*When I was working at Cal State Long Beach, I developed this discussion about Winnie the Pooh and Forky to illustrate what I feel is a healthier approach to young people’s problems: Creatively playing with all sides of themselves, including less pleasant and darker ones, to develop a whole personality, instead of labeling them as symptoms of an illness in need of treatment and medications to cope with them or eliminate them. Lots of the students I was treating and students in classes I taught could really relate to this formulation.*

*I put it in writing this year on Father’s Day at the urging of a friend and submitted it as an op-ed to the LA Times. I never heard back from them. Here it is for you anyhow.*

**Is Psychiatry on the Wrong Path with Our Kids:**

**Lessons from Winie the Pooh and Toy Story**

**(2024)** by Mark Ragins MD

When I first saw a drawing of the characters in Winnie the Pooh, diagnosing each of them with a psychiatric disorder (you know, Eyeore is depressed, Rabbit is anxious, Pooh has an eating disorder, Tigger has ADHD, Owl has a narcissistic personality, etc.) I thought it was funny. When I read today’s NPR report that the CDC found that “About 1 in 9 children in the U.S., between the ages of 3 and 17, have been diagnosed with ADHD…7.1 million kids and adolescents…but *only* about half of them were taking medication to treat the condition”, I no longer found it so funny.

Diagnosing parts of our children, and ourselves, as pathological illnesses to be treated and eliminated counteracts the creative process of playing with various parts of ourselves, learning to use and balance them. Winnie the Pooh stories are touching precisely because every character is included in every adventure without having to change (No one tells Eyeore to cheer up or Tigger to calm down) and every character contributes, not in spite of their issues, but because of them. Good mental health is more about including and integrating everything about us, even painful parts, finding growth in suffering and gifts in wounds, than about eliminating “symptoms”. These characters aren’t really illness symptoms, but parts of all of us, that can be overused, get out of balance, or become out of control.

My children grew up with the Toy Story characters. Joining the classic toys and characters were two new stars: Woody and Buzz Lightyear.

Woody is a father figure, and although he usually feels anxious and insecure, he’s actually quite a good father. He’s always looking out for Andy’s welfare and supporting the toys. He helps keep everyone organized and safe. He worries when Andy goes off to college. I can relate.

Buzz, on the other hand, is a problematic youth obsessed with technology. If we were to diagnose Buzz (who is grandiose, impulsive, overactive, even delusional) we’d likely choose Bipolar Disorder, currently another very popular diagnosis. That would be a mistake. Buzz is actually a reasonably normal adolescent: He believes he’s not really part of his family, he has a special mission in life, unappreciated talents, and is impatient with his father figure Woody. Sound familiar? This misdiagnosis is appallingly common with tens of thousands of teenagers currently cursorily diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and treated with multiple medications.

Woody, to his credit, after a period of frustration and disbelief in Buzz’s naivete and grandiosity and Buzz’s refusal to accept his realistic role in life as a toy, pivots and “meets him where he’s at” offering guidance, and support when Buzz is discouraged, which eventually helps bring out the true hero in Buzz. How many fathers do that?

But it’s not until Toy Story 4 that we meet Forky, a unique character who I believe most accurately represents today’s young people. Toy Story 4 opens with Bonnie starting kindergarten. She’s given a box of scraps to make something, but a bully kid throws the box on the floor, leaving Bonnie in tears. Woody, unobtrusively as always, helps her get back on track and she creates Forky out of a plastic spork, some pipe cleaner, and a couple of mismatched googly eyes. Forky comes to life and immediately decides he’s trash and jumps in the garbage can. Woody pulls him out and tells him he’s not trash, he’s loved. The movie gets complex as Woody has his own issues (reconnecting with an ex who wants him to expand himself, as well as empty nest and midlife crisis issues). Nonetheless he keeps pulling Forky out of the trash over and over again, until Forky eventually believes in himself. At the end of the movie Bonnie, in her first day of first grade, makes a new toy- friend Knifey, who also thinks she’s trash. This time it’s a love-smitten Forky who reassures Knifey that she’s alive and valuable too. Then Woody can move on.

The reason I think Forky is emblematic of today’s youth, is that most young people today, rather than accepting the examples of older generations, are actively creating their own highly individualized lives including their own careers, spirituality, genders, fashions, media, politics, and family structures. My generation has already taken for ourselves most of the good stuff (jobs, houses, free college, pensions, good medical insurance, tax benefits, etc.) leaving them scraps. If, by some miracle, usually after about 30 years of experimentation, building strengths from struggles, they manage to create a self-identity and life that works for them, as often as not, they think they’re trash. And very few of us elders respond by pulling them out of the garbage can, reassuring them they’re loved, and valuable, and magical beings. Instead, we get frustrated and baffled by their choices, we criticize and correct them (though sometimes letting them live in our basements too). Often, they’re left looking for support from their peers, like Knifey got from Forky, including from similarly self-made, online “influencers”.

Meanwhile, our mental health professionals, instead of supporting young people’s journeys, argue over whether they should be diagnosed with Major Depression or Panic Disorder or if they’re trauma victims, hand out more and more medications alongside our medical colleagues, and wring our hands that there aren’t more of us and accessibility to our services is so poor.

We are over-diagnosing and medicating our children, rather than accepting, playing with them and helping them integrate, guiding and supporting them as they build their self-identities, relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Help us Woody.

*Mark Ragins, MD has been a psychiatrist and a father for 37 years, both challenging roles in today’s world. He’s worked with both homeless people and college students and wrote the book “Journeys Beyond the Frontier: A Rebellious Guide to Psychosis and Other Extraordinary Experiences.” He can be reached at markragins.com and markragins@gmail.com.*

[ADHD cases are up. 7 million U.S. kids have gotten a diagnosis, study finds : Shots - Health News : NPR](https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2024/05/23/1252941968/adhd-diagnoses-are-rising-1-in-9-u-s-kids-have-gotten-one-new-study-finds)

Diagram

Description automatically generated

