

#30 Encore!! What is Mental Wellness?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner Challenge podcast. I'm MJ Murray Vachon. A Licensed Clinical Social Worker with more than 44,000 hours of therapy sessions and 30 years of teaching mental wellness. Join me for Season One as we take the mystery out of cultivating mental wellness.

This week I invite you to listen to an encore performance of episode number one. What is mental wellness? In May of 2022, I downloaded episodes one to 13. These episodes are my fundamentals of mental wellness, and to be honest, they were meant for my clients, people are my wait list and a few programs where I serve as mental wellness consultant. As you listen, you will quickly observe two things. I am the only person talking [00:01:00] and I'm learning this new skill of podcasting. So be patient. Surprisingly, episode number one that was never released individually is the most listened to episode. I release it this week to give you this very important information, but also so you are prepared for next week's episode where a young woman takes on the Inner Challenge and applies the information in this episode to her daily life. You will love listening to her share her experience, which was almost stopped by a funeral. No kidding. So, sit back and take on the Inner Challenge: What is mental wellness?

If your answer is, I don't really know, don't feel bad. My name is MJ Murray Vachon, and I'm a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. A therapist. About 15 years ago, I was taking a workshop with Dr. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist that many of you may know [00:02:00] through his books, whole brainchild brainstorm and aware. Dr. Siegel was giving a workshop for mental health professionals and he asked how many had a working definition of mental wellness? This was back in the day of in-person workshops and very few people raised their hands. While I was watching online, if I had been in the audience, my hand would not have gone up either. My reaction, a good bit of embarrassment. Not only was it embarrassing to be a clinician without a working definition of mental wellness, but a colleague and I had created a mental wellness curriculum that had been in a school for more than 12 years. Inner. Challenge, we called it. And nowhere in it had we defined mental wellness.

At that very moment, I set out to find a definition that was both practical and usable for my clients, my students, and now for this podcast. When I give workshops, classes, or training on [00:03:00] mental wellness, I often begin by

asking, What is mental illness? Instantly, people raise their hands or fill up the chat boxes with good definitions.

They talk about bipolar, schizophrenia, and often give statistics that are accurate. One in five people suffer from depression and anxiety. One in 20 suffer from serious mental illness and one in 12 suffer from substance abuse. And those statistics are before the pandemic. While these statistics should cause us all concern, I also find them to be a bit hopeful.

Thirty-five years ago, when I began to work in mental health, very few people understood mental illness. As a culture, we continue to make progress in decreasing the stigma and misinformation connected to mental illness, which allows more people to seek treatment. But when I ask the same people, what is mental wellness? Just [00:04:00] like with Dr. Siegel's audience, people seldom say anything. While I am grateful that we are more educated when it comes to mental illness, I am concerned that when we do not understand what mental wellness is and how to cultivate it through lifestyle and healthy relationships, we become more vulnerable to mental illness.

What I want to do in this podcast is to help you understand, what mental wellness is and how to cultivate it in your everyday life. Mental wellness, like physical wellness, can be cultivated with knowledge and a little bit of effort. There will be 13 episodes of this podcast giving you the foundational information you need to cultivate mental wellness. If you are a parent learning this for yourself, you will automatically help your children's mental wellness, which I know for all of us is a major concern. Each episode will have a one [00:05:00] pager that you can download from my website at MJ Murray bashan.com. You can use these one pagers to take notes. Of equal importance each of them will have very powerful images that will help you remember these simple skills so that you can integrate them into your life, into your mind, the hub of your mental wellness. This will help you feel and function better. Before I share with you my working definitions of mental wellness, I want to state the obvious.

Our mind is not meant to be in a constant state of anxiety, low mood, or busyness. I often meet with people who have normalized these mental states and say things like, oh, I was born this way. If you think my mind races, you should meet my parents. While we are born with our genetic vulnerabilities, temperaments, and personality, we also have agency when it comes to cultivating mental states of calm and [00:06:00] clarity no matter what we've inherited. Our agency to do this can be cultivated through learning about what mental wellness is and developing simple lifestyle and relational habits that

really make a difference in how we feel, think and behave. Cultivating mental wellness is not nearly as much work as one fears. It doesn't cost much, and much of what helps us can be done in our homes, schools, workplaces, and with our family and friends. A year into the pandemic, one of my clients who had suffered from severe depression and was in remission said to me, I am managing the stress of the pandemic pretty well because of all the skills that I've learned.

So, I'm excited to share what I have learned from my more than 40,000 hours of counseling sessions, years of teaching mental wellness, and hours and hours of listening to many experts and colleagues that have [00:07:00] continually helped me improve and update my knowledge. I know this information can really help you, so keep listening.

Let's begin, what is mental wellness? Let me share with you my 40,000-foot definition that I have adapted from the World Health Organization. Their definition states that mental wellness is a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes their own abilities can cope with the normal stresses of life and work productively. So, they are able to make a contribution to their community, you know, your families, schools, workplaces, and wherever you live. I think it is worth taking a minute to look at each of these lines because one of the most important things in cultivating mental wellness is knowing what we are supposed to be cultivating. When we understand this, we can also spot when things head south. First, we all [00:08:00] have abilities and interests that engage, develop, and stimulate our mind, the hub of our mental wellness. Maybe we are a student learning to read, a barista accepting the challenge of pouring a latte that has a beautiful heart on it. A medical professional doing a complex surgery, a parent trying to understand a child's tantrums or a coder developing a new video game. Our mental wellness gets fed by these interests and abilities, and no matter how old we are, we will feel better if our mind is actively engaged and stimulated. One of the first signs that our mental wellness is sagging, is a change in our relationship to our abilities and interests.

I have had hundreds of calls from observant parents over the years who saw a red flag when their child's grades dropped. These red flags can initially be scary, but if we look at these red flags with a [00:09:00] sense of curiosity, seeking to understand the change, whether we see it in another person or ourselves, will be led to deeper awareness and connection. Which will help us cultivate mental wellness. The next part of the definition of mental wellness is the ability to cope with the normal stresses of life in the midst of a pandemic, we are always reworking what is normal, which is one of the reasons we are so tired, and

mental health has become a serious concern as we move into year three of the pandemic.

Again, what is a normal stress of life? Well, that depends on your age and stage. We want five-year old's to be able to separate and go to school. We want teenagers to work through the stress of rejection and choosing what college is right for them. 30 somethings need to have the coping skills to balance the demands [00:10:00] of work and home life. And 80-year old's need to have the coping skills in order to deal with all the stresses that come with aging. If we are to cultivate mental wellness, we need to learn healthy coping skills in order to successfully move through each life stage. The last part of the World Health Organization's definition reminds us that we all live a life in a relational context.

We bring our abilities and coping skills into our families, schools, workplaces and communities, be them in person or online. Thus, we are not alone in cultivating mental wellness, which is one of the reasons we see a new emphasis on bringing mental wellness, not just in a family life, but into our schools, our jobs, and many community organizations such as police, firefighters and other community groups.

The fruit of our mental [00:11:00] wellness is a gift we give to the various groups we belong to. And when these systems are healthy, they help us develop and boost our own mental wellness. Mental wellness is a very mutual process. Here's an example. One of my clients works remotely. His company appears to me to be highly committed to their employee's mental wellness. During one week, he was working nightly until 10:00 PM. In his weekly meeting with his boss, he was asked why he was working so late. There was no deadline. He was just a 25-year-old, stuck at home in the pandemic with nothing to do, so he was overworking. His boss told him that while this was understandable, it was not allowed, that they wanted him to have boundaries around his work. This made me really happy because this young man was really struggling with self-care. Let's face it. For many people [00:12:00] it's easier to work than exercise. We do not cultivate our mental wellness in a vacuum and we are supported when people and organizations that we are part of encourage us to live in a more balanced way.

To live into this first definition of mental wellness, I encourage you to find interests and abilities that stimulate your mind in a life-giving way. Offer these to the communities you are a part of and see it as normal to continually build up your skill sets that will help you cope with whatever are the stressors in your life.

Next, let me share with you my definition, which I have adapted from Dr. Siegel. I think of this more as my boots on the ground definition or maybe it's more accurate to say the canoe in the river definition. This will make more sense to you if you look at the one pager on my website, MJ Murray [00:13:00] Vachon dot com.

My clients and students have said to me that this image is one of the most helpful images, not only in helping them understand mental wellness, but in helping them cultivate and develop their own mental wellness in a very practical way. Siegel's definition includes an image of a nice blue river with the acronym FACES floating in the water. On one side is the word rigidity, and on the other side is the word chaos. In a simple way this is the story of our mind. People I have worked with are often surprised to learn that mental wellness begins with our mind. Often people think it begins with behavior or maybe emotion, but our mind is where our mental states begin.

So, learning to observe our mind is not only fascinating, but incredibly necessary if we want to up our [00:14:00] game of mental wellness. I have loved Dr. Siegel's image because it's become a useful tool in helping me teach people how to observe their mind. Looking at the one pager we see a blue river, which represents our mind when our mental states are calm, clear and alert. The left bank represents our mind when it's rigid, when our mental states often have dug themselves in, and we are trying to impose control. To the right is the bank of chaos. When things seem to be spinning out and our mental state feels out of control. This is really uncomfortable. Of course, there are degrees of intensity to how our mind experiences each of these states.

What's important for this podcast is that you begin to observe your mental states. At times we are floating in the river and enjoying [00:15:00] the ride and then out of nowhere, something happens that disrupts our minds, calm, engaged, and clear state. We are thrown out of the river and onto the bank of rigidity, chaos, or even both.

We cultivate mental wellness by observing when this happens and having the wisdom and tools to know how to move our mind from rigidity and chaos back into a more calm, alert and clear mental state. For our mind to be able to make such a move, we must be able to use self-awareness and understand how Dr. Siegel's acronym FACES encourages our mind to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Dr. Siegel's model allows us to observe our mind. If we miss what's happening upstairs in our mind, we can [00:16:00] certainly get clues from our body as well as our behaviors. This will help us become more and more familiar with what's going on in our mind.

Yes, we develop self-awareness using many lenses. Let me give you an example of how I put this to use in my every day. Last fall on my way to work, I decided to stop by a local coffee shop. I had placed my order ahead of time so I could get to my office early. When I arrived, the lobby was packed with customers. My coffee wasn't ready, so I sat outside next to a window so I could see when my drink was done. After 10 minutes, I went into inquire about my coffee, only to hear another customer yelling at one of the baristas. She said, I ordered my coffee 10 minutes ago and I need it now. The barista explained to her that they were short staffed and they were doing their best. This person dug her heels in and said, no, I need it now! I should [00:17:00] not have to wait this long for coffee! I went back outside and I realized I was going to have quite a wait. I was at a decision point like the other customer, I could feel my anger and impatience rising. But I took a few breaths and I thought about the acronym FACES. I actually really did. I'm not just saying this for the podcast. It is a deep value of mine to stay in the river because who wants a cup of coffee to ruin their morning? Certainly not me. Probably, no one. But most of us aren't taught the skills, so we find ourselves raging at a barista or internally pissed. All because of a cup of coffee. This is why I love Siegel's image. I was at a decision point and I was going to have to do a bit of Inner work, or I could risk ending up like the other customer. When I find myself in these moments of rising anger, I have trained myself to start with the C in [00:18:00] Siegel's acronym of FACES.

C stands for coherence. Coherence asks me to check in and see if what I am thinking, doing or expecting makes sense. Will it serve me well in the long run? In this instance, I had to do a mental shift from what I thought was going to happen to what was actually happening. I had wished for a quick coffee stop on my way to the office, but the barista said they were short-staffed. The lobby was full of waiting customers. I had to accept this would not be a quick stop. If I didn't accept that I was going to flip my lid and so I needed a quick update to stay coherent. because remember, I want to stay in the river. I had to rework my morning plan. I could leave without my coffee or wait until it was done. I chose to stay because I had the time and I could sit outside and do my emails, which is why I was going into work early. About five minutes into [00:19:00] this, my fellow customer stormed out coffee in hand, swear words flying from her mouth and her mental state, more chaotic than calm. When I walked in to get my coffee, I could feel the tension in the coffee shop. As I looked at the barista, I could tell she had been crying. We cultivate mental wellness in the small things, and we do not do so in a vacuum. I drove to work thinking how easy it is for any of us to get our day off to a bad start because we aren't sure how to manage our mental state when the unexpected happens.

Because I've been taught the value of looking through the lens of coherence in order to help my mind think in a more flexible way, I was able to adapt, which

of course led me to feel more energized and stable. Yes, FACES, these five words are so powerful in helping us create mental wellness. [00:20:00] The power to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable. This whole process, when I was at that decision making point, took 20 seconds. It took me just about two minutes to explain it to you, but it goes so quickly once we train ourself. And that is really the whole purpose of this podcast, to help you gain the tools so you can move your mind more into that river of wellness where you feel really, really good and off the banks of rigidity and chaos. That can not only ruin your day, but the days of people around you.

Let me take a little bit of time to talk about rigidity. A common mental state. Rigidity is basically giving coherence, the middle finger. Rigidity, is a mindset that usually says this should be a certain way, and I am not open to [00:21:00] change input or thinking about this any differently. Anger and control are two common signs of rigidity. When we are on the banks of rigidity, we can lash out at others. Or lash inward towards ourself. Lashing outward can be demonstrated by controlling the narrative so we don't hear another person's point of view, experiences, or feelings, kind of like the coffee customer. Lashing inward can be demonstrated by victim thinking or self-pity. Often when someone is lashing inward, both of these mental states are full of blame. Both are full of pain. Let me give you an example of mental rigidity. This is one in the context of a parent-child relationship, so we know this is going to be challenging.

Any of us who have parented know that no matter how well-meaning we are, we can find ourselves thrown quickly to the bank of [00:22:00] rigidity. Anyone who has ever been a 17-year-old knows that rigidity can look like either or thinking with a dose of impatience thrown in. Years ago, I had a wonderful young man who was a client of mine. He entered therapy mildly depressed. On the initial phone call, his mom said, I don't really know what's wrong. It's kind of like he's lost his spirit. Yes. Mental wellness is about our spirit. So, when I met him, I began with this question, can you help me understand what brought you here? As he told me his story, he said he was a second semester junior and he explained to me that his true passion was music. He had played the piano, trumpet, and trombone since grade school. He spoke about his love from music and how he never found it boring. He mentioned he had regretted not being able to do marching band in high school, but at the time he wanted to play football. Something he also loved [00:23:00] and was very good at and something that meant a lot to his family because so many people had played for generations. He went to a school that was a football powerhouse that had incredible coaches and opportunity. He was grateful to have been part of it all, but now he was hoping to study music in college and he was aiming to attend one of the top two music schools in the country. He felt that in order to have a better shot at getting in, he needed to put more time into practice, and he also needed to take lessons

with the best teacher in the region who only had an opening on Friday night. When he told this to his parents, they said, absolutely not!. The sport was a family tradition. He was great at it and he could find another teacher. My client told me it was after that conversation, he just felt stuck, not very motivated, and pretty moody all the time. In the next session, I brought the parents [00:24:00] in and I asked them to tell me what they saw the problem.

The parents began by saying how much they loved their son and that he was a kid who was just too talented. He excelled at sports and music and had always done so, and they saw no need for him to change at this point in his life. After all, his sport was going to end the next year. They each took turns telling me how many generations on both sides of the family had been four-year starters, and how his playing brought so much joy to the family who ended up coming together every Friday night to watch his games. They explained all the great things their son had done and developed through this sports program, and they didn't want him to regret or miss out on feeling the completion of what he had started. Not to mention that his senior year looked like a real chance for the team to get to State, and as a four-year starter, he would probably be named a [00:25:00] Captain. They also said they understood his love of music. But what's the point of studying music in college? The Dad said you can't really pay the mortgage by playing the trombone. When they were done, the Dad looked at me and said, and if us forbidding him to quit, the team means we are bad parents, so be it. I said to the parents, this is not about bad parenting, but actually the opposite. I explained that from my point of view. They seemed like great parents who had given their son incredible opportunities and support, and now they were all in a new place trying to figure out when he gets to make decisions and what this process would look like. I invited the parents to be willing to step into their son's mind so they could really understand his point of view to leave their bank of rigidity, we will not allow you to quit, and walk into the river and float alongside [00:26:00] him. Giving him time and space to explore this significant life decision. By doing so, he could imagine for himself what it would be like to not play senior year. They could also become more curious as to what he means when he intends to step into music in a more serious and committed way.

In that moment, I could see dad soften. He looked at his son and he said, oh, well maybe I'm not really seeing the whole picture. Maybe I'm just looking at it from what I think is best. Can you tell me your point of view? Dad became flexible by updating his coherence, that his point of view was not the only one that needed to be considered in making this decision. The son who might be good at football needed to up his own skills of self-defense because he had not pushed back weeks ago, and instead [00:27:00] withdrew, which led to his low

mood. Now, dad was throwing him a pass and he had to step out of his withdrawal and find words to share his perspective with his dad.

This is not easy when you're seventeen. Especially, if you have lived in a family where there have not been a lot of mutual conversations. I have said a million times in my office. We must find thoughts for our feelings and feelings for our thoughts. This takes patience and effort, not only for the son, but the parents must do the same. They must understand what's going on inside of them while being aware that their son might not be quite as thought out as he thinks he is. Yes. Our mental rigidity is often triggered by being confronted by that which is different, unexpected, unknown, and threatening. Even if it's just a trombone or a dad [00:28:00] changing a lifelong communication pattern. Rigidity often comes with anger, judgment, and a sense that our view is the only one. Underneath all this is emotional discomfort that makes it difficult to listen. Put this all together and rigidity can be very disconnecting. The parents wanted what was best for their son, which initially was football. What they learned in the next few sessions was what they really wanted was authentic connection. Each of them had to look at their mental states and move from certainty to curiosity by being more flexible, adaptive, and coherent, which leads to better decision-making. As they did this, they could see their son's energy return and he became more stable in looking not only towards his future, but to the next stage of their parent-child relationship where space is made for his voice.

Now let's look at chaos through the lens of mental [00:29:00] wellness. A former client of mine was a very productive, talented, and confident person. In her first session, she sat on the proverbial couch and said, I'm here because I'm constantly letting people in my life. I'm always over committed and I have no time for myself. She was a person who had honed her talents and was consistently asked to use them in various productive and life-giving ways in her family work and the community she lived in. Just sitting with her, I could tell she was a dynamo! Yet, she always ran over budget and she often did not meet deadlines, and this made others mad.

This was not the only problem. She told me, my life is out of control. I seldom have time to eat, sleep, or keep my apartment clean. She said she was interested in everything and often joked that her least favorite word in the English language was no. I explained to her my one pager on the river of wellness [00:30:00] and asked her where she would put her canoe. She instantly said, my canoe is spinning in a whirlpool of chaos. I then explained to her FACES. I asked her if any of those words might help her stay in the river where her talent and desires did not cost her so much when it came to her own self-care or relationships. She really pondered the question and looked at me and got a little

teary. She said, well, if I'm going to be more honest, more coherent, I would need to learn to say the word no. I asked her what that would be like for her, and she said, I am a person who hates to close doors. Then after another second of thought, she said, but I guess I have to admit I've been closing doors for years. I can see now that people who I love to work with no longer ask me because the ride is too chaotic and uncertain for [00:31:00] them. My chaos actually makes them unstable. I never really thought of it like that, but it's the truth. I know I'll get it done. But they have to live with the fear that I won't. It really isn't fair to them.

Yes. Chaos is often born out of a lack of self-awareness where we don't take into account the impact that our chaos has on others. I then asked her to think about how her chaos impacts her. She said, I have no time for myself and I really want to have some. She realized that for her to come off the Bank of Chaos, she would need to be willing to do the one thing she hated. She'd need to say no to some interesting opportunities. She would need to close some doors. In her case, she would need to stop and enter a process of self-reflection. First, where she became curious about what was going on in her mental state when she had to say [00:32:00] no to others, as well as what happens inside of her when she chooses to say yes to herself.

Our mental states are fascinating and a bit more complex than we sometimes realize. Mental wellness is a process that helps us make more sense of who we. This can lead us to create lives that are more enjoyable and in balance. Most of the time we're just canoeing down the river and things are going well enough. Don't get me wrong, the river is not paradise. It can get wavy and rough, but lots of times we have the skills to stay afloat. But as we all know, life throws us the unexpected, be it a pandemic or having to wait for coffee. We are humans and we can all expect to end up on the banks of chaos and rigidity. The real problem is not ending up there, but being there and not realizing it. These banks, for many can be mental states that become habits [00:33:00] unless we learn to recognize them and train our minds to move to healthier places. Lots of unintended damage takes place when we don't understand what mental wellness is and when we are out of the river and living on the banks on a regular basis.

Perhaps some of you have been waiting for me to address mental illness. That is the purview of other podcasts, not this one. We all know people who suffer from mental illness, and you may be one. To successfully treat or manage their illness, they will need specific treatments that are beyond the scope of this podcast. As a person who has treated, many people who have mental illnesses, once their conditions are stabilized and they learn the foundational skills necessary to treat their illness, this podcast can be most helpful. Just like my

client who suffered from severe depression once her depression was treated many of [00:34:00] the skills in this podcast have helped her stay mentally well. I hope that you have enjoyed listening to this podcast today, and that it has given you a very concrete way to not only define mental wellness, but begin to think about assessing and cultivating your own mental wellness. I invite you to listen to all 13 episodes, which will help you learn many easy and practical skills that will help you mentally feel better.

Please join me next week where listener ,just like you ,took on the Inner Challenge and applied today's information to her life. I invite you, to do the same. This is your Inner Challenge.