

Ep. 39 Who Am I? Internal Self-Awareness (Part 1)

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. Last week I shared with you the first half of Erik Erickson's lifespan development, ages and stages. We left off at adolescence, where the big question is, Who am I? How do we as humans develop enough self-awareness so that we can answer this question authentically throughout our lifespan? You may be surprised to learn that there are two types of self-awareness, internal self-awareness, the ability to perceive and understand our strengths, weaknesses, abilities, values, emotions, and reactions. And external self-awareness, our ability to understand how others view us in these same areas. When asked, most people think of themselves as self-aware, but studies show that only 10 to 15% of the population truly are. It seems to me that most people mistakes self-knowledge, the basic about one's self for self-awareness and many people avoid [00:01:00] external self-awareness because it can be unsettling, even painful to learn how others see us. People with true self-awareness see themselves in 3D. They have an understanding of themselves, they have an understanding of how they impact others, and they also live their life in a way that is connected to values that contribute to the world. Which, if you remember, being a contributor is one of the important parts of mental wellness. When all this is flushed out, it becomes easier to see how self-awareness, 3D style, can help us cultivate not only better mental health, but a better world. Not naval gazing some people fear. Today we're going to talk with a college student who asked to be on the podcast when he took the Enneagram as a tool to help him grow in self-awareness. I want to begin by thanking you for being on the podcast and asking you to introduce yourself to our listeners today.

Guest: Thank you for having me. I'm a college student [00:02:00] from St. Charles Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago. I am majoring in marketing and psychology.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You became a guest because you had a friend who was on the podcast. I'm always looking for people to be on the podcast. You can just shoot me an email at mjmurrayvachon.com. You are really interested in talking about this topic of self-awareness. You had told me that you had recently taken the enneagram.

Guest: Yeah.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Can you tell our audience who may not know what the enneagram is?

Guest: The enneagram is a personality test with nine different personality types. I would say it goes deeper than defining your personality. I think it's more about self-awareness and your deepest motivation. It's something that I was exposed to actually through my mom before I came to school this year. She said it might be cool to learn more about yourself. She knows that's something I'm always looking to do. I took it and then as I was reading through the results and reading up on what my type is I was , oh my gosh, this is so neat. Everything I've always wanted to be that I thought I was is what my result is. I thought that was so cool. This test was telling me what I want it to be is how I [00:03:00] actually am, which I thought was really cool.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Three cheers for your mom. How old are you?

Guest: 20 now.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: At 20, she probably intuitively understands that one of your jobs, is to answer the question, Who am I? I worked in a junior high, and I often would say 13 to 18 or 19 was, Who am I? 18 and 19 to 25 is who am I really? Because at 13 and 14, we have a lot of fantasies of what we want to be. But that really may not be who we are. One of the values of personality tests the Enneagram, Myers Briggs, Disc 360, E Colors, is that you take the test, but in the end you validate the test. Meaning if you had read, things about yourself that didn't resonate with you. Do you think you would've allowed the test to overshadow your belief about who you were?

Guest: I feel the test is a way to start, helping you to realize [00:04:00] there's so much more than what's on the surface and even what you know about yourself already. You were saying that age, 20 to 25. That's when you get to know really who you are. Going into this, I was 19. I have a good idea of who I am. But this test helped me pinpoint what is my internal motivation? What is my reasoning for being the way I am? What is at the end of the day, I really want to achieve in my life? I think the reason it was so helpful and the test didn't really overshadow who it was is because I went into it thinking I'm just going to take it, be really honest with myself. And then my experience after the test of reading books about these results and starting to realize other people's types in this personality test that I've really been able to appreciate it. Now I have an idea of I'm this kind of person and I start paying attention to it more. Starting to key in on parts of me are motivated by what?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Is it safe to say that test gave you words for what you already knew about yourself?

Guest: Exactly. That's, I think that's a great way of putting it. And that's why it was so helpful for me and why I still talk about it and recommend it. It was able to articulate exactly what I've always felt inside and never thought [00:05:00] anyone else could relate to it. But there's a whole group of people out there that do.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Given that it gave you words for what you knew about yourself, can you talk about how that's been helpful?

Guest: Yeah, that's been really helpful. Because I think mainly the biggest thing is that it gives you a sense of belonging. I think everyone at the end of the day, that's the biggest goal and your whole life is a sense of belonging. Up until taking this test, I think there are a lot of parts to me that I'm , oh my gosh, I don't think anyone really relates to it. My personality type on the Enneagram is this, very artsy person. For a long time , I never really thought there were people out there that related to me in this deep level and that relationships and arts and feelings were the deep root of who I am. Then taking this test and realizing that there's a whole personality type dedicated to us. There's a personality type, a group of people in the world that are me. That was probably one of the coolest parts of it is getting that sense of belonging. On top of that, I personally really liked what they were saying about mine. Even when it came to the jobs they typically pursue, I was , oh my gosh. It was all the [00:06:00] careers I've considered recently. I thought that was really neat.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It gave you a sense of belonging first to yourself. So that internal self-awareness that I talked about in the introduction.

Guest: Yeah.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: When you saw the results of the Enneagram, you could feel , oh. I knew that about myself. And that allowed you to have a sense of belonging to yourself. But it also made you feel an external sense of there are other people who are like me. Yeah. Because here's a test that's devoted one whole category to my type of person.

Guest: The way I think of it is , for me and my mental health and spiritual life, it just strengthened it. I had this rough outline of who I was and who I felt I was becoming and then internally taking this test just strengthened it. I came into this year and all these things, I wanted to be and thought I was , being, I

definitely am. It was the experience of reflecting on myself and really understanding that the person I want to be and the person I think I am. I am. And then externally, you were saying, it [00:07:00] helps to reassure that there are people out there like you. I think it also gives a lot of compassion to other people and knowing everyone's different.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yes. I often say that we spend our adolescence and early twenties answering the question, who am I? And then we spend the next 10 years realizing everybody isn't us. Yeah. But it also sounds you started the school year with this knowledge and that was really empowering to be this is who I am and I'm going to work on building off my own self-awareness.

Guest: Oh my gosh. Yeah. When my mom was the night before I came back to school and she's just taken this test. And I'm kind of , oh, okay. Whatever. And I just took it. It takes a while because you really have to go slow and think about the questions deeply and really reflect on them. I didn't really realize how amazing it was because then after when I had my results, she's start reading this book. I think the personality tests are great but it's really what you do with the information that matters. Learning about yourself is so helpful to your self-awareness, but also your interactions with other people.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to punctuate that you said, doing the test is helpful, but what one does with the test [00:08:00] is what really creates self-awareness. I think most people think a lot of people are self-aware. Yeah. And it's quite shocking that we're really looking at 10 to 15% of the population has what we call full self-awareness, what I call 3D self-awareness. One of the skills that people have is exactly what you just said, what do I do about this? I'm number four in the Enneagram. Sum up what your type is, if you're comfortable doing that.

Guest: There's nine points on this, circle and they're split into three sections. One being what's called a head triad, where your kind of internal motivation is within your head. Another one is a heart, the heart triad and the other one is the gut triad. What part of you is your, instinct, motivation. And so, for me, I fall within the heart triad specifically a four, which is called the Individualist. How I would explain it is someone who is very in touch with their feelings and is very into the art and beauty of the world and expressing those feelings. And they're main, importance of all of life is pretty much [00:09:00] relationships and how those intertwine with their feelings. That's how I am. The reason I like this so much I always felt I don't know, I'm emotional or sentimental person and I never really understood why. Why do certain things leave me more emotional than other people? When I looking into this, I was , oh, there's a reason for this.

I have a certain motivation that makes me this. I was very happy. Anyone who takes it, should be very proud of who they are and what the result is.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The way you build off of it is what do I do about it? That research tells us that introspection for the sake of introspection can actually make people more anxious and depressed. It is important to do Inner work on the why, without a doubt, it's a starting point. But we move to healthy self-awareness when we don't just stop at the why and we say, now what? I'm this type of person, and what am I called to do to further develop myself? What am I called to do career wise, friendship wise? How do I use who I am in a healthy way? To really [00:10:00] contribute, because we know in mental wellness, if we're not contributing in ways that are healthy it really costs us when it comes to our mental health. When you think about what, what you've been able to do, now that you have a clearer sense of who you are, can you talk a little bit about how that test and all the reading and the work you did after it moved your what to a different place?

Guest: I think you're totally right. I mean it comes to self-awareness. Yeah. It's what you do about it. It was really helpful with my self-awareness, journey. Because the biggest thing is it not only made me compassionate for others, but also for myself. It was the first time I was I guess shouldn't be afraid to do the things I want to do. Being aware of what it is that that motivates me deep down. I think you always have this feeling of you want to do certain things, everyone's motivated to do different things. Everyone values different things in life. Some people are gunning for The C-suite in a corporation. Some people just want to create something. Some people want something simple, to find meaningful relationships. For me it [00:11:00] really made me self-aware of that. I think it gave me a lot of appreciation for everyone's version of success is different. Through this I found where mine is and that's something that made me self-aware.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to build on that because I think in your generation that's always grown up with social media, part of answering the question, who am I? Gets a little foggy because you have a lot of images of pretty fantastic things you could be. I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on how that dynamic in your growing up years helps or hurts you in answering the internal part of self-awareness.

Guest: I think with social media and with a lot of the world, you're pulled in all different directions. Different people, different groups, different things pulled different sides out of you. I think with the Enneagram, something that helped me was , it gave me this consistency. Yes, there's different parts of me different

people bring out different qualities in me. What was helpful about that was that , deep down, there's this one thing that is consistent across all. Which is really helpful for me because in my [00:12:00] high school years, it was always neat to have different parts of me seen by different friends. But there was always part of me that was , I wish, the real me, deep down, who I really am, could be consistent across all of that. I think my self-awareness with the enneagram gave me a pinpoint this is who I am. I am this very feeling driven person who's finds a lot of beauty in the art and relationships and emotion of the world. Now using that back in all my environments and how seeing how my different qualities come out in different groups I'm able to point back to this internal self-awareness of mine that this is who I am and I feel more confident in who I am and what I want in the world.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Wow. That is probably the best description of the first part of adolescents I've ever heard. I'm going to try to mirror back because I really want our listeners to understand. You're in high school and you are connected with different groups and different people. You're aware, you have enough self-awareness that you know you have a little bit of a chameleon, you're changing yourself[00:13:00] to fit into each group, that's actually really healthy on two levels. One is we want, in that first part of adolescence, we want people to seek novelty. That's what the teen brain wants and novelty is by putting yourself in different groups. Lots of teens don't do that. But you were able to do that. That created a healthy Inner tension of what if I could be the same person in every group? Yeah. And that's the second part of adolescence. So you are developmentally on track, which is fabulous. But not easy. Mm-hmm. Because then it's what do I need to do in order to strengthen who I am enough that I am the same person in each group. It's not, why am I different in each group? You're different in each group because developmentally, that's the first part of adolescence. But the second part is what do I have to do to try to be me? I really encourage the, high school and college [00:14:00] students and even up to thirties that I work with to have fun with this to just note when they make those changes, not in a critical way. A couple weeks ago in session, I had a young man I was working with and he was talking to some young woman he found attractive and she was from a different country. She said to him, do you hunt? And said, six months before he would've said yeah, because he wanted to impress her, obviously she hunted. And he said, no, I don't. That was a big win for him because he stayed true to himself. It sounds really silly, but a lot of times we change who we are to connect with people and when we have the self-awareness and really challenge ourselves to not do that. What he learned it was zero big deal to her. Most of the time when we're changing ourselves just very slightly, some people do it drastically, right? But in your case, it's slightly, it's developmentally just [00:15:00] trying to figure out, how do I fit in? How do I belong? And then you have enough of yourself in the second part of

adolescence, for someone who's on track, you're , oh, I just think I'm going to try to be consistent. And in doing that, have you found that you still can connect to different groups?

Guest: Oh my gosh, yes. That's what's been , the best part of being introspective and being self-aware. I've realized it's so much more rewarding and seriously so much more amazing when you can , just be yourself. Say the things you want, show who you really are, and then still be received so well by that person. Because then, they love and watch you for who you are. And that's been something for a long time I think I definitely struggled with is oh, I need to play the role for this person. You think that's just how it's supposed to go? On the surface level, it works, especially at a younger age, but as you get older you realize this is miserable. I don't want to be in these relationships, in these friendships with people who I have to , put on a face for I wouldn't to go to certain groups of friends' houses and be , okay, I have to act this way. I just want to [00:16:00] be who I am. I want them to see all of me . And I've realized if from the beginning you just go up with Okay. This is who I am. You show yourself and you disagree when you disagree you, you do things that only you would do. In the long run when they're still there and they're still , connecting with you and still find you interesting. That is so amazing because then you know that the real you is what they like. Then you don't have to worry about, going to hang out with people and being , okay, I have to put this face on. You don't have to worry about the sides that people or environments see in you. And that I think is the coolest thing that I've taken away from my self-awareness introspection. It's cliché, but if you , just be yourself and just seriously don't care what other people think and just do you express yourself how you want to express it, that is the most amazing thing ever, then you'll be rewarded so well because people will love you for you.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Wow. I just think that is so well said, and I also really want to punctuate that it is a process to get to that point.

Guest: Mm-hmm.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: One of the things I used to say when I taught [00:17:00] this program to junior high students is there is nobody gifted in mental wellness. Yeah. You can only be as mentally old as you are. There are people of athletic gifts at a rare age or musical gifts, but when it comes to this type of self-awareness, nobody at 13 has the self-awareness of a 30-year-old. You can only have the self-awareness of a 13-year-old, and then I would say to them, nobody in this class is completely confident. Yeah, and I am not kidding you. When I would say to them, you don't need to be confident at this age. You

need to be working on building self-awareness, and then eventually the confidence will follow. So, you have to be able to hold that insecurity that is just part of adolescence. If you have insecurity, it doesn't mean you're not self-confident. It means that you're an adolescent, growing in self-awareness, trying to figure out who am I, what do I love? What's my gifts, what, so what's my [00:18:00] talents, what are my values that I root those in? When I would say that to them, literally I could see 80% of the class just take a big breath of relief.

Guest: Oh, definitely.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I'm saying it because I don't have the classroom anymore and it's really important because you got to this point because you were willing to move through the early part of adolescence, try different things out, and have enough self-awareness that you're , Ooh, I'd to just be one guy in every group.

Guest: Yes.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: But you can't be one guy at 13 or 14 because you don't have enough of who you are. It sounds to me using the tool, the Enneagram really helped consolidate what you knew about yourself. Now I have the words, onward.

Guest: Honestly, I don't feel I'm born with this, self-awareness. I don't feel I've had an edge on everybody else. I feel an athlete who's been through years of training, mental training and is now very fit in my mental health journey and physique, I guess you could say. I've had that insecurity, the only [00:19:00] reason I feel self-aware and know all this stuff is , because I failed too. Now I say, I love just being myself and showing people the real me.

Guest: There were years and years growing up that I was not that. I had to put on faces for people. I had several groups where they saw different sides of me. Not until I came to college, it was the first time I was really , okay, I'm going to take what I've learned from this self-awareness, introspection and really actually try it. I've always known . You got to be yourself. That's what everyone says, but actually starting to believe it and reflecting on your actions didn't really happen until I was about 18 years old.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to punctuate that is because it can't happen until you're 18.

Guest: Exactly.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Can you talk about other things you've done besides the enneagram that has helped cultivate this internal self-awareness.

Guest: Yeah, I've always been really introspective. I've always I've always prided myself on that, but I think most recently, what's been really helpful is I personally like write songs. Like I have a band and stuff and music is a really important part of my life, which, I say that relates to the enneagram because that's a part of my number four. Their big, artsy and music and that kind of section of arts. That's something that's [00:20:00] been really helpful because it gives you a lot of time to reflect. For me, songs I write are , I try to make them really about me. It's really cool because it allows you to acknowledge your feelings, think about who you are and then turn that into an expression. I think overall just the music process and specifically songwriting has been really helpful for me because it makes me reflect on things, break down situations and events. Instead of just going through them, I really can tackle them and process them. I guess that's the word I'm looking for. That's been really helpful to see not only what I go through, but also how I am when I process things. Not only is it reflecting on the past, but then you're actively also kind of learning about yourself in the present.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Dan Siegel has a nice acronym for the teen brain, and he said as the brain matures, the essence of it is emotional spark, being connected to your emotions, that are most intense in those 13 years. Social engagement, finding your tribe, novelty, new experiences and creative expression. That vignette that [00:21:00] you just gave us about writing music encapsulates everything that the teen brain craves, and that is an incredible way to increase your self-awareness because you're writing songs about your life, about yourself, and you're also processing the emotional experiences, and then you're singing and performing them with friends in a band. It's An a plus example. Some people write poetry, some people do their own blogs or talk to their friends. But that is really important in your age and stage to really find a way to do exactly what you did. And I would really want to validate you on that.

Guest: Thank you. It's not the fact of writing a song or producing something, but it's the whole experience overall. I just take actual things that happened and then just pour what you're feeling into that. Then months later, I'm , performing with my band and no one will know what this song really means to me. But to me it was seriously so helpful in my mental journey and my self-awareness. That's just how I do it. There's so many ways you can tap into that self-awareness. [00:22:00] Everyone's looks a little different.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I think that is one of the reasons that Taylor Swift is so beloved by teenage girls because she is able, to do exactly that for teenage girls who might not have your capacity, of writing their own song and their own music. Listening to music can be an incredible way for people to have a d deeper understanding of who they are. So, as you create music, it's not just for yourself. No. You also give it to people. And as you learned with the enneagram, we to think we're unique, but actually there's a lot of people out there that are so similar to us that we have these personality tools that see clusters of different personalities. Let's move to external self-awareness. Have you ever heard of that before? I spoke about it today.

Guest: I don't think I've specifically heard of that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: External self-awareness is coming up with ways that we learn how others perceive us. Let's do this. It's my experience that few people really think about how to create structures of external self-awareness in their life. So [00:23:00] let's stop our conversation today and we'll continue it next week.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Here are my Inner Challenge insights:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: insight number one:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It seems that there are two types of people in the world. Those love personality tests, and those who are skeptics, where you begin is not as important as where you end up. For those who love them a bit of distance and curiosity can be helpful. Ask do my results resonate with my experience of myself? What about my results, doesn't resonate. Share your results with a trusted friend and do, as today's guest did read more about your type. For many, this is a rather invigorating process. I believe these tests can be very helpful tools, but just like a hammer, they must be applied properly. If you are a skeptic, encourage yourself to befriend your skepticism, so you really understand it. Go deeper than I just don't want to test to tell me who I am. When we find ourself [00:24:00] resistant or even defensive, such Inner conversations increase our self-awareness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number two:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: To answer the question, who am I takes a bit of bravery. In a culture that idolizes exceptions and the exceptional, most of us normal folks can feel not enough at a pretty young age. You can feel the self-acceptance grow in this young man. As he took the test to not define who he is,

but to deepen his own understanding of who he is. He is wise in saying it's what you do with the test that matters more than who the test says you are.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number three:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: In learning that there was a whole personality type devoted to people like him. My guest today found it deepening his sense of belonging. I find this quite hopeful. We are often told to strive for uniqueness and specialness. Instead of connecting to others and seeing our similarities, we compete and [00:25:00] compare. I worry that such striving can unintentionally make us feel lonely and separate, which is not good for our mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number four:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Our personality type is inborn. We can spend a lifetime trying to change it, ignore it, or build on it. You choose.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number five:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Self-worth is rooted in our value of worthiness. I believe we are all born worthy. It is our birthright. Each person is as valuable as the next and our self-worth never changes. Self-esteem or self-confidence is developed throughout our lifetime. It is more like the weather. Dependent on many factors, it can be sunny one day, cloudy the next and at times downright stormy. The mental wellness tool of self-awareness helps us navigate these changes. When our self-confidence takes a hit, we are wise to remember our self-worth [00:26:00] has not at all been dinged. When we are on top of the world where even wiser to celebrate the win, but ground it in the reality that this win does not make us worthier than the person we may have beat out for the job, the award, or whatever else went our way that day. Our mental wellness will be far more stable when grounded in our self-worth not our self-esteem or self-confidence.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number six:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I regretted not asking this young man, what role his values had in how he answered the question, who am I? One of the biggest changes I have seen in my 36 years of being a therapist, is the values people share with me. 25 years ago, most of my clients shared with me values rooted in family, religion and contributing to their communities. For the most part, the values were rooted in the other and that is what guided [00:27:00] their self-awareness. Today, many of my clients share with me that their values are about

personal success, personal happiness and personal wealth. Not all of my clients, but many. I do not believe that mental wellness being, happy and peaceful, can really happen if our primary purpose is self-development for the sake of ourself. When we ground our self-development in values that help others there's an alchemy that I have seen happen again, and again, and again.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Thanks for listening. Take on the Inner Challenge of answering the question. Who am I?[00:28:00]