

Ep. 48 Mental Wellness & Exercise: Getting off the Couch!

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. As we continue to explore the role, our spirit plays in cultivating mental wellness, I had to do an episode on exercise. You might be surprised to learn that research shows that exercise for many people who suffer from mild to moderate depression or anxiety is just as effective as medication.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Let's admit it. There seems to be two types of people in the world. Those who naturally love working out, going for walks, sweating in the gym, hitting the pool or climbing a mountain. Or those who just hate it, avoid it, start it, stop it and that's the pattern for the rest of their life. Actually 72% of Americans fall into that category: people who don't exercise. Lots of people use exercise as a weight management tool or as a way to keep their heart healthy. But it is foundational for cultivating mental wellness. Today joining me is Julie Hamilton. Julie is a professional trainer who's worked 10 [00:01:00] years and I know people have worked for her and they have had excellent results. She is graciously joining us, not to talk about the value of exercise, because we all know that, but rather to focus on how do we get ourselves to do something that we want to do not just for our physical health but for our mental health when somehow we just end up on the couch.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Welcome to the podcast today, Julie, I'm so excited for you to be part of this episode.

Guest: Thanks so much. I am so excited to be here as well.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Julie's from Portland, Oregon. I'm always begin with my guests, by asking them how do you define mental wellness?

Guest: For me, I would define mental wellness as knowing the truth about your life and your situation, and being able to adapt and adjust accordingly with the right tools in a healthy manner. I like to think of it as being mentally fit. You're not immune to things but you are [00:02:00] just more equipped to handle what comes your way. In the right way.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's a beautiful definition. Part in mental wellness is being honest with ourself. That really feeds into today's topic because we all know we're supposed to be moving our bodies. We all know how

important it is, but sometimes we're actually not very honest with ourselves as to how little we're doing it, or if we're doing it ineffectively. Before we jump into your expertise, tell our audience your background.

Guest: I grew up as a child of the eighties, where my hero was the gymnast, Mary Lou Retton, the 1984 Olympics. That was my first taste of true exercise and learning what it meant to be a stronger person. I just loved it. Life past, of course I did not become a professional gymnast. I went to college, got a degree in education, was a teacher. It was not until my family and [00:03:00] I moved to the United Kingdom in 2006, that I truly began to find exercise and strength training as a way of combating and really adjusting to the culture shock of living in a different culture. When I discovered strength training, particularly lifting weights. I finally was able to recreate what I experienced as a child in gymnastics. Just this amazing feeling. When my family and I moved to Portland, Oregon over a decade ago. I started by getting my certification from the National Academy of Sports Medicine. I got a nutrition certification from Precision Nutrition and for the last 10 years I've been working one-on-one with clients ranging from age 20 to about 75. I have to say it is the most interesting and rewarding [00:04:00] work I have ever done in my life.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What an interesting background. We often start off in one profession in our twenties and our life has zig zags. This is a profession that really honors your background in education but also your deep childhood interests in wellness and fitness. That is fascinating to me. I want to jump right into the real bulk of this issue for most people. I would love for you to share with our listeners, two tips for those people who want to exercise, but can't get themselves to do it. Can't even get themselves to start. From your expertise, what can they possibly do?

Guest: I think even before the first two tips. I would love to share something that I encourage my clients to avoid. And it is don't wait until you completely change your thinking before you decide to start. [00:05:00] I found all throughout my own life, through my clients' lives that often the right thinking does not necessarily lead to right actions. I would encourage people to not wait, be gin, today. There's never a perfect moment. What you will find is that your right actions, will often lead to your right thinking.

Guest: Another thing I like to say, putting on your clothes either go outside or go to the gym. That's going to be the hardest part. Don't diminish those things.

Guest: As we're talking about tips, I would say the first thing start simple. Start with something that actually you think you could possibly like. You don't have

to like it right now. I usually enjoy telling people. Start with a walk. Put it on your calendar. If you can look at your weekly calendar where your work commitments lie, and you can say, [00:06:00] okay, during that day, whether it be before work during the middle of the day, after work, I'm going to put something on my calendar so that I prioritize it. Then do it. Start with a 20 to 30 minute walk. In doing that, don't go with the all or nothing mentality. I have to do it seven days a week or nothing. For about a month or two months, try doing one to two days a week of a walk or something that you enjoy doing. As that becomes a habit in your life, you can slowly build up to more movement.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I've often said this to my clients. Just walk and they all say walking doesn't count as exercise. Can you explain to our listeners why it does count as exercise?

Guest: It does count as exercise because you're getting your heart rate up. You're moving. You're exercising your muscles. I hesitate to say easiest because while these ideas are very [00:07:00] simple, nothing is easy. It is not easy to get up from your sofa and actually go do the thing. But it is the thing that requires the least amount of thought, the least amount of equipment, the least amount of money. When you begin to do that you're getting into the practice of setting aside time to do some sort of purposeful movement.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I love that idea . If people have an aversion to moving, I always encourage them to pair it with something that they might like talking on the phone, doing a podcast, meeting a friend. So they're doing something they like while they're doing something that they don't like.

Guest: Oh, absolutely. I always say if you can put something you like with something that takes way more effort. It seems to actually be a tad bit more enjoyable.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Okay, so tip number one is basically I haven't ever heard anybody say this, so I want to go back and punctuate it. [00:08:00] Don't wait for your thoughts to align with what your aspirations are. I think a lot of times we hear a lot of life coach speak and that is change your thoughts and you'll change your actions. What you're saying is don't wait to change your thoughts. You're really saying Nike's slogan, Just Do It, is one of the secret weapons you give to people?

Guest: Absolutely. I have used this in my own life countless times. Sometimes we can give as many good ways of thinking, changing what you truly believe and at the end of the day, you gotta get up off the sofa. I problem solve with my

clients. Many times we talk about the benefits. We talk about how exercise will actually help your life right now and in the longterm. But almost always, there comes a point where I say you have to begin. When are you going to begin? And once a [00:09:00] person begins their thoughts, their thought process, and their thinking slowly does change because you see the benefits.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I totally agree. We sometimes can change our thoughts by changing our thoughts, but we will almost always change our thoughts by changing our actions. I'm not good in math. I'm not good in math, you study hard for the test and you get an A, and you're like, oh, maybe I'm not bad in math. Maybe I'm not good at it, but maybe I'm not so bad in it. What's your second tip.

Guest: My second tip is if you have the monetary resources. Hire it out. Actually all of my clients, they pay for personal training. Every client probably has to budget. Very few of us have endless resources to throw at these sort of things. But often hiring out something that is intimidating. That you say, I don't even know where to begin. It will make all the difference in the world.

[00:10:00] For me, I don't know how to dance. I can put on a YouTube, a dance video, and quite frankly, dancing in my home by myself is not that enjoyable on a regular basis. So, I pay once a month to go to a dance studio with a friend and take a class.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Can you talk about why hiring it out is a really effective strategy? Hiring a personal trainer. And I guess before I ask you to answer that, I'm going to say one of the things I've done with my clients, because as a mental wellness therapist, know that very few people, if they come to me with depression or anxiety, even if they're on medication can have the same results, if they don't do some exercise. One thing I asked them to do is to look at their credit card bills for the last three months and add up how much they've spent on coffee and how much they've spent on eating out. It's often much more than they realize. Then I asked them if they would cut that [00:11:00] in half and put that towards a trainer . What's interesting to me is, many of them after month one decide to use more of it because it's exactly what you said in your first tip. They're thinking got changed because they just started to do it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's very intimidating to go to a trainer. Because trainers are in shape. So what are some things that can help people work through that intimidation? I gave some tips on how they could work through the money piece, because you don't have to necessarily hire a trainer for a year. People can go for one or two sessions. Correct.

Guest: Correct.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What are some ways for people to find the right trainer and then how do you help that trainer understand that you are not an Olympic athlete and you want to just start with where you're at.

Guest: Great questions. My experience is obviously with my own clients, but I would encourage someone to look on Yelp. If you would [00:12:00] like to go to an in-person trainer, which for me, I've done and I continue to do zoom training sessions with clients. My favorite though and the majority of my clients right now that we are not at the height of the pandemic, is to do one-on-one in-person training. But depending on your needs, maybe you find a trainer far away and you have to do zoom and it's in your home. What I would do is I would look online, the closer to your home, the better. I know that the studio that I train at has many Google and Yelp reviews. I would go to that studio, or gyms website. Hopefully, the trainers will have some bios. I would also encourage someone and this is just my personal recommendation. I am a middle aged woman who is going through perimenopause. I'm most likely going to want a trainer that I think maybe has [00:13:00] been through this, or at least has had some areas of study. If that is what I'm truly wanting help with. Once you get a complimentary consultation, almost all studios and gyms have a free session. I would make certain that the trainer knows what I am looking to accomplish. And what is actually possible for me. With all of my clients as I sit down and listen to their goals, their past history, their limitations. I always say, how can I help you right now? How are you looking to incorporate this into your life?

Guest: Are you looking to become a person who comes to the gym every day? Or are you looking to add one to two strength training sessions a week? Supplementing with walking. I really want people to be honest. So I would recommend if you are sitting down with someone that you think has had [00:14:00] decent Yelp or Google reviews, or maybe there is nothing about them and you very honestly say what you are looking for and if it's truly fat loss slash weight loss, say it! Don't wait for your trainer to ask. An accomplished and experienced trainers should be asking the right questions. But it is also up to the client at the very first session to be very clear at what you're looking for and to say, Hey, I know that this might be your hobby, your area of love and your profession but I have a full-time family. I'm a single mom. I work a lot during the week and I want to get the biggest bang for my buck when it comes to my health. In the minimal amount of time without spending my life at the gym. So I think honesty, with some background research.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: One of the things I see a lot is the struggle to be that clear and that honest is that many [00:15:00] of the people I work with are in shame storms when it comes to their weight, when it comes to working out. I'm wondering if you have any advice for them as how to honor the shame, right? Because the shame isn't all bad. It's saying I don't want this piece of my life to say the same, but it also keeps them imprisoned. Do you have any sense of what they might do to push through it?

Guest: This does not come naturally for most people. Exercise and health related topics. Very few people excel in this area. I'm going to use myself as an example. I would say this is a misconception that people share about working out. I was a child gymnast. I love exercise. It is my profession. It is my hobby. It is an area that I do have [00:16:00] research. But still when I'm laying on the sofa, I take a nap every day because I get up so early to work with clients. After I take my nap in the afternoon, that's my time to go and get some exercise, whether it be walking, riding a bike lifting weights, but every day, I have trouble getting up from the sofa. I wake up from my nap and I go, oh gosh. I don't want to get up. I don't want to get up. Oh, I don't want to get up and go work out. I would love to encourage people who really struggle in this area. That even for someone like me who has been doing this for a long time, it is so hard for me every day to overcome those little voices that say, just lay there, don't get up. You don't want to do this. I like to normalize to my clients. That it is okay to struggle. It is okay to not be [00:17:00] motivated. The beauty that happens over time, when you continually get up off the sofa. And I know I use that analogy a lot, but that's the story for me of what I actually struggle with. Is that every time I get up off the sofa, I put on my workout clothes and my shoes, which I stated earlier is the hardest thing for me to do. I am basically telling that little voice it's no, you can just sit there. I am saying no to that little voice and I am creating habits over and I'm being, self-compassionate going, Julie, you don't have to want to get up, but you are continually doing this because, not only is it better for you physically, it's better for you mentally. It's life-giving. Myself and many of my clients have become really good at hearing that little voice that doesn't want to do it. The shame you're not gonna accomplish anything, actually not going to make your life better. [00:18:00] Just sit in your misery right now. And over time, we just continued to override it. I would like to encourage people that over time the voices do get a little bit less. But I've been exercising in this manner for almost 20 years and I still don't want to get up off the sofa many days.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah. I really like people to understand that the brain is lazy. The brain is very busy running all the bodily systems. our lifestyle doesn't force us into movement. It doesn't force us into eating healthy. It actually forces us to be very sedentary and it actually forces us to eat like crap.

Which is two things outside of us that work against our inside. I completely agree with you if we understand that we all have a lazy brain and the first response of the brain is I just want to sit around and do nothing except, breathe and all the automatic systems in the body, [00:19:00] then I think we will really understand that talking back to that voice and not taking it so seriously. I have a number of clients right now who have made themselves work out and they feel so much better . I think so much of it was moving through the shame and doing just what you were saying.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Do you have any advice? I am a regular exerciser. Always have been, but I don't push myself hard. I'd love some advice for the people listening, who do exercise, but probably should up their game. Any thoughts about that?

Guest: I do want to say that consistency is better than intensity. Speaking to the fact that you feel like sometimes you should push yourself more, we don't want to overlook the fact that truly being consistent at something over the long haul is going to have many more physical and mental benefits than intensity. I like [00:20:00] this quote from Bruce Lee. He says longterm consistency, trumps short term intensity, every time. I think it depends on how much you're saying that you could probably push yourself a little bit more. That is often why encourage people to hire out. Because when clients come to me, Or go to a trainer, you're basically putting that entire hour in the hands of someone else. So while you might stand there doing, I'll just use squats, for example, you might stand there doing a few squats. Pretty easy. Your trainer is going to see to the level at which you can do it and help you with your rest breaks. I know that when I go to a dance class, I am sweating and moving around. Whereas probably if I were at home, I would do a little thing and then I just sit for a while. I love that we're allowing [00:21:00] someone else to help push us.

Guest: Also, I try to think if my own walk her example. I think to myself, I'm going to just leasurly walk, like I always do. But maybe the last five minutes, I am going to walk faster and get my heart rate up. I think right now there's actually a misconception in our industry and it's been there for quite a while, that when we finish exercising, we need to feel absolutely horrible. We need to feel like we can't do anything else the rest of the day. I call it the Boot Camp style workout. If what you're doing as far as exercise leaves you so exhausted at the end of that session. Studies have shown that it's not as beneficial as you think to work out like that because the rest of your day, your body thinks, oh, I've put forth a lot of effort from the hours of 10 to 11. I need to [00:22:00] take it easy. We end up sitting more when it's time to walk our dog, maybe we go, I don't want to do that. I'm tired. So we actually end up getting less movement in

then, if we would push ourselves a little bit harder, but not so much that we are so exhausted.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's really interesting. I think that's a very different perspective because I always feel like I should do a couple of boot camps a month, but I have an aversion to it. I'm very consistent. I don't push myself to the point where I feel like I don't have energy for the rest of the day. I have clients who have had that experience and they have stayed with it but they do talk about that they often are drained throughout the day. What you're saying is we still got the rest of the day to do and we want to be able to have energy for that as well.

Guest: Absolutely. I, especially as a perimenopausal woman middle-age of life you really do have to be [00:23:00] careful at day in and day out for an hour, pushing yourself so hard that your stress hormones start working crazy and that you are left feeling so exhausted. It's impossible when you exercise to not feel, like you have put forth effort. All of my clients, once they leave, most of them are sweating. They definitely have gotten their heart rate up. But I want them to feel better about approaching the rest of the day. Now they're going to be a little more tired because you've put forth effort. Even when I went on my walk this morning, I came back a little more tired. But I am not so tired and exhausted that I completely adjust the rest of my day. I think we want to look at our day and our weeks with how can I add movement naturally into my life? How can I add some scheduled things. So that we're living a life where we move, where we [00:24:00] feel like we're made to do that, but not so intensely that we dread it because even though I've exercised for years, I dread intense exercise. To me it's not fun.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's exactly how I am. Julie, we have a couple minutes left. You are incredibly feet on the ground, very relatable, doable professional in this area. What you're saying is just doable. But is there anything you haven't said that when this ends oh, I wish I had said that.

Guest: When I look at incorporating movement slash exercise into my life and into those that I work with. I think what helps people really keep with it, is identifying that this truly does make life better. It does not solve your problems. But it makes your problems somehow [00:25:00] more doable. I love the quote by health psychologist, Kelly McGonigal. She says that exercise is like giving yourself an intravenous dose of hope. In my experience movement and exercise tends to be the first domino that when someone can start incorporating that more into their life, other things become more possible. People can start to make tweaks and improvements in their eating. Especially for women feeling

more confident. To approach different things in our life. There is something about movement that starts to make other things fall more into place. When it becomes part of your identity. And who you are. You are more apt to keep with it. We don't need to think of ourselves as I am an athlete. When I think [00:26:00] about myself, I am a mother. I am a personal trainer. There's many more things, but I am also a person who takes care of my health by exercising. And when we can start believing that this is part of our identity, it will help us incorporate it more into our daily and weekly habits and into our lives.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's exactly where we're going to end, because it's where you began. We can't think of ourself as a person who moves, a person who stays in shape until we are a person who moves and stays in shape. It's really about doing it. It's not about having the identity until you've actually earned it and that's what makes us feel powerful. I have said no to this and that, and yes to this. Now I feel a different part of myself has been developed. I really want to thank you for the message that you've given. If you've been inspired by Julie and [00:27:00] would like a consultation or an online workout, you can email her at julie@thevelvetdumbbell.com. it will also be in the show notes.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Here are my Inner Challenge Insights brought to you from the couch. Methods, strategies, and a few tricks, I've seen my clients over the years use to gradually help themselves not only get off the couch, but stay off it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number one.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Count your steps. We no longer need a Fitbit because our phones do this for us. Years ago, one of my clients ran an experiment. At the end of one day, he guessed how many steps he had walked. He was not exercising, but he wanted to know how much he moved in his day. He guessed 5,000 steps. He actually walked just under 1300. I've had other clients run this experiment in my office. So far, most people who don't like to exercise, think they're moving much more than they do. My client began to make adjustments. He parked at the edge of the [00:28:00] parking lot. He walked for 15 minutes at lunch. He went with his wife and son when they took the dog on a walk. He even did a few sets of stairs while he waited for his appointment with me to start. In four months, he went from 1300 steps to 10,000, many days of the week. Not once did he go to the gym or put on workout clothes? He felt so much better. And as he said to me, I know everybody talks about steps, but wow! It was so much easier than I'd ever imagined. I'm just glad I did it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number two

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Ask for gift certificates for a few personal training sessions. One of my clients who was exercise avoidant made this request of her children. They were thrilled because they were really worried about her health. She had heard of a trainer from a friend. Yes, Yelp is a good resource, but so are friends. In session, we crafted an email to the trainer about her goals. This woman knew face-to-face she was never going to say her [00:29:00] truth to the trainer. But writing an email, not only made it easier for her to keep the appointment. But it also made her feel much safer knowing that the trainer would follow her lead. In the past, when she tried to keep up with how others wanted her to work out she hated every minute of it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number three

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Befriend your avoidance. Become curious, not judgemental as to why you are avoiding something that will definitely make you feel better. I bet it is not because you don't want to feel better. Perhaps you had a terrible experience in gym class .Is moving too hard because of a knee or back issue? Were you a really good high school athlete who now tells him or herself that if it can't move like it did in high school, what's the use. Maybe your life is out of balance due to a demanding job, demanding schedules of your kids. Or maybe you are the person who does for others at the expense [00:30:00] of taking care of yourself. Sit with a trusted friend, a journal or even a therapist and look at your avoidance. Be- friend it. Ask yourself, is this the whole truth? Do what I call an internal update to increase not only your self-awareness, but your self- honesty. Don't let fear, rooted in the past or in the present get in the way of you doing what is best for yourself today? Nothing im- prison's us like avoidance. Free yourself with the truth. It does take a bit of bravery and at times it can be a bit of a pinch. But such updates are essential tools in cultivating mental and physical wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number four

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The light has gone on for many of my clients, once they had to take care of their elderly parents. Enough said.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number five

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Do you consider your physical condition too far to [00:31:00] rehabilitate? Once I worked with a young woman who weighed close to 400 pounds. Having been overweight her whole life, she had never

really moved. How she got there is not nearly as interesting as how she ended up running a 10 K. Every morning when she woke up, she would say out loud, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. I am going to do this! This began with an online chair yoga class and walking for two minutes around her house. What was the purpose of counting to five? In her words, not mine. It helped her move from, I can't get up! To I can get up! Just as Julie said, Our actions change our thoughts.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number six

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to end with Julie's wisdom, which I have seen reflected in so many of my clients. Just do it. Okay. I guess it's Nike's wisdom. God, we hate being told what to do. [00:32:00] But what happens when we are the ones having the conversation with ourself that says, I want the couch! I want the couch! Then we gently say, I know you want the couch. You can have the couch, just go walk for 30 minutes. You'll feel better. And then the couch will lovingly accept you back. Just keep the conversation with yourself going. Understand that the brain starts with the negative, but with a bit of gentleness, fortitude and right action, we can move to a better place.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Thanks for listening. Don't overthink it. Just move. This is your Inner Challenge. You can do it! [00:33:00]