change. Next, Mirabel enlists all the things that her family can do and she cannot: she cannot move the mountains, nor make the flowers bloom (like her two sisters can), she cannot control the weather (like her aunt Pepa). It is only later that Mirabel discovers that her power is the ability to hold the family together and to heal them, and that she does not need a miracle. In REBT terms, waiting for a miracle is unproductive and wrong, as it has nothing to do with you, rather it makes you a passive recipient of anything that might happen. Instead, knowing what you can and cannot do and accepting this reality, gives you more power and control over your thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Ellis, 2019). Until the end of this song, we see that Mirabel has yet

to discover how to control her thoughts and set her expectations, because she is waiting for a miracle to happen, instead of doing something possible herself.

In the last song of the movie, Mirabel and her family accept the fact that the value of a person is that person, when Abuela says that the miracle is Mirabel herself, and not what that person can do, when she admits that the miracle is not some gift or magic. This comes in line with REBT, which states that a person is valuable for the simple fact that he/she exists, and not for what that person does (Bernard, 2020).

The end of the movie *Encanto* shows a family whose members have agreed to discuss the problems they had and start dealing with them. Mirabel's grandmother accepts that no one is perfect, nor should it be, and that everyone's value comes from the simple fact they exist.

## **Applied cinematherapy**

Incorporating life lessons from movies like *Frozen* and *Encanto* into psychotherapy and cinematherapy can be a creative and effective way to engage clients in the therapeutic process. Here are a few examples of how these movies' lessons can be applied in therapy:

### *1. Self-Acceptance and Identity Exploration:*

Both *Frozen* and *Encanto* touch upon themes of self-acceptance and identity exploration. In psychotherapy, clients often struggle with understanding and accepting themselves. Therapists can use these movies to spark discussions on self-discovery, embracing one's uniqueness, and challenging societal expectations. For example, therapists can explore with clients how characters like Elsa (*Frozen*) or Mirabel (*Encanto*) navigate their personal journeys of self-discovery and help clients relate these experiences to their own lives.

### *2. Emotional Expression and Regulation:*

The characters in these movies experience a range of emotions, which can provide opportunities to explore emotional expression and regulation in therapy. For instance, therapists can use scenes from *Frozen* to discuss the importance of allowing oneself to feel and express emotions, such as Elsa's journey of embracing her powers and learning to control them. Similarly, therapists can use scenes from *Encanto* to explore how different characters cope with their feelings and the impact it has on their lives.

### *3. Family Dynamics and Relationships:*

Both movies delve into complex family dynamics and relationships, which can be valuable material for therapy sessions. Therapists can use these



movies to explore topics such as communication, conflict resolution, and setting boundaries within families. Clients can be encouraged to reflect on their own family dynamics and identify healthier ways of relating, drawing inspiration from the characters' journeys in the films.

*4. Resilience and Empowerment:*

The characters in *Frozen* and *Encanto* demonstrate resilience and empowerment in the face of adversity, providing inspiration for therapy. Therapists can use these movies to discuss concepts such as personal growth, overcoming challenges, and building resilience. Clients can explore how characters like Anna (*Frozen*) or Mirabel (*Encanto*) find their inner strength and apply it to their own struggles, fostering a sense of empowerment and motivation within therapy.

*5. Letting Go and Embracing Change:*

The movies emphasise the importance of letting go of the past and embracing change, which can be relevant to therapeutic work. Therapists can use scenes from these movies to explore themes of personal growth, forgiveness, and adaptation. Clients can reflect on how characters like Elsa (*Frozen*) or the Madrigal family (*Encanto*) navigate significant life changes and relate these experiences to their own process of letting go and embracing new beginnings.

*6. Self-Compassion and Healing:*

Both movies touch upon the themes of self-compassion and healing. In therapy, clients often struggle with self-criticism, guilt, or past hurts. Therapists can use scenes from these movies to explore the importance of self-forgiveness, self-care, and the healing process. Clients can identify with characters like Elsa (*Frozen*) or Mirabel (*Encanto*) as they navigate their own journeys of self-compassion and learn to let go of past wounds.

*7. Empathy and Understanding:*

*Frozen* and *Encanto* emphasise the power of empathy and understanding in building connections and resolving conflicts. Therapists can use these movies to explore the concepts of empathy, active listening, and perspective-taking. Clients can reflect on how characters like Anna (*Frozen*) or the Madrigal family (*Encanto*) demonstrate empathy towards others and how they can apply these skills in their own relationships.

*8. Embracing Imperfection and Growth:*

Both movies highlight the importance of embracing imperfections and embracing growth. In therapy, clients often struggle with perfectionism or fear of failure. Therapists can use scenes from these movies to discuss the benefits

of embracing imperfections, taking risks, and learning from mistakes. Clients can relate to characters like Elsa (Frozen) or Mirabel (Encanto) as they navigate their own paths of growth and self-acceptance.

*9. Mindfulness and Present Moment Awareness:*

Frozen and Encanto provide opportunities to explore the concept of mindfulness and present moment awareness. Therapists can use scenes from these movies to discuss the importance of being present, managing anxiety, and finding inner peace. Clients can reflect on how characters like Elsa (Frozen) or the Madrigal family (Encanto) practice mindfulness in challenging situations and explore how they can incorporate these practices into their own lives.

*10. Finding Strength in Vulnerability:*

Both movies emphasise the idea that vulnerability can be a source of strength. Therapists can use these movies to discuss the benefits of opening up, seeking support, and embracing vulnerability in therapy and in life. Clients can learn from characters like Anna (Frozen) or Mirabel (Encanto) as they demonstrate courage in being vulnerable and expressing their authentic selves.

Therapists should always consider their clients' unique needs, preferences, and therapeutic goals when incorporating movies into therapy. Using movies as therapeutic tools can enhance engagement, promote insights, and facilitate discussions on various life lessons and themes that are relevant to clients' experiences.

## **Final conclusions**

Both movies depicted here, Frozen and Encanto, are great examples of rational expressions proposed in the Rational Emotive Behavior Theory. The songs and messages in those movies first start with the characters being insecure about themselves and their emotions, and then slowly changing their irrational attitudes and thoughts into more rational ones.

In Frozen, the main characters, Elsa and Anna, show opposing attitudes towards risk and novelty. Elsa plays safely, because she is fearful of not hurting those around her with her powers. Because of this, she hides from the world and feels guilty about what happened to her sister Anna, when they were kids. She later feels guilty again about what has happened to her parents, who went far away to search for a solution to her magical powers. She acts very scared and insecure. On the other hand, Anna is very eager to meet new people, to open the gates of the realm and even get married. She is open to adventures and fears almost nothing. Towards the end of the movie, Elsa changes her attitude and

acts more rational, in the terms described by REBT. Throughout the entire process, Elsa is helped by her sister Anna, who plays the role of the therapist. Anna guides Elsa from an attitude of fear and guilt, to one of preoccupation and regret. Those emotions (preoccupation and regret) are not positive ones, nor should they be. REBT recommends that not all emotions have to be positive, nor that all negative emotions have to change into positive ones directly. Instead, negative emotions that are dysfunctional, such as fear and guilt, should change into negative functional ones, like preoccupation and regret (Neenan & Dryden, 2015). And later on, should it be the case, change into positive ones.

In *Encanto*, the characters are faced with a lot of hard choices and conflicting emotions. In the beginning, most of them are in the irrational category and throughout the movie, they become more flexible and change to rational. The main character, Mirabel, lives in denial and, although feels miserable, tries to convince herself and everyone else that she is fine. Only when she finally accepts that she is not fine, things begin to change for the better. Another strong character in this movie, Mirabel's grandmother, also lives in denial and pretends that everything and everyone is just perfect. In fact, she demands perfection from everyone, especially from her three daughters that have received magical powers. She uses those powers to her own will. In the end, she understands that the real magic consists of the people around her, and not their powers. This is entirely consistent with REBT, which states that the true value of a person lies in the simple fact they exist, and not in what they do (Davies, 2006). Mirabel's uncle, Bruno, is considered lost for the family, as everyone believes that he has gone. Yet, he lives close to the family, in some hidden walls and chambers of the house. He did this because he still loves his family and wants to be close to them. At the same time, he feels guilty about the things that have happened to his family members (e.g. the ruined wedding of his sister Pepa, the small changes that happened to other members of the community and, most important, about what might happen to his niece, Mirabel, if he should stay close to the family).

This is very in tune with REBT, which states that we are in control of our lives and what we do, and not some superior power (Vernon & Bernard, 2006). Bruno's mother, instead, chooses to see the negative part in Bruno's visions and sees Mirabel as the source of their problems, combined with the fact that she did not receive any powers. We clearly see here one of the main ideas in REBT, namely the fact that we can perceive the same event very differently, according to our own thoughts and fears (Dryden, 2012). The two sisters of Mirabel are also affected by the demands for perfection shown by their grandmother. Luisa is considered to be the powerful one, physically speaking, and everyone expects from her to do all the heavy stuff they cannot. Isabela is Mirabel's second sister, and she is expected to show grace and beauty at all times, so she too feels too much pressure from all these demands and "bursts" in an explosion of wild and

imperfect flowers, which make her feel very proud of herself. These demands of perfection are unrealistic, because humans are not perfect (Ellis, 2002) and asking this from them only leads to frustration and misery. All the tension and frustration is finally dissipated when the two main characters, Mirabel and her grandmother, face each other and discuss their thoughts and attitudes. This too is in line with REBT's unconditional acceptance and self-acceptance (Bernard, 2020), and Mirabel's grandmother learns to accept herself as being not perfect and too tough on her family, along with the fact that her family is also not perfect.

Both *Frozen* and *Encanto* offer benefits for children and adults alike. For children, these films provide age-appropriate platforms to explore complex emotions, learn coping strategies, and develop empathy. They promote resilience by depicting characters who face adversity and find inner strength to overcome challenges. Through cinematherapy, children can gain a deeper understanding of their own emotions, learn to express themselves, and develop problem-solving skills by drawing inspiration from the characters' journeys.

For adults, these films can serve as powerful reminders of the importance of self-acceptance, challenging limiting beliefs, and fostering emotional resilience. They offer opportunities for adults to reflect on their own life experiences, identify patterns of irrational thinking, and reframe their perspectives. Cinematherapy with *Frozen* and *Encanto* can facilitate introspection, emotional healing, and personal growth by providing relatable narratives that resonate with adult viewers.

Furthermore, both films promote intergenerational discussions, fostering connections between children and adults. They create shared experiences that allow families and therapy groups to explore emotional themes together, enhancing communication, empathy, and mutual understanding.

*Frozen* and *Encanto*, when viewed through the lens of cinematherapy and analysed from a REBT perspective, offer substantial benefits for children and adults. These films provide opportunities for emotional exploration, self-reflection, and personal growth. Through relatable characters and compelling narratives, they address themes such as self-acceptance, resilience, and the power of rational thinking. Using these films within a therapeutic context can foster emotional understanding, facilitate cognitive restructuring, and promote positive change. *Frozen* and *Encanto* exemplify the transformative potential of cinematherapy, enabling viewers to embark on their own journey of self-discovery, emotional healing, and psychological well-being.

From a psychology perspective, *Frozen* and *Encanto* can be used as appropriate tools in psychotherapy and cinematherapy, for the many benefits they present:

1. *Emotional Regulation*: Both movies present a range of emotions experienced by the characters, including joy, sadness, fear, and anger. By witnessing and connecting with these emotions on screen, viewers can enhance their emotional vocabulary, develop emotional intelligence, and learn strategies for regulating their own emotions. This can be particularly valuable for children who are still learning to identify and manage their feelings.

2. *Empathy and Perspective-Taking*: The narratives in *Frozen* and *Encanto* invite viewers to be empathic with the characters' struggles and challenges. By immersing themselves in the characters' perspectives, viewers can develop empathy, compassion, and a broader understanding of diverse experiences. This fosters interpersonal skills, promotes tolerance, and encourages a more empathetic approach to relationships and interactions.

3. *Positive Role Models*: Both films feature strong, resilient, and relatable protagonists who face adversity and grow throughout their journeys. Elsa from *Frozen* and Mirabel from *Encanto* exemplify traits such as courage, determination, and perseverance. These characters can serve as positive role models, inspiring viewers to cultivate similar qualities in their own lives and face challenges with resilience and determination.

4. *Identity Development*: *Frozen* and *Encanto* explore the themes of self-identity, belonging, and embracing one's uniqueness. These films can be particularly beneficial for children and adolescents who are navigating their own identity development. By witnessing characters who grapple with similar issues, viewers can gain insights into their own sense of self, cultural identity, and acceptance of personal attributes that make them who they are.

5. *Social and Cultural Understanding*: Both films incorporate cultural elements and explore themes related to family, community, and social dynamics. They provide opportunities for viewers to learn about different cultures, customs, and values. This exposure fosters cultural understanding, respect for diversity, and a broader worldview.

6. *Catharsis and Emotional Release*: Engaging with emotionally charged moments in these films can provide a cathartic experience for viewers. Emotional catharsis allows individuals to release pent-up emotions, find emotional release, and experience a sense of relief. This can be particularly beneficial for individuals who struggle with emotional expression or have difficulty processing their own feelings.

*7. Hope and Inspiration:* Both movies offer messages of hope, resilience, and personal growth. They depict characters who overcome challenges, embrace their strengths, and find their own paths to happiness and fulfilment. This can inspire viewers to adopt a more optimistic outlook, believe in their own potential, and approach life's difficulties with a sense of hope and determination.

By leveraging these psychological benefits, *Frozen* and *Encanto* can be powerful tools for personal reflection, emotional exploration, and psychological well-being. Whether viewed in therapeutic settings or as part of everyday entertainment, these films contribute to the positive development and growth of individuals from a psychological perspective.

To conclude, both movies (*Frozen* and *Encanto*) are built with a lot of care for how the characters are created, how they think, feel and behave, and how they grow. At first, they exhibit some irrational beliefs and attitudes, which change over the course of the movie, and in the end they change from irrational to rational, leading to characters that feel more fulfilled and behave more functional and adaptive. For these reasons and the fact that both movies are built according to the REBT principles, we highly recommend them to children of (almost) all ages and adults alike, because they have educational messages that can help the viewers better understand their own problems and learn how to overcome them. Also, we recommend them to be used in psychotherapy and cinematherapy as well, along other movies built around the concept of emotions, such as *Inside Out*, *Finding Nemo* or *The Lion King*, which will be a topic for future analyses.

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