

#31 Taking the Mental Wellness Challenge!

[00:00:00]

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Welcome to the podcast today. I'm really excited about this new format for today's episode. You may or may not know this, but initially I developed season one of the Inner Challenge podcast for my wait list and for programs which I serve as a mental health consultant. I'd love the idea of an Inner Challenge podcast where I could share what I've learned in a really easy to access way for anybody who wanted to help their mental wellness. I developed 13 episodes, which compiled into season one. Basically, the fundamentals of mental wellness. Today we're going to look at episode number one: What is mental wellness? With a podcast listener who's agreed to have a conversation with me about this episode. I asked her a couple weeks ago if she listened to it and then try it out if she moved through her week in her normal kind of way. Basically, to run an experiment, put it to test, and then come and talk to me about it, what worked, what didn't work, what does she need a little bit more clarification about [00:01:00] so she can continue to develop her own mental wellness. I'm always looking for guests, and if you're interested, please send me an email at MJ Murray vachon.com. Can figure out the topic and perhaps she'll be like, today's guest, looking at one of season one's topics. About how can I manage my phone better, or maybe how to regulate your feelings. There's just a lot of different options that you might have and be interested in. Just send me that email if you're interested. Let's get to this episode and I want to begin by welcoming you to the podcast today and to ask you to introduce yourself to our listeners.

Guest: I am a recent college graduate. I just embarked on my graduate service program. I'm studying theology in graduate school and work as a minister. I studied applied psychology in human development in undergraduate, and I'm originally from Massachusetts.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Oh, great. The great state of Massachusetts. You have any brothers, sisters, dogs, gerbils?

Guest: I have [00:02:00] two older brothers. And a dog.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What's your dog's name?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW : Beau. I want to ask you to go back before you ever listen to this episode, because I always start the podcast asking people to define mental wellness.

Guest: I would say mental wellness would be a state of wellbeing that one has when they're able to take care of themselves and they're able to complete their normal daily task.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Great. So, you were a psych and an applied lifestyle. What was the other?

Guest: Yeah, applied psychology and human development.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Applied psychology and human development major. Did you ever receive a definition for mental wellness in your studies?

Guest: I don't think so. I took a class on mental illness from a social clinical perspective. I took a lot of class on like systems and how society works and how people think and feel, but I don't think we ever really dove into mental [00:03:00] wellness. When I heard about your podcast, I was really excited about it because I think I've definitely been familiarized with more deficit-based models and yours is very strength-based. I was really intrigued by that and I liked your positive spin.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Oh, thank you. And I would say it's not a spin. It really isn't a spin because it's all pretty science based and it's factual. In this podcast, I tell a story about where I had a mental wellness program in a school. I didn't have a definition. That was probably 15 years ago. It's interesting for me to talk to a recent grad who studied psychology. And again, we're not defining what I think everybody craves, and that is we want to feel good. This is the whole goal of this podcast is to broaden people's ideas of how to cultivate mental wellness in pretty much free, inexpensive, and helpful ways.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Episode one is my introduction. That's what you listen to.[00:04:00]

Guest: Yes.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I use two definitions. The first definition is from the World Health Organization and it basically mirrors your own personal

definition, which is a state of wellbeing in which individuals realize their own abilities can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and are able to make a contribution to the community. If anybody wants to see this definition in a beautiful one-pager, you can go to my website under Inner Challenge and there's a one pager for each of the episodes of Season one, and they're really beautiful done by Cathy Hall, a graphic artist who worked for me forever. I'm not going to have us talk too much about that, because I think it's so obvious. I want us to move to the second definition, which I've adapted from Dr. Daniel Siegel. Given that most of the people will not have seen this image, if you had to teach them using descriptive words, how would you describe what Dr. Siegel's image is?

Guest: I would say picture in your head, a [00:05:00] bank on the left and a bank on the right, and a river in between. On the left would be rigidity. That would be thinking about seeking, needing control, and on the right would be chaos, feeling out of control. And then in the middle you can think about these little stones or little rocks in the river with different acronyms. So that's like visually how I would see it. The acronym in the middle is FACES. Which MJ will probably cover. It's all about how can we stay in this river of wellness and not get washed up towards one end of rigidity or chaos, and how do we stay flexible and adaptable?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Perfect. I want you all to know listeners. She did not know I was going to ask her to describe the image, and I bet you did not stay up late last night memorizing what that image was, right?

Guest: No.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's one of the things I love about this because I think it's so easy to remember. The acronym in the middle [00:06:00] is FACES. One of the ways that we stay in that river is to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. We will talk about that as this conversation goes on. I want to ask you a really obvious question. Where does our mental wellness start? Where's the seat of our mental wellness?

Guest: I think our mind and our body.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What's interesting to me, having been a clinician all these years is you know that it's in your mind that our mental wellness, it's our mental state. What's really hopeful to me is I always ask my clients that, and when I would ask that five years ago, 90% would be, I don't know. I really have never thought of it. It's really hopeful to me that just asking you off the top of

your head, you're like, oh, it starts in our mind. That's important because [00:07:00] one of the basic tools to cultivate mental wellness is self-awareness. Part of what I asked you to do, and I'm going to ask you to talk about now, is I asked you to listen to the episode and become self-aware of this image of how to stay mentally peaceful, clear, and alert. In our country people have come very accustomed to thinking, oh, I was born anxious. I was born depressed. I have a mind that never shuts off. They don't realize no, our mind is peaceful, our mind is calm, and circumstances have led those mental states to take over. Can you share with our audience what it was like to listen to the episode and use self-awareness throughout your week to notice your mental state, not with judgment, but with curiosity.

Guest: It was really interesting. I had the experience of traveling while [00:08:00] experiencing this one week of reflection and also working. Being in two very different settings in a setting where, I need structure and routine, and I have responsibility to fulfill in my ministry versus spending time with friends and being able to travel and relax. I really got to see my natural tendencies come out in both of those. When I was on vacation and when I was traveling, I noticed I had a really great desire to want control and want to have a plan for how the day was going to go. That's just something that I like to do to navigate my wellbeing and manage my anxiety. But I noticed I was continually being asked to be flexible and adaptive because I wasn't traveling alone. I was with a friend and our plans revolved around factors that were outside of myself. So, I definitely had to learn how to try to stay in that river on vacation when I frequently felt [00:09:00] myself washed up on the shores of Rigidity. Contrastingly, while I'm at work, coming off of vacation, I felt myself leaning more on the banks of chaos because I went from having five days without routine to then needing to rebuild my routine back with my time that I wake up and the way that I start my day with prayer and eating right and et cetera. It was really interesting because I think I had both experiences on the banks. I am trying to figure out, okay, what does it mean to no matter what location I'm in and what task are asked of me to stay in that river?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What was it like to move through these two different experiences in your life and be watching your what happens to your mind?

Guest: That was really cool because I noticed that naturally I'm person that wants control and I go through a lot of situations in [00:10:00] my head of possibilities. I noticed that it was hard when I felt rigid or chaos to stop the thought loops and to stop thinking of how I would get out of those feelings of rigidity or chaos. For example, this morning I woke up and my routine was a

little bit off and I felt in a state of chaos. I spent a lot of mental energy trying to think about how do I change my routine so I don't feel like this? What time do I need to be getting up? What do I need to be doing for my sleep routine in order to not feel this anxiety or just feeling like our mind is racing. Then on the other end When I was feeling a need for control, I tried to just notice it and say you are on vacation. You do not need to have control over this. You just need to let go. For me, my faith is really important, so just let God lead me. It was a continual challenge to be on the beach and thinking of things. I might want to do later in the day or the next day [00:11:00] or the next week, and try to remind myself to stay present. It was really cool. I think about sometimes my thoughts as coming in and it's like a blue sky and then the clouds are my thoughts and sometimes it gets pretty stormy. It's just interesting to notice that I can't really control whether or not the clouds come in, but I can control whether or not I clinging onto it or I try to let it go.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I loved so much of what you said. Part of what you said was as you were going through the week; you became more aware of your mental states and there was something that felt really cool about that. What's interesting to me is it feels like it might not feel so great cause you're noticing things that are uncomfortable, but you're describing the experience as being really positive.

Guest: Yeah. It's actually been really awesome to grow in self-awareness because even if it [00:12:00] feels uncomfortable, I feel a sense of agency. I'm no longer powerless to my mind and that I can take steps to calm down or whatever I might need in that moment. Maybe it's not about solving, all the problems or all my thoughts, but just starrng it and pointing it out and that feels good. To no longer let that have power over my actions.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to say to our listeners, I have never met you. I met you 20 minutes ago. I did not pay her to say this, but this is the truth. That self-awareness, observing our mind allows us to see whoa, there it is on the bank. It also allows us to step into our agency, and that feels really empowering. That feels really cool. That's one of the reasons why I'm so passionate about all of this, it's a very small tweak. When you were talking about being on vacation, it didn't sound like a vacation to me. It sounded [00:13:00] like, oh, I'm on the bank of rigidity and I need my vacation to go a certain way. But because you had self-awareness, you were able to dial down and soften the rigidity and then really be more on vacation.

Guest: Yeah, it's funny because maybe our minds can always be on vacation if we learn how to stay in the river. When you said that we can take a vacation

from feeling like we need to control or feeling out of control and just find that calm. I'm noticing that it doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing, you could feel that sense of calm. Or I can feel that sense of calm, like amidst a stressful work day if I work at it and if I'm aware and I could maybe feel more stressed while I'm on a vacation if I'm not being aware of where my thoughts are at.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We actually are retraining our minds, but actually I'm not sure we even ever train our minds. I think that they just run amuck with us most of [00:14:00] the time because we don't have this information. Often what throws us on the banks of rigidity is the desire to impose control or chaos when we feel out of control, it's often things that we're worried about that aren't even real. Or are things, if you're traveling and the plane got delayed, there's nothing you can do about it.

Guest: Yeah.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So, to get rigid and be like, this can't happen to me, that is creating internal stress that's completely not necessary.

Guest: Yeah. It's almost like both sides of the river are promoting the opposite of mental wellness and they're things that prevent us from experiencing what it feels like to be Well.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yes. If we don't understand that we have the option to feel more peaceful, to feel calmer. I don't know if we could get to the Dalai Lama's, Zen state. That's not my goal here. But a little goes a long way when it comes to trying to retrain our mind. [00:15:00] I think people have pretty clear goals about what their educational goals are, maybe their money goals, what their physical fitness goals are. I'm really trying to encourage people to have some goals when it comes to their mental wellness, and part of that is exactly what you talked about, self-awareness. The self-awareness to cultivate mental wellness is observing what happens in your mind. And one of the things you did, and this comes up more and more on the podcast as I talk to people, is you had an Inner conversation with yourself. you were observing yourself and even as you were telling it, you didn't look pained. It was look where my mind is going. Then you had a conversation that maybe that isn't the best. Can you share an experience of one of those conversations that you had with yourself?

Guest: I guess I could bring up today. My work day happened to start on a note where a lot of things went not as I would've planned. For example, I got to work and I [00:16:00] show up and there's a funeral going on. I'm like, oh, no, I

wasn't prepared for this. Then I was where am I going to film this podcast with you? Then I'm like, oh, I'll go into the youth room. I go into the youth room; I pull up my computer and set it up. Then I realize that the music from the funeral is so loud that I can't record the podcast. Then I go to see where my headphones are. My headphones are dead. My roommate gave me a microphone.

Microphone didn't plug into the computer. I'm like, there's no way I can record this. But it felt for me some, I'm working on integrity and honesty with my word, and I felt really guilty that I wasn't able to show up for our original podcast appointment at 10 o'clock. And my Inner conversation was Oh no, I need to be perfect and I really want to do this right. And it was also shame and guilt of I can't believe you did this. You're so unprepared. Then it felt wow you really need to figure out your routines. Your routine must be so off because if you're not showing up prepared to [00:17:00] something that you've committed to, you need to check your sleep schedule, you need to check what time you're getting up, and it just became a spiral of self-blame of all the things that I could have done differently to prevent this situation. And then I had to just accept that, okay, I've tried all my options, practically, I tried to find a different space to record the podcast. I tried to plug my headphones in, but nothing seemed to be working. It finally became a moment of internal dialogue where I said. You need to ask for help and it's okay. Then I called you MJ and I just said, this is what's going on and you were so understanding, it made me realize, I was being so ruthless and hard on myself for things that some of them were in my control, yes, charge your headphones. But other things like a funeral I can't control. Looking back on the situation after talking to you, I did a little bit of a meditation because I was like, I don't want to start my day off on this chaotic note, [00:18:00] and I want to stop this mental loop. I just took a couple breaths. I said a prayer went to work. I tried not to ruminate on what happened and tried to have a positive spin and said Okay, I just get to try again. When I show up later today I'll be more prepared.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Wow. It's like the best example in the world because part of what you're talking about is the rigidity turns in on yourself. Where you are being so hard on yourself. And the bottom line is had your earphones been set up and ready to go, neither one of us have the power to stop a funeral, right? This podcast wasn't happening this morning at 10 o'clock. No matter what our intentions were, no matter if we did everything perfectly, there were forces outside of us that we had to be flexible and adaptive to. Because coherence is that it doesn't make sense. It would be [00:19:00] really weird to do a podcast with Dirges in the background and Be Not Afraid playing or whatever was the song, and that we would've both had to have been respectful of that and been flexible and said, oh, let's do it another time. There was this one factor that had nothing to do with you, but what you did was be really rigid and

ruthless. You said it yourself. But you worked yourself out of it. That was so fabulous. That's the best example I could have ever asked for.

Guest: I'm glad that happened, honestly, because I felt I was like, wow, I have to live what I'm going to preach. What we're going to talk about, I'm being put to the test. So, it was really good that it happened.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I meant to send you a text all afternoon. Because we didn't do that at 10 40 when we would've been doing the podcast. This psychiatrist that I have literally been trying to get in touch with since December called me and I wouldn't have taken this call. That's one of the things that I've really learned is that when we commit, when we say [00:20:00] one of my values is I'm going to work on mental wellness, it doesn't really cost much, except a little energy, a little effort and some self-awareness. Then we stay in the river and things end up working out. Things end up working out and the coherence that middle part is, it didn't make sense to do the podcast. Nobody's fault. Even if you forgot to do your EarPods, it's a podcast like, we'll just do it again. Even that we all forget to do stuff and we are both flexible and adaptive. But what you did that was so brilliant after being on the banks, because you could go back and forth in that example of the chaos, I'm I don't have my life together, my EarPods aren't plugged in or whatever. Then rigid, oh, I'm being so awful. You were going back and forth, but then you said, I'm going to stop. And you did a little meditation. That resets our mindset. Sitting down, feet on the floor, taking a breath, saying a [00:21:00] prayer, clearing our mind, whatever works for anyone to reset is so valuable. And how long did that take you to do?

Guest: It just found a five minute one on YouTube and Yeah. Went back to work.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah. And again, like that's what's so great about technology. We can use it in a life-giving way. We can use it to cultivate mental wellness. We can also use it to get in the way of mental wellness. When you use that example of, I Googled meditation or whatever you did. You all by yourself reset your brain, but you were intentional. It wasn't like I said to you, Hey, this has been hard. Do a meditation. It wasn't like the little meditation bird flew in front of you and said, don't forget to do your meditation. You did it. And that's the part about mental wellness. It takes so little. I want to know; how did you get yourself to do the meditation? because it would've been easy to just stay up on the [00:22:00] bank and spin.

Guest: I think I have a positive outlook and I was; this is early in my day. I haven't even begun work. I can't continue my day like this. It just felt so horrible

the way that things were going and my mind was feeling that I was like, this needs to stop. I'm not going to let one thing that's so small ruin my day. I tried to remind myself of the perspective. My mom would always remind me of it's not that big of a deal. But mentally, I make it a huge deal. I blow it up out of proportion sometimes. I knew what I had to do for the rest of the day and I knew that I don't ever want to act out of control or chaos and I really have been craving that peace. So, I wanted to get back to it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And did it feel good?

Guest: It did. It was hard in the moment.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yes,

Guest: taking the breaths didn't feel great because I was still pretty worked up. But if I looked to how the rest of my day went, I think that really made an impact. [00:23:00]

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: One of the things that frustrates people about meditation is it often feels pretty crappy. We often look and judge our meditation. What I've learned about the science of meditation is the power of meditation is not being able to keep our mind blank. It's being able to bring our mind back to where we want it to be. It's the bringing back that is helpful. I think of it a bit like stretching before one runs. That doesn't feel that good in the moment, in the middle of the run or in the middle of the workout that those stretches did their job. Just by interfering with the ruminations of being so hard on yourself of thinking, oh, this is a really big deal when it really isn't a big deal. The antidote to rumination was you stepping into managing your mind instead of letting it run amok. And the mind will run amok. It loves to be negative; it loves to spin. But if you bring it back, [00:24:00] then you actually have administered medication by doing meditation.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We're getting ready to wrap up. This went so fast. I could talk to you forever. Is there anything else you'd want to say to our listeners that you think would be helpful?

Guest: I think that for me personally, embarking on my mental wellness journey has been one of the best investments I've made in my life. I have been in places where I have experienced mental illness and now I'm in a place where I feel mentally well. Just that there is hope and it does get better, but it does take work. I think not being afraid to do the work or to seek help, to do that work. Something I would recommend under the guidance of therapists or friends or

family, but not being afraid to sit with yourself in those dark thoughts and not being afraid of that darkness, whatever that might look like, and getting familiar with what [00:25:00] those thoughts look like in your mind. Once you can start to see patterns in yourself and become aware, self-aware of those parts of darkness that you face, it gives you a sense of courage that you can get out of that. You don't always have to live there and that there can be hope in the light. If you're in that place of feeling you're on the banks, Know that it's possible to get back in the river and it will take a little bit of uncomfortable self-awareness, but I promise that it's worth it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Thank you so much. This was delightful and I'm so happy that we weren't able to do it this morning because that just was the best example I could have ever asked for.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Why use my words when today's guests spoke so clearly? Today's Inner Challenge insights are brought to you by a listener who took on the Inner Challenge.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight, number one:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: In her words, using self-awareness. I am trying to figure [00:26:00] out what does it mean no matter what location I'm in or what task is asked of me to stay in the river? Yep. It's that simple.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number two:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Again, her words, how do I change my routine so I don't feel like this?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number three:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We're on a roll. I can't really control whether or not the clouds come in, but I can control whether or not I clinging onto them or I try to let them go.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number four:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's actually been really awesome to grow in self-awareness because even if it feels uncomfortable, I feel a sense of agency. I'm no longer powerless to my mind. I can take steps to calm down or whatever I might need in that moment. Maybe it's not about solving all the problems or all

the thoughts, but just starring it, pointing it out. That feels good. To no longer let that have power [00:27:00] over my actions.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number five:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I am going to stop. I am going to stop. Not a harsh. I might add, but a gentle one that resets our mindset. Put your feet on the floor. Take a few breaths, Google a meditation, say a prayer. Move back into the river of feeling more peaceful, more calm, and move your attention, your alertness to the present moment.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number six:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Maybe our minds can always be on vacation. If we learn how to stay in the river. We can take a vacation from feeling like we need to control or feeling out of control .And just find the calm.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Thanks for listening, and as you move through your week, listen to podcast # 30 What is Mental Wellness? Observe your mind and give back [00:28:00] in the river of calm, peacefulness, and alertness. This is your Inner Challenge.