

# #34 Pregnancy & Mental Wellness: Baby Makes MWE!(Part 1)

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. There are few things in life that change how we answer the question, Who Am I?, in a more profound way than becoming a parent. While timing and circumstances of becoming a parent are unique to each of us, as the due date gets closer, all of us ask, who am I now that I'm a parent? Our identity broadens. We're no longer just someone's child, sibling, neighbor, friend, partner, or coworker. We are a mother, father, a mom, a dad. In my opinion, this is one of the most fascinating transitions when it comes to our identity. It's perplexing to me how little we talk about the psychological and the inter and intrapersonal experience of becoming a parent. In Inner Challenge terms, how little we Notice on the Inside the transition from me to MWE, a term coined by Dr. Daniel Siegel. Becoming a parent effortlessly, holds a mirror up to parts of ourself that previously may have gone [00:01:00] untapped or untested. Who knew we could love so much? Wow. I am not so great at managing my feelings, I am quite irritated at this baby that will not stop crying. Or, I thought it would be easier to put my needs aside in order to put my child's needs first. We document the physical journey almost obsessively. Apps like The Bump give us lots of helpful information. The baby is now the size of an avocado, the trials of sleep deprivation. But interestingly, most resources do not seem to address my area of interest about this huge life transition. You know, where ordinary human beings become a parent to an extraordinary human being and how this radically changes the way we answer the question, Who Am I? Today, I have invited a lovely young couple who are weeks away from delivering their first child to see if together we can find words for this powerful and meaningful identity [00:02:00] transition. Welcome to the Inner Challenge podcast.

**Dad:** Thank you. It's great to be here.

**Mom:** Thanks for having us. We're so excited.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I am so excited about this. Yesterday, my nephew and his wife had their baby and they named him Desi Michael. So, I am hot off the excitement of a new member of the family. How many weeks are you?

**Mom:** I'm 37 weeks today. Okay.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** So we're gonna try to not deliver this baby in the studio because I actually faint at blood. How are you dad at delivering a baby in a studio?

**Dad:** I've never done that before, so hopefully I never will.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** We will Google it. Should you go into labor? We are going to Google it and we're gonna make it happen. You could name the baby Studio.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I always begin the podcast by asking you to define what is mental wellness and how do you know when you're mentally in a good place.

**Mom:** That's a really good question. I think of mental wellness as all of the ways that you physically, spiritually, and emotionally take care of [00:03:00] yourself. How I know where I'm at with my mental health is usually through my relationships with others. I feel like Michael is usually a good mirror for me. In addition, I can have those moments with myself where I can notice, I'm feeling more irritable or more cranky or more rundown. I notice that how I am in my relationships can tell me a lot about if I need to do that check-in.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Great. And how about you?

**Dad:** If I could use a physical analogy, when I'm sick is when I'm thinking most about my health. I'm like, oh no, I'm sick and this terrible poor me or whatever. When I'm healthy, those are the days that I can go the whole day without ever thinking about the fact that I'm healthy. Forget myself in a way and just enjoy my relationships and the things that I'm doing. With my mental health I can tell when I'm not doing well or when I need help or need to slow down. I would say mental health is when with a new kind of ease or [00:04:00] effortless enjoyment of the people around you and the parts of your life.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Because this isn't unscripted, I often forget my organization and I usually start by asking you to introduce yourself.

**Mom:** I have my master's in poetry and theology, but now I work mostly with first year students as an advisor. We settled here in South Bend about two years ago. And we're starting a family now.

**Dad:** I was born and raised in California. Came out to South Bend for college where we met as students. Was in a master's program in Boston, and then that led us back to Notre Dame, where we both work now.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** That's great. I want to start with the question that I set up in the introduction of, when you think about becoming parents how has your answer to the question, Who Am I? evolved, changed, stayed the same?

**Mom:** For me, one thing that I've been really surprised about through this whole process is adding in this deeper sense that I'm not [00:05:00] in control of everything, which is an interesting thing to add to your definition of who am I? Like I'm not someone who is always in control, and I think that started even back when we were trying to get pregnant. It's so vulnerable to really want this thing and to try to make it happen and to know at the end of the day that you can't really force it to happen. We tried for about seven months, which I think a normal amount of time. But even that felt really vulnerable, like letting go. As I've been pregnant the physical experience of growing this little person inside of me and not really being able to control. I can do my best to be healthy and do all those things, but I think every doctor's appointment is pretty vulnerable when they'll check for the heartbeat. I'm really aware of Wow. This is not something I could really wake up and decide [00:06:00] to control whether or not the baby's gonna have a healthy heartbeat today. But I think that's probably good to start to learn slowly going into parenthood because I have a sense that I'm not in control all the time, but that's okay. And that's actually good in a lot of ways.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** How about you, Dad?

**Dad:** That's a good question. During the pregnancy, I've gotten some little sneak peaks at what being a Dad will be like once the baby's born. Just in the ways that I've had opportunities to serve Madeline more. As she has been getting more and more pregnant the weeks and sometimes has less ability to do things. On the way driving over here, we have these plants in our front yard that we got last spring and Madeline was like, oh yeah, we need to snip those and cut them down so we can make sure that they grow again. Can you do that because, she's just having trouble bending over just to, snip the little plant. I think my understanding of myself has been already to be more informed by the sense of being responsible for someone [00:07:00] else. I'm not just taking care of myself and the things that I want and managing my own, little plans or agendas for each day. I think the first thing that comes to mind is okay, what do I need to do? Or what can I do for the people around me? And being available and being of service in that way. I think it's starting to change my understanding of, who I am.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Wow. I think those are both so beautifully said because what you're talking about is control and you're talking about a subset of control and that's letting go. Both in the service of another . You're saying I can't control the baby. If it's healthy, if it grows. Of course that's not completely true. We need to eat well and take our vitamins and that kind of thing. But you're doing all those things and you still feel the anxiety of I can't control this. Your response is really mature in the sense you have to let go of your agenda, but what you're really trying to [00:08:00] do is make things easier. Pick up what she can't do. Sometimes I've worked with fathers and they're resentful of that. They don't quite have your concept.

**Dad:** It's easier for me to say it than to live it out, that's, for sure.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** So, talk about living it out.

**Dad:** I would say, I think that you can back me up here. I am someone who's very into my own designs. My own plans.

**Mom:** He has a very organized Google calendar.

**Dad:** That's how I've developed over the course of my young adulthood to stay organized and get things done and that's also pretty hyper detailed. I know certainly when the baby comes that I'll have to grow in flexibility. I think it's nice for me and there's some grace in it that I get to in tiny ways just begin to practice that habit of letting go of my own little plan and becoming available to Madeline. We'll have to do that a lot more with the baby. It definitely takes work. I feel like it is [00:09:00] a habit that you have to build to change what your initial reflex is. When a need arises or someone asks something of you, instead of having that knee jerk reaction of oh man to yeah, just being joyful and okay with those things as they come up.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Because from the beginning of time we pretty much had children at 16, 17, and 18. And this is the greatest sociological experiment. You're approaching what, 30 and you're having your first child . You've really had a decade to be self-focused.

**Mom:** Wow.

**Dad:** Yeah.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** And that transition that both of you are talking about, the letting go, the feeling out of control is a really natural, healthy

transition. And one of the reasons I'm doing this episode is I don't think we say this to people. I remember when I was having my first child, I was 30 and my mother-in-law was really upset that I was gonna go back to work. I tried to explain to her this is my first child, my job is my first child. I have tended to it, put [00:10:00] energy into it, loved it. And she said, oh, because she had her first child at I think 20 or 21. Mm. Really vastly different experiences. Wow. Yeah. Part of what you're talking about, and it really dovetails into the model that I use for mental wellness, is Seigel's River of Wellness. In the middle, if we want to be peaceful, calm, we use the acronyms. Flexible that you mentioned. Adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. And the sea and coherent is we try to make our inside and outside match. That's the letting go. If we're going to raise a child. We have to understand something has to go, we don't have a baby and then get four extra days in the week. What goes changes throughout the whole baby's lifetime. Sleep goes initially not so much when the child's seven, et cetera. What's your emotional reaction to feeling out of control?

**Mom:** The first thing that I can feel when I have to let go of control is fear[00:11:00] and worry. I guessing those are slightly different. Fear for me being like a drawing your breath and worry being more like all the thoughts that come in, all the specific things I could worry about. My whole pregnancy, been working to have instead is more of a sense of peace and even like a physical sense of calm.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** What do you do to try to cultivate that peace and calm?

**Mom:** I think for me, actually part of it has been thinking about the question who am I? I would describe myself as a worrier. Sometimes my worrying has a strategic benefit in that I do like to mull over all the options of what could happen and get all the information and try to filter out for myself what is reasonable to worry about and what's not. I've always been that way. I remember when we were trying to get pregnant, I already could tell that just wasn't going to be sustainable because every month I would just be on this [00:12:00] roller coaster of hope and fear and then despair when we didn't get pregnant. Even doing that for a few months, it quickly was like this is exhausting. I can't really be this way for the long term. I remember thinking too, that pregnancy would be nine months and that would be filled with things to worry about. And the baby would come and there would be a whole host of new things to worry about. And I just remember thinking that just wouldn't work and I'd have to find a different way. I think that was the first step for me, was actually just the self-awareness of this is something that might have worked for me in the past, but I don't think that's gonna work for me as a pregnant mom.

There's a combination of things I've done. I think one thing that I've tried to do is to be really intentional about what information is helpful for me to seek out and what isn't. A past version of myself might have been trying to read all the birth stories I could. At 37 weeks, even the [00:13:00] traumatic ones. And what I've done instead is just to say, I don't think I really need to read those stories right now. I have also tried to limit how much I'll Google a pregnancy symptom or go down that deep Google rabbit hole of potential things that could happen. Physically I've been taking really warm showers at the end of the day just to like have a sense of physical calm. I think that has helped a lot too. I'm actually proud of myself. I think I've worried a lot less while I've been pregnant than I used to. I think you would probably say that too.

**Dad:** Yeah. You've done a great job.

**Mom:** That's pretty surprising to me cuz when we think about that question, who am I? I would say that was a big part of who I am slash was. I also have the sense that I really don't want my worrying be something that my child picks up on and carries with them as their own worries. So [00:14:00] long, long term I wanted. Start to slowly change that a little bit.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I think this is the most beautiful part of being a parent. If we have self-reflection, we have a chance to update ourself and to take into parenting the parts of ourself that work for this stage of our life and to look at the parts that may not be beneficial. And you're right. Think about what we worry about. We worry about things that are untrue. We worry about things that are over that we regret. When we really have a crisis, we tend to be pretty focused on it. That doesn't mean there's worry, but there's a lot to do in a crisis. We waste a lot of energy with what might happen and I think one of the foundations of mental wellness in 2023 is exactly what your doing. I am going to manage what I put in my mind. What is out there? I downloaded The Bump in order to get ready for this and it scared the crap out of me. I was like, whoa, this is [00:15:00] really helpful. I love that the babies an avocado or grapefruit or whatever but the articles had a negative slant. One thing I know for sure, being a therapist, having had lots of clients deliver babies in my 36 years is no one has the same birth story. So there's no reason to read anyone's birth story . But, the reason people read them is for control.

**Mom:** Yeah. It does go back to that sense of control. I was thinking about The Bump app actually, it's also, I'm never perfect at this. I have to recalibrate every day and The Bump will list all of the possible symptoms you could have that week. I started to realize that when I would read all of those symptoms, I would just naturally assume, okay, they're all going to happen to me. There are some

symptoms that I was so worried about having. For some reason I was really scared about the idea of having really intense swelling and I really haven't had swelling my whole pregnancy. That's good example of a data point that I totally absorbed and worried about that actually didn't end up happening [00:16:00] at all. It's interesting cuz you do wanna have the app to see the little food. It can be hard to filter sometimes.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** It's very hard to filter. It puts people in the position of kind of all or nothing. Yeah. But you have enough self-awareness that it sounds like you figured it out. I think we don't talk about, we want pregnancy to be a time that people prepare psychically. Just like you're doing, who am I? What do I need to update? I don't want to pass my worry onto my child. Of course, you'll worry about your children, but you wanna worry in real time you don't want to worry in what might happen.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** How about you? What's been this process of thinking about who you are and what are some things you've thought, Ooh, I have to update that in order to be the dad that I hope to be.

**Dad:** The first thing that comes to mind is I have been doing a little bit of searching for new job opportunities recently. When we found out we were pregnant, we were obviously so overjoyed and we then started to look at [00:17:00] all the details as you do start to plan. We looked at our monthly budget and we're like, oh, we could use some extra wiggle room here with the baby coming and the new expenses. I've been looking for new opportunities to just take the next step of my career and maybe make a little more money, which would be nice. I think that's been a direct manifestation of what I was talking about before, of wanting to be available to serve my family and to provide for them. It's been hard to do that and to apply for something or kind of put your hope in something and then maybe get rejected or doesn't work out the way that you hoped. That's still an ongoing journey.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I think one of the biggest shocks to me in 2023 is how expensive it is. Yeah. To have a child very different than 30 years ago when I had a child, it cost, but it wasn't like today. Part of it is that women could easily work part-time and flex in and out of the workforce like that. Much harder today. Deductibles. Much lower and it costs a lot to live today. Rents are more, [00:18:00] mortgages are more so that makes sense. It's ooh, now it's real.

**Dad:** Yeah. I think that's been a very concrete way that we've been preparing for the baby to come.

**Mom:** There's that vulnerability too. Wow, not even knowing beforehand how many parts of your life might have to be reimagined? I don't know that we thought about that so much when we were trying to get pregnant. Then the goal was just getting pregnant and that was our whole hope. It's only when you're to run the numbers that you're thinking, whoa, now I feel newly vulnerable about our finances, which isn't really something that we had to worry about so much.

**Dad:** I think it really does touch like every part of your life. Yeah, you think of having a baby and how your life in the home will be so different with the baby, but now it's even life outside the home. What I am gonna be doing every day if I, find a new job.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I like your word reimagined. Because that's our hope that we can reimagine it. [00:19:00] A lot of it is reimagined as we go through it. Just like your finances, right? You're like, a year ago they were great!. And now in the moment you're like, oh, we are re-imagining how to move through this. I find great comfort in that we don't have to have this figured out ahead of time. This is truly becoming parents. Parenting is really one of the most mindful experiences a human being can have. It puts us in the present again and again. I hear both of you saying is that you're developing this wisdom of, I'm gonna be in the present more. Because to be too far ahead is overwhelming and you can't go back. Yeah. This idea of, wait, we're smart, we're competent, we're resourceful. We have the ability to imagine, and how do we do this more and more in the moment? I think it's just a smart strategy whether it's applying for a job or having a baby, both of them, you're out of [00:20:00] control once you send the application and once the baby comes, it's how are you gonna dance with being out of control. Of understanding, it's really what we do when we're out of control. A lot more important than trying to impose control. Siegel's model is helpful because he has the river of wellness where we're peaceful and calm and alert. Then he has the banks. One bank is chaos, which is out of control. The other bank is rigidity, which is imposing control, and that's just part of our daily life. But if we have the self-awareness of, Ooh, I'm on the bank of chaos, we can usually breathe for a little bit and our mind will tell us, be more flexible, be more adaptive. Hey, what you're doing doesn't make sense. And when we use those three words, we then can put ourself back in the middle and we feel more energized and stable. If we're rigid, we're trying to impose control. This shouldn't be happening, this shouldn't be happening. It's just such a helpful model because like you said, every part of your life will be. [00:21:00] Mm-hmm. Every part of your life in, in some ways that's really beautiful sounding on a podcast, but day to day it's really disruptive.



**Mom:** Yeah. It can be scary day to day. At the same time that it's so beautiful. We're also in this anticipation phase now. Probably I'll listen to this after the baby comes and have a whole host of new thoughts. It's an interesting time of it being really beautiful and really scary at the same time. Yeah.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Yeah. And it's scarier because the puppy isn't there. Think about when you got your puppy. Love was really the antidote, right? For the fear, the amount of work, the inconvenience. I remember when I was pregnant, I loved my sister's, two boys. And I had a real fear I don't know if I could love my baby as much as I love these two boys. But in reality, right away I was I was like, of course I will. You don't have the baby, which is really the best medicine for the fear.

**Mom:** That's so true. Yeah. Yes. I'm [00:22:00] glad we're only a few weeks away from that.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** What are you looking forward to the most about the baby?

**Mom:** That's a really hard question. I looking forward to seeing Michael be a Dad and I've thought about that moment that I see Michael holding the baby for the first time. I think that's what I've thought about a lot because he's so curious and excited about all the physical ways that I have the baby with me right now. I love when Michael will talk to the baby inside my belly and sometimes the baby will move around when they hear Michael's voice. That's one of the main things that I think about that'll be so different between having the baby just inside my belly and being out here in the world with us. I think the same thing about my parents being grandparents as well. I am so excited for this moment whenever it is that [00:23:00] it's not just me experiencing the baby inside my belly, but the baby being a part of all these other loving people's lives. That's exciting to me.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** That's so beautiful.

**Mom:** Yeah.

**Dad:** That's really awesome.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** No self-centeredness there. I know.

**Mom:** I have to include my brothers too. That'll be great uncles. Just that first interaction between the baby and each of the people I love. That gives me a chill.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** What about you, dad?

**Dad:** I'm so excited to see you become a mom. I just always known that you would be a really good mom. I'm really excited to see that in action. I'm just really excited for play and discovering a new relationship. I feel like it's almost like meeting, a new person and like getting to know their personality and watch them grow over the weeks and months and years. Walk through a park and look at trees and flowers and play with little blocks and read books and stuff. That all just makes me really excited and makes me feel really happy.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I think one of the irritating [00:24:00] parts of becoming a new parent is what just happened in me. That when you talk about your hopes, it puts me back to my experience and then I'm gonna tell you my experience. And then everybody always wants to give you their experience of pregnancy, their experience of delivery. I remember I felt the world, like all the reds are red, or the greens were green, the blue were bluer after my son was born. Everything was in vivid technicolor. I was a little psychotic. Cause I really thought it was different. I thought something happened and somebody turned up the hue and the brightness of all the trees, all the colors, everything. I think there's something so universal about having a child that people like myself cannot help but share their experience with your experience. Which is what I think is beautiful with what both of you said because we want babies to be born into families. We are in this unique time in history, especially in our culture, where the nuclear [00:25:00] family often dominates the extended family. I think it's beautiful that you are pushing the boundaries of, this isn't just our child, this is our family's child. That I think, really wise for so many reasons, but I loved hearing you say that.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** The last question I wanna ask you and I'm gonna put you on this spot here, have you thought much about how you cultivate mental wellness for your child?

**Mom:** That's a great question. I don't think I have really thought about that. The closest I've come to thinking about that was what I said earlier about having a sense that I don't want my worries to become something that burdens them. But that's more, in the realm of what behaviors am I modeling for them. I don't know that I've thought much about their own agency as a person that will have their own mental health journey. Probably because I'm so caught up in the week

[00:26:00] old newborn idea of who my child will be. That's a really interesting question. I don't know. Have you thought about that?

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Oh, no, it's our first cliffhanger on the Inner Challenge podcast. Have you thought about that, dad? How we will try to encourage mental wellness in our child? Tune in next week for part two of baby makes MWE. But before that, let me share with you my Inner Challenge insights.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number one:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** The Population Reference Bureau estimates at 117 billion people have been born since the beginning of time. Isn't it wonderful that each new baby is a really big deal?

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number two:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** There's a lot of ways to measure if our mental wellness is a bit off, but this new mom to be gives us a sure fire way. How are we treating others? If we're not treating others well, especially those closest to us, [00:27:00] it's time for a mental wellness reboot. Look in the mirror and use self-reflection, to figure out, do you need better nutrition? More exercise or sleep? Or better ways to manage your stress or technology? Or is the problem not about self care, but about realigning, your attitude and expectations. So you feel better and in turn, treat others better.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number three:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** When we feel out of control, we often find ourselves on the banks of rigidity and chaos. And in these moments, it's not unusual for our minds to run a mok catastrophizing or blaming, or maybe both. These are not peaceful mental states. Blame and fear. Fear cause our mind to feel more anxious, more negative and often self-righteous or self-loathing. Babies just make us want to be better people. And there is no better place that we can work on our own [00:28:00] self-improvement then when it comes to mental wellness. The next time your mind runs a mok. Ground your feet. Choose an object to focus on. Take a breath. Fill your lungs and slowly, breathe out. Do this as many times as necessary, to bring your mind to a more peaceful place. Say to yourself. Whoa. I can do this. The, this is not blaming or catastrophizing, but rather I can breathe and help my mind be more peaceful. Guess what? Working on your mental state for the sake of yourself and your child costs nothing but a bit of intention and effort. Yup. We can do this!

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number four:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** We have all heard we are what we eat. The same is true when it comes to our mind. We are what we read, watch, listen, [00:29:00] or play. So, if what you're reading, watching, listening, and playing is making your mind anxious or your spirits cynical, negative or hopeless. Take back your power. Take back your control and step into your agency by switching the channel, closing the app and choosing something else.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number five:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Stepping into parenthood, asks us to let go of the life we know, and step into a new way of living. Dad's for a time being are not in a starring role, but this new dad is wise to understand that just like theater, there are no small roles in family life. In the beginning, the baby is a star and the mom is the best supporting actress. Dad is the stage crew. Doing what he can to help the show run smoothly. Come on, we all know this is the truth. [00:30:00] Dads who can be the best damn stage crew ever help build a family that is full of mutuality and love. And that my friends is no small role.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Insight number six:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Hey, it is your baby, but be gentle with the other 117 billion of us who are transported back to our experience. It really does take a village to raise a child. And for those of us who traveled the road before you throw us a bone, be patient as we share our stories, advice or memories. And in return, we will do our best to avoid the S B S you know, scary birth stories. They're just not helpful.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Next week, the cliffhanger ends. Join us for part two, where we talk about the foundation of creating mental wellness in your child. Attunement. You won't want to miss this episode chock full of real life examples about how to attune ourselves [00:31:00] to our children, no matter what their age is. This foundational process is so often not talked about and it's really, really life-changing. I can't wait to have you join us.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** As you move through your week, send me an email at MJ Murray Vachon. If you want to be a guest on the podcast. This is your Inner Challenge.