

# Ep. 49 Mental Wellness and Compassion

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. In today's episode, we're going to talk to someone who's a regular listener. To be more exact, he is my husband, Dominic Vachon. The Director of the Ruth Hildebrand Center For Compassionate Care In Medicine at the University of Notre Dame. Dominic has actually more than a listener. It is more accurate to say that he is responsible for jump-starting Season Two, where I piloted the idea of a podcast that offered mental wellness coaching. He sent an email to his students, inviting them to be a guest on a podcast about mental wellness. Neither of us were sure that there would be any response, but in a short time, seven of his students said, yes, Their quick response had little to do with me or the podcast, but rather their deep trust in him and the program he runs teaching them to be more compassionate. And that's what we're going to talk about today. This often elusive idea of compassion. Just the other day, I was in the Atlanta airport and I saw a huge poster with Elton John and the tagline was Compassion. Pass it on. And [00:01:00] that is exactly what we want to talk about today. What is compassion? Does it help us or drain us? Is it something we can learn or are we just born compassionate or not? Let me welcome you Dominic to the podcast. And let's talk about what really has been an area of incredible interest and study of yours for the last 40 years.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Thanks for having me on your podcast.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** It's good to have you. I usually start with the question, what is mental wellness, but I'm actually going to leave that towards the end. Instead, I want to just jump right into our conversation today and ask you to define compassion.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** I would say there's two parts to that, compassionate caring, people usually blend the two together. Caring means that we have a sincere desire to promote or attend to the wellbeing of another person and the thoughts, feelings, actions, attitudes that go with that. When you have that sincere desire to care for somebody else, when they are going through something, when they're [00:02:00] suffering, when something bad happens to them, compassion is a four step process that happens inside your mind and body. First you notice the suffering. Then you're moved by that suffering, but you don't lose emotional control. Because you're focused on the suffering of the other person. And then the third step is you want to do something to help them. And the fourth step is you actually do something to try to help alleviate their

suffering. So it's four parts to it. If you don't have one of those parts, you don't have compassion. You've got something, but you don't have compassion.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** When you say that it seems to me like compassion is something some people have and something other people don't have. What do you think?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** I think that's a common thought that some people say, oh, I'm too compassionate or I'm I'm not. Frankly, if you are a human being, you are built for compassion. You may not be aware of what that is [00:03:00] inside you. But every human being is built for compassion. In fact, if a person doesn't have compassion. Either they're not aware of it or something bad has happened to them or something's wrong. Because compassion is the whole reason why human beings have evolved and survived and thrived. If we don't have that, we actually fail as a species. Darwin, never said survival of the fittest. What he said is those communities that had the most sympathetic members are most likely to survive. Recent scientist says it's not survival of the fittest. This is Dacher Kel ner. It's survival of the kindest. If a person doesn't feel compassionate, caring. It means that somehow it got buried or impaired in some way, but it's there and it can be grown and cultivated.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** In our culture today, we're talking a lot about trauma, [00:04:00] Which occurs when there isn't compassion. What happens if someone has had trauma?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** If someone has had trauma, there's a number of ways that can happen, but if they've witnessed something that's overwhelming. Overwhelmingly terrible or something that has happened to them that's terrible. Their whole system is in a protective mode. In order to protect themselves that trauma, that experience, can get carried through in the future where they are trying to protect themselves. It can make them afraid of connecting, afraid of going to certain places. That is something that a lot of people have gone through and it does block them. It's certainly something that can be worked through. It's understandable when somebody has been through something terrible and it blocks them from connecting or functioning. It's important to really have compassion in the sense of, oh, something happened to them and let's really try to understand what they went through and [00:05:00] help them through whatever they've gone through.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Yes. Tell us a little bit about what you do at the center at the University of Notre Dame.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** At the Center for Compassionate Care in Medicine, our mission is to restore a spirit of compassion in healthcare. And to do that, we use a new field called science of compassion. In order to restore that compassion, we focus both on compassionate patient care, but also helping the clinicians take care of themselves as well. So it's both of those. What we do is at every level of training and practice, we apply science of compassion. At Notre Dame, we have a program for people who are college students. Most of whom want to go into healthcare, but not all of them. What they want to do is learn the science of compassion as a way to anchor themselves, prepare themselves for how hard healthcare is, and also what it [00:06:00] takes to have really good patient care.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** You talk about it, it sounds heady to me. And I think of compassion as heart-centered. So explain that paradox.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** That's an amazing thing to hear because I've mostly been a heart-centered person, who would have been told exactly the opposite 20 years ago. I've spent most of my career working in healthcare. In healthcare, the words, caring and compassion are viewed with suspicion. Everybody writes in their personal statements, I want to help people. But once they get in these words, caring and compassion, mostly occur in marketing. In healthcare itself, people are think of caring and compassion as sentimental things. So what's happened to me, especially with the tools science of compassion is I can reach people who are blocked in that way. Where they think caring is an add on ,it's not necessary. When I start with the scientific piece and I say, if you don't think that caring and [00:07:00] compassion are the center of everything you do, that's fine, but you're practicing outdated medicine. Because what we know now is we are all built for compassion. And when we aren't living in this way, basing everything in that something's wrong. Something happened and frankly, If we connected back to what you just said earlier about trauma, a lot of people in healthcare, not only the patients, but people who work in healthcare themselves have been traumatized. It is really hard. Their training is really hard. The work is really hard and there can be a way that compassionate core gets harmed by the organizational dysfunction.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Or just the demands of their job.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Exactly. What the research says is that caring and compassion don't burn people out. It's usually what's around it that burns people out. People actually are energized by being able to give their gifts to another human being. But when you do too much [00:08:00] of it, Or you were in a

system that devalues that, or gets in the way of that, that's where a lot of the problems happen.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** This is a podcast that's really, for a lot of different kinds of people. I'm not shooting towards one demographic. Most podcasts they're targeting women in their thirties or men who like sports. One of the things I want to do is just have a podcast where I have lots of different people on it. I wondered for those listeners who aren't in healthcare what tips would you have for being able to recognize their compassionate response?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Absolutely. I'm talking about healthcare. This is a human thing. Every human, whenever we see somebody going through something, especially somebody we really care about. You're going to notice that and you might actually might feel it in your gut. So if somebody, if you're one of your kids or you're, your spouse, a friend had their hand in a door [00:09:00] and the car door slammed on it. You would have a body reaction to that. It would be overwhelming. What's happened is your whole mind and body has seen somebody that you care about, go through something and you are registering it inside. Oh my gosh, this happened to my loved one. I know what that might feel like. That's the first step of compassion right there where you notice it and you have a body reaction or a thought reaction oh my gosh, I wonder what they're going through. When that happens that can be overwhelming. The first reaction can be like, oh my God, that's awful. You can be overwhelmed and you can fall apart. You could cry, you could get distressed with them, or you might avoid them. Let somebody else take care of this. That's understandable why that would happen because things are hard. I ask people when I do this work to think about a time when you've helped somebody that you really care about and notice how those four steps go for you. You'll notice somebody, your loved [00:10:00] ones suffering. It grips you in some way, you want to do something about it and then you go, what can I do about this? And then you reach out. The first compassionate response is being present. You accompany the person, even if you don't know what to do. Your presence is going to be a compassionate response, but then if you can do something else like that hand in the car door. You'll go get some ice. And you'll say let's go to the ER. That's compassion.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I have a question from my clinical practice. Two things I've seen, a lot in the last 15 years, didn't see him so much 30 years ago, but somewhat. One was a college student whose roommates and mother died. And she came into me and she said, I don't have time for this. I don't have time to go to this funeral. I don't have time to be there for my roommate who had the [00:11:00] unexpected death of her mother. Part of what you're talking about is

this assumption that people feel it. But what happens when they feel it and it feels so overwhelming that they don't want to be part of supporting, nurturing, fixing. What was surprising to me was her parents supported her. So the parents are like, you're just three weeks away from finals. We totally understand. I'm sure she'll understand.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** The first thing that comes to mind is we do the best that we can. There's a lot of pain and suffering in the world. We can't respond to everything. It's overwhelming. Literally overwhelming. What we try to do is we do the best that we can. The way, especially the Buddhist would talk about it is compassion and wisdom are two wings of the bird. So you have to say, what's the best that I can do. What are my limits? Do I know what can be done? Can I afford to do this now, given all the other [00:12:00] things that I'm supposed to be doing? You have to balance it in the best way that you can. I think when I hear that it's this person is saying, I really don't think I can do any more than I'm doing right now. My first thought is let's try to really understand where that person's coming from. Because number one, she might have others people's needs that she's responding to that she's got to protect. She can't overextend herself. The other thing is not so much in this situation you've talked about, but sometimes something is happening and you're like, I really can't do anything to help that I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what to do in that situation. Even though I want that person to be better or to get help. I might not be that person today. But I still have the desire to help them. But I've got to do the best that I can. Actually this happens so much because there's so much need out there. Every day if you watch [00:13:00] the news or listen to the news, it's one suffering thing after another. In our society because of how good our communication is, we can actually get so much suffering input that we have to navigate that's really hard to do. And I don't think we really have a great answer for that. And a lot of people have to get very firm about that. That's enough. I can't do anymore.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I like the bird. One wing is wisdom. One wing is compassion. In this case the bird wasn't flying north. She just got so overwhelmed, she shut down. What are some things you would recommend to move through that place where I think we have a lot because of everything you've said. Instead of shutting down of staying in a compassionate state of mind.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** First thing is to really notice that and to be compassionate to yourself to say, oh my gosh, Notice [00:14:00] your own suffering. Have that matter to you and saying what's going on with me? Part of it might be I can't handle this right now because there's so much going on or it

might be, I just don't know what to do or how to manage that. It can be a process. It would be important not to just stop there. It would be like, okay, wait a second, here. That is a brother dramatic response from me. As a person, who's a parent and a friend and wow, what's going on with me? I can't believe I just said that to myself. To notice that first of all, and then to really stay with it. Stay in that uncomfortable place. And then try to make sense of it. Then say, okay, what do I need to do here? Do I need to talk this through? Do I need to sit back for a little while? What do I need in order to do the best that I can in this situation? I hear people who quickly judge themselves. That might be your reaction right now but tomorrow's another day. When you really sit with [00:15:00] that sometimes the solution will come up, it'll become more clear. The overwhelming piece, we'll get worked through, and then you'll be able to know what you need to do. That overwhelming response is not unusual. It's important to notice it and hang in with it and give it time.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** What Dominic and I didn't give him a chance because I know him so well. I didn't really introduce him completely, but he is a psychologist. He's done tons of therapy, he's a really good clinician. Part of what I think the young woman learned is that it really wasn't about her work. It was exactly like you said, it was that, she was overwhelmed. Cause she was a really competent high functioning person. Thrown into a situation that she didn't have an equation for. A lot of it was her sitting with it and her coming to the insight that I don't have to fix my roommate. I [00:16:00] don't have to get overly involved because it was a family loss. This was someone she hadn't known for a long time. It was a freshmen. I think the frame she used is I have to learn to carry that terrible things like this can happen.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Yes. I think one of the things you've just said there. People have a lot of times an internal burden, I should. I need to fix. That's shoulding on yourself. A lot of things can't be fixed. People say bad things should not ever happen. And if they do, they need to be fixed as soon as possible. If we can. Yes, but a lot of things take time to do that. I have this temperature gauge image I use in healthcare because in healthcare, even though people are really experienced, have done it for years. They get times when they get overheated or really cold. The temperature gauge has got a green middle, like on your cars. The needle is pointing in the middle, that's being in a [00:17:00] compassionate place. Then there's a blue part, which is running cold, which is this is overwhelming. I'm distancing myself. The other side is orange and red, which is running hot, which is you get overwhelmed, you fall apart, you get really distressed. You break down. What I tell people is that temperature gauge that little needle, is fluctuating all day long. There's some people that I meet, and this is not just in the clinical world, this isn't our personal lives. Sometimes something bad happens to a loved one and it just hits

you hard and your needle goes right to red. That's the shock piece. But your body and mind will try to find a way to get through that. Part of it is trusting your mind and body. That it will find a way. When a bone is broken, the bone wants to heal itself. When we go through trauma, Or when we encounter a loved one or someone who's gone through something terrible and we hit that shock response. Our [00:18:00] mind is going to try to find a way to work through that because. We are built to respond to other suffering and our own. With time, there is a way that our souls, our minds find a way and then that shock passes and then you get back to the middle piece, the green zone. The baby's crying. Overwhelming and then you go, okay, wait a second. Then you think it through rationally or you think it through step-by-step and you go wait a second. And then it gets clearer what to do. Just because you hit red or blue, called your detach or you're overwhelmed, this is not necessarily a bad sign. It's what you do after that. Trust that sometimes you have to cycle through. I tried to tell that to healthcare people, especially because sometimes they judge themselves pretty harshly. Whoa, wait a second. You're a human being too. Stay with that, but trust that you're going to figure it [00:19:00] out.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** You just put yourself out of a job because you're assuming everyone knows how to do this naturally. Yet you have an entire center, which is a second biggest minor on campus of students who have the courage to say ,maybe, I don't know how to do this naturally.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** That's so true, but the other side is I didn't even have these tools. Clearly, these tools are grown for me. What I'm trying to do now is take all of that research and wisdom and personal experience for me, put it all together so that people can think about their experience and go, okay, this is part of life. I've been in a sense, giving them information, that's going to help them go through it a lot more easily. Most human beings figure this out. You learn for example, if you're doing family caregiving or your parenting or your teaching or whatever, it might be, you're running a big experiment and you're going I [00:20:00] really overdid it there. What's going wrong? And then you figure it out. You might have this language, this definition. But you don't need the definition. You can figure this without that. They figure out that getting over involved didn't helped anyone. They also figure out that wow, me just focusing on myself doesn't really seem to help either. Most people learn through the experiment of their own life. They find that balance.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** What's the biggest misconception people have when it comes to compassion.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** That's a great question. A lot of people, when they define compassion, they go suffering with. If I have compassion for you, I have to suffer with you. Because that's what the word means. The biggest misconception is that if your loved one is suffering, you have to suffer exactly the way they do. Otherwise, you're not really compassionate. The reality is you're going to suffer with them, but they're the ones who got their hands smashed in the door. The biggest [00:21:00] misconception is that if you're crying, I have to cry. If you're angry, I have to be angry. Now that doesn't mean you might cry with the person you might share their anger. But to just stay in that place, then you're not really being helpful. The biggest misconception is that compassion means that you have to feel it exactly the way they do otherwise you're not really caring. If we go back to, the mom or dad with caregiver taking care of the baby crying being compassionate to the baby. The first time it's oh my gosh, I am not used to this, but later on, you're like, oh, that's a hungry cry. Oh, that's a poop cry. Compassion, there doesn't mean I have to cry too. What really matters there is I get emotionally centered and going okay, what kind of cry is this, let me figure out what to do. That's the biggest misconception. I would call that more sympathy. Sympathy is a good thing. If you're sympathetically sharing somebody's emotion. Great. That's a beautiful thing. [00:22:00] Compassion takes it one step further. I'm not just feeling with you, I'm feeling for you and then going, how can I be helpful to you in that?

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** The million dollar question, I think I've really learned in working with people. I am a fixer. Give me anything, I'm up for fixing it and I am known to have planned Z. One of the things that I've learned, because you are not a fixer, which is lovely, you are a process person, is to ask. How can I help you? So often people see someone suffering and they don't know what to do. And it never dawns on them to say, oh, how can I help you?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** What do you really need? The other misconception would be not to put compassion in a little box. You're fixing is a compassionate response and it is really helpful. We wouldn't want to say that more listening approach or a accompanying approach is the only way to be compassionate. Because fixing [00:23:00] can be the compassionate response. A lot of times when I work with people and compassionate compassion means being warm and cuddly and soft. Sometimes compassion is being challenging. I think that's the other misconception is that we think compassion has to look on the outside, always warm and kind. When you are offering advice or when you are challenging someone, then that actually can be a very loving thing. Would you have done for me? You offer that as a way to help because you really care about the person. Confronting a person, challenging a person, can be done in a mean spirited way,. If you really care about that person, you really worried



about that loved one. This is just being human. If you're really worried about somebody and you go, oh, I care about them too much to tell them whatever it is. Then that's not really caring and compassion. That might be important to remember in general, not to box compassion in [00:24:00] it's got to look this way and it's got to be handholding and it's gotta be sharing the same feeling. The fixing and the challenging also can be compassionate.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Everything depends on your intention. Your intention is the big part of this. Sometimes people will help other people and it's out of duty. Like I should help you. That's not compassion. That's duty. That's wonderful. We need that, but that's not really compassion. 'cause you're like going on I should help you. I'm going to do it. Actually the quality of that is not going to be as good. If you aren't in touch with okay, what are you going through? And what do you need? Sometimes what happens is when people are suffering, especially loved ones, that suffering will be really uncomfortable. It's one thing to fix something that matches what the person's problem is. It's another thing to go. Oh, my God, you are really having a hard time and you throw some solution at it. But the solution does not fit the [00:25:00] problem. What will happen is people will witness something that's terrible. They will throw something at it, advice, money, some other thing, but it might not match what they really need. But what they're saying your suffering is so uncomfortable for me that I want to make myself feel good. So I'm going to do something to make you feel good. I'm really not trying to make you feel good. I'm trying to make myself feel good. That's really, self-focused helping. It looks like I'm helping you, but really what I'm doing is trying to make myself feel better. That's why in compassion, it's important to notice it and let yourself be moved by what is this person's need? What are they going through? Because they might need a response that matches what they do. If the fixing that you do matches where they're at, then you've got a great compassionate response.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Part of what you're talking about is a common dynamic when [00:26:00] people in their forties and fifties and sixties are taking care of their elderly parents. I have this often in my practice, we both have had it with our own parents. It's so uncomfortable to see these people who you could have many different kinds of relationships with, not everybody has great relationships with their aging parents. It really doesn't matter where you start in that relationship with that person, but to see your parents age, is very uncomfortable. I have learned a lot not just from my parents, but from a couple of my friends who are in their eighties and nineties who have really taught me to not minimize what older people need and want and their ability to say it. I'm not talking about somebody with Alzheimer's. I remember one of my dear friends after her husband died, she was probably 80. Two or 83. She said to me, I [00:27:00] lost my husband, not my mind but I'm not sure my kids know it. I

always remember that. Because it was easy with both my parents, for me to want to fix something that couldn't be fixed. That's so much of it is accompanying. And so much of it's asking. How can I help you? Yes. Yes. I think you said it really well that our own discomfort goes to do something that we're comfortable with that they probably don't want 80% of the time.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Yes. Talk about compassion. That's all around us all the time is exactly that accompanying people through their later years or the difficult earlier years. It happens all the time where something is not going to get fixed tomorrow or next year, it's going to be an accompanying process and it's going to be a balancing act all the way through. The tendency is going to be, I wish this was over with, or let's just [00:28:00] fix you or whatever it might be, but it's going to be a process. I think what you've said, there is so important. I might be uncomfortable. I have to tolerate that and make sure number one in pacing myself, number two, that I'm really connected to where they really need. Then the other one is not to expect the impossible. Suffering is part of life. Let's do the best that we can and we need each other to do that and that's exactly why we were built the way we are. We're built to do at least two things. One to signal that we're not doing well. When we're crying, when we're angry, when we're emotionally shutdown, We're signaling that we're not doing well. We all have that ability. And the other ability is when somebody is crying, is angry, is withdrawn, our brains are going that human isn't doing well. Something is going wrong and that's when that whole compassionate reaction in us is getting going. We learn how to do that. It takes time to learn how to do that. We spend a whole lifetime [00:29:00] learning how to do that.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Let's shift to a really interesting session I had today with a freshman in college, who is so homesick. It's going so terrible from her perspective and she is suffering. She is been there for three weeks. She doesn't have friends. She thought she would have them by now. And to her therapist, three times her age, who's had maybe, I don't know, 2000 college students as clients over the years. I think she is doing a terrific job. She's going to class, she's working out, she's walking. She tried one thing to make friends didn't feel like she could really be herself. She had the courage to back out of it. She had another plan for tonight. But the one thing she didn't have was any self-compassion. She was saying to [00:30:00] me, what am I doing wrong that this is so hard. I wondered if you could just talk a little bit about self-compassion.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** I'm so glad you brought that up. When we think about compassion, we usually think about compassion toward other people. A psychologist by the name of Paul Gilbert says there's three types of compassion. There is compassion toward other people. That's an ability. Are you able to be

compassionate to other people? Secondly, are you able to receive compassion from other people? And third, are you able to be compassionate toward yourself? And you have to have all three of those. I'm really glad you brought that up because a lot of times people will focus just on the one, but not what you're talking about with her. Being able to look at herself like she would a good friend. If her good friend were homesick, and that she would treat herself like that good friend. Like saying, oh, it's it's understandable. Why you be going through this?[00:31:00] Let's hang in with it. Let's take a walk. And do all the things that friends do for each other when they're going through hard times. It might not get solved overnight. You have to hang in with that. So you accompany, your friends . To do the same thing for yourself. To be able to say, wait, let me not judge myself harshly to say, you know what? That makes sense why this is happening to me. Of course, this is Christina. Neff's one wonderful work. To not judge yourself, but to say, okay, it makes sense. Let's just take it one step at a time and work through it, but to do the same thing you would do for yourself as you would for another person. In other words, being kind to yourself, and that doesn't mean you're coddling yourself. It means that your emotions and the way you're thinking is signaling to you something has changed, and I'm not used to it yet, or I don't know what to do about that yet. I've got to give myself time to read that situation.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** [00:32:00] I'm interested in your thoughts on this because we are living in a time of great division. And we are living in a time of great blame. What is the relationship between blame and compassion?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Wow.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Oh, God, I'm stumping ya. It is great.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Yeah, it really is tough because people quickly dislike each other and it doesn't take much. You'll say something or do something that signals that you are different, that you're in a different tribe. Or your quick to judge and blame. I do share with you this real concern that it's almost like our infrastructure of kindness has taken a beating. The compassion is related to that. This is not my thinking. This is thinking that has really helped me. To really notice when I'm doing that. If I'm judging somebody, if I'm blaming, if I'm getting a scapegoat. To quickly go whoa, wait a second. We're all human beings. We all want to be happy. [00:33:00] We all want to be free from suffering. What is this other person going through? That brings them to be the way they are now. To start with that. It doesn't mean I'm absolving them. But nor does it mean that I'm blaming and judging them? It means that, Hey, we're both humans here. We both want to be happy. We both want to be free

from suffering. That's our starting point. We human beings, we need each other. If we don't have each other, the world falls apart. Gosh, we've seen so much of that in the last 20 years. Even more than that. Something goes badly in one part of the world and the rest of the world is affected by that disaster. That just shows how interdependent we are. In order to navigate this really hard time all of us have to get back to that core part. Which is we, human beings are in this together. What, if I was in that person's shoes and I had gone through what they had gone through, I might be thinking and acting just like they [00:34:00] are. Let's start with that. And then work from there.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** In this very individualistic culture. One of your antidotes, is to think of the other. What I call psychological intelligence. What's my story. What's your story then it's our story. I did an earlier podcast on family caregiving. And because I live with you and I've been swimming in compassion for 40 years. I don't even question it. And in that podcast, the woman said something where I almost fell off my chair. I said we're wired for compassion. Of course, I live with an expert. So I say that with great certainty. And she says, I don't think so. She said, I think that compassion is cultivated in a culture. And if the culture doesn't cultivate it. It doesn't get cultivated.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** There's two sides to that. There is truth to what she's [00:35:00] saying that it's gotta be cultivated. It is possible to have a human being who's not compassionate. There's lots of ways that gets cultivated. Usually starts very early in their lives. But it is not how the human system was built. The human system is built for connection. It's actually not very good for fighting. It's much better for nurturing and healing. It's two steps. Number one, it is built that way, but if you don't have good caregiving early on or things go wrong or something's wrong with your body or your brain. We'll then compassion is going to be undercut. We wouldn't judge the person for that. It'd be like, oh, I understand why that happened. But it is something that is cultivated, but it's cultivated in ways that it's not something that you go to school to you, you can learn how to like our program. You can get deeper into it. But really it's being a human being. And if you've had fairly decent caregiving [00:36:00] in your early life, you're actually well trained for compassion already. That's why many of the meditations are to really think about the love of a mother for a child as being the foundational building block for compassion. When that happens the road is already being laid. I don't think it's as simple as it's not cultivated or not. It's if it's not cultivated, the system's actually frustrated. It's if you had a car. You're just going to have the car. But it's there. But you never drive it. That would be my way of thinking about what she said about compassion is you can have a car and not drive it. You can have compassion and never get it cultivated. Does that make sense?

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I also think you can have a car and misuse it. Oh, yeah. Maybe the integration is we are meant to be compassionate. It's a gift. Compassion may be an innate gift. But if it isn't cultivated throughout one's life and I've seen this, we [00:37:00] see all these groups of hate that have been cultivated online. And I can't assume that all those people had bad parenting. Because I think parents do their best. But I think one of the dramatic shifts is the culture is really more powerful than parents. My guest, when she said that I thought gave my listeners an insight. Part of what we want to be careful of is we cultivate compassion with another and I do a lot of work ,for lack of a better word with my younger clients to say, be careful what you expose yourself to.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Exactly.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I don't want you in a box. I exposed myself to a lot. It's so important to expose ourself to that which makes what is innately good in us better. And that is really difficult to do. One of my clients who I think is a terrific person [00:38:00] was going down the rabbit hole of, and Andrew Tate, who a lot of younger men like. He's a bad human, but initially he's very appealing to young men. And this kind of rabbit hole. I think we want to be careful. I think we're in a new place where what happens in those first five and 10 and 15 years can take a terrible turn in adolescents, if the village isn't watching. And the village can no longer watch because it's all online. It's all in secret. What I'm thinking about how this fits in with mental wellness, compassion is a tool of mental wellness and both have to be very intentionally protected or they get lost.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** So if we think of your life has a garden. You can start out really well. You can have you had the garden can have been cultivated. You had good parents good community. And then you can always ruin a garden, [00:39:00] right? You can cultivate it poorly or not cultivated all or negatively cultivated. And that's what you're talking about. You can have a really solid beginning. But then start giving yourself negative fertilizers. You listen to things that are not kind, not compassionate at all, and start thinking that's a good thing and start diluting yourself and harming the garden that you had going. It really is important how you cultivate this and just because you cultivated at one point in your life. Doesn't mean it's permanent. You have to keep working at it. I think you're absolutely right that we have a lot of negative cultivating anti compassionate forces going on. People don't always realize that is happening. One of the indicators is that people aren't happy at a certain point. In other words, you go down these really negative ideologies, for example. In the end, when you really look at it it doesn't really end in a happy place. And the people who [00:40:00] are in that are generally not happy people. There's an

edge to it. A discontent You can tell that it's not working. But sometimes people live whole life like that and it ends badly. But one of the signs is they're not happy and the people aren't around them aren't happy. Maybe the little group that's diluted themselves and had ingested all this negative fertilizer, but it doesn't work out very well. This goes back to your earlier point. When we know people who are going through this., To be able to say that is a place of suffering. There's something wrong there. How can we connect with that and help people out of that, through that. That's not an easy thing. Especially when the forces are huge now in a negative way. This is a pretty rough time.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** In beginning to wrap up , I'm interested in given your background in compassion. What is your definition of mental wellness and how does compassion fit into it?

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** I live with an expert on mental wellness, so I've [00:41:00] been coached well on this. How I use what you've taught me, is taking care of your mind, body and your spirit. Am I taking care of this body, this car that I drive, so to speak. My taking care of this mind. Am I giving it what it needs to keep it going. This spirit. My spiritual part. That's one part of the mental wellness for me. The other piece is life is hard. There are stresses and how do I take this self that I have and keep adjusting to what's thrown at me or what life brings. As I'm going through this, I'm doing the best that I can taking care of my mind, body and spirit, knowing that it's always a balancing act. Being able to notice when my mind, body and spirit are out of balance, help it get back in balance. Then underneath that, is what is it all aiming toward? And what is aiming toward is taking care of each other and making the world a better place. That's what [00:42:00] we were designed for. For me, mental wellness involves this care for each other and ourselves and the world. If it's not there, then we're missing a piece. And doing the best that we can in a world that's hard.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** That's a beautiful definition and a great way to end. Thank you so much. I think so much of what you shared is wise.

**Dr. Dominic Vachon Ph.D:** Thanks for having me.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** See ya dinner.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Here are my inner challenge insights.

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

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I've listened to Dom talk about compassion for thousands of hours. Yet, I heard something new today. When he said we're not actually built for fighting, we're built to be nurturers and healers. I imagine people disagreeing, especially as they look at today's world. Think about it. There's no such thing as PTC S, Post-Traumatic Compassion Syndrome, in this day where people strive for authenticity. What if compassion is truly our most authentic self? Our north star, that when [00:43:00] cultivated would help us balance our drive for wealth, competition, power, status, righteousness, and identity in such a way that we would think about how our actions, our beliefs, our lives affect others. We would care about others' wellbeing as much as we care about our own. The science says we're wired for compassion. But in the end, it's our values that make sure the wiring stays plugged in.

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

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I love this episode. Okay. Maybe it's because I got to do with my husband. But mostly because I think he makes compassion really relatable, doable. So no more insights from me. I think your time is better spent relistening to him. If only to hear his voice, which sounds so compassionate. Kind of crazy. Lucky, he found his topic.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** As you go through your week. Take notice of when you feel [00:44:00] compassionate. Or take notice when you don't. And do, as Dom said, work through it. This is your Inner Challenge.