Ep. 53 Mental Wellness &2023!!

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner Challenge podcast. It's hard to believe, but it's December 2023 and we are headed towards a new year and the wrapping up this one. For my final podcast of the year, I'm going to share with you my favorite Inner Challenge Insights from this year's episodes. But before I do that, I want to give a shout out to two really special women . One is Grace Morrison of Morrison Marketing. Grace is my consultant for the podcast and she has taught me in 2023 how to edit this podcast much more efficiently and so many things about distribution and skills to make this podcast better and better. I would be nowhere without Grace and I really have appreciated her help so much. My numbers for the year came out and my listeners were up 600%. My followers 500% and I have hundreds of listeners where I'm their number one podcast. That is a real thrill for me and it was Grace that said, these [00:01:00] are really great numbers 'cause I don't know anything about that. Thank you Grace of Morrison Marketing. She is really an unbelievable support system for me.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The second woman I want to give a shout out to as we end this year is Times Person of the Year: Taylor Swift. Swift. I love Taylor Swift. I was first introduced to her by my daughter when she was 13, and she sang a song about being 13, and we listened to it every day on her way to school. I also have a deep affection for her because I was embedded in a junior high for almost 21 years, and I really understood that Taylor had this unique knack for finding words for that hard stage in life. So many of my students loved her, and my Mental Wellness program was really about increasing self-awareness. Through her songs, she helped so many young girls and boys, to be honest, understand this stage of life. Now at the age of 33, she is Time [00:02:00] Magazine's Person of the Year. I am really excited about this and I wanted to share with you one sentence from the Time Magazine article that I think applies to the Inner Challenge podcast. Taylor says to the interviewer. It feels like the breakthrough moment of my career happening at 33, and for the first time in my life, I am mentally tough enough to take what comes with that. One of the things that she highlights for us in this statement is what I hope you've gleaned from this podcast. Our Mental Wellness is something that we continue to develop through our life. When we do that, it really helps us navigate not only the low times, which are really important, but also the great times. Taylor's been in the music industry for 20 years and she now is saying after 20 years, she's really got the mental toughness to manage the ups and [00:03:00] downs.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: That's what I hope this podcast has helped you do is to really understand that our Mental Wellness is learning to manage our mind. What we often want to do is manage the world around us so our mind is not disturbed. We don't have that superpower. The best we can do is commit to really developing our Mental Wellness. We get a lot of encouragement to develop our physical wellness, and that is important. But no matter what, no matter how old we get, our physical wellness is going to diminish. Our Mental Wellness the opposite. The older we get, if we show some effort, some commitment, the more strong and capable and really calm our mental state can be. So, thanks Taylor for putting into words one of the deepest beliefs that I have.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Let's move on to the top 10 of my [00:04:00] Inner Challenge insights. I My Inner Challenge insights are how I wrap up every episode. You might wonder how do I create them? To be honest, as I'm doing the episode, I write a few notes and then when I'm done with the episode completely, I sit down and my insights are something that I put together in 10 to 15 minutes. I just trust my instinct of what feels like an important point in the episode to punctuate as we wrap up that particular topic. I'm going to share with you my top 10. The first nine I think of our equal importance. I will end with the number one insight of the year. I'm going to share with you the episode and then maybe a little bit more about why I picked that particular insight.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The first one I want to share with you comes from Episode 19: Handling the Pressure . This was an episode where a Division One athlete shared with us his own growth and his own insights on how to handle the pressure that we experience [00:05:00] inside ourself and outside of ourself. The Inner Challenge Insight that I want to share today is: Mental Wellness is a mindset, what you do on the inside to set your mind up to be clear, peaceful and calm can be more powerful than what happens to you on the outside. This mindset is seldom taught in school, but can easily be cultivated with a little bit of information, effort, curiosity, and self-awareness. I picked this insight because if we want Mental Wellness, it is a choice, and what we're saying is I'm going to choose to work on my mind to not let it run amok to really understand what messages my mind is giving me and of incredible importance, I'm going to be able to learn how to calm my mind. In this episode, our guest gave us some really lovely hints. If you haven't heard it, I would encourage you to go back.[00:06:00] One of the things that he said is that he would look up at the sky, take a few breaths and he would reset his mind through breath work.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Moving on to the next three Inner Challenge Insights that I'm going to share with you. They fall under the important skill of self-awareness. Self-awareness, internal self-awareness, and external self-awareness are vital when it comes to Mental Wellness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Internal self-awareness is knowing what's going on inside of you. External self-awareness is knowing how you impact, affect and influence other people.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The first insight I'm going to share with you is from episode 23: Adulting!. This was one of my dearest episodes where a young woman, almost 30 years old shares her story of stepping into adulthood and of really being able to help not only people her age, but older people understand the challenges [00:07:00] of this age and stage. Here is the Inner Challenge insight that I want to share with you that came from that episode. In my, MJ, clinical practice, sometimes people say to me, I am not that into self-awareness, because it often makes me uncomfortable. Hey, I love their honesty. But what they soon learn in the process of therapy is that self-awareness does not cause discomfort. It just shines the light on giving us the power to make adjustments rather than being blindsided. A lot of times people avoid it because they feel like they're going to get in touch with something that's uncomfortable and they will. But we are built to hold and to handle discomfort. When we can just sit, put our hands on our body, wherever the discomfort is. I did this with a client yesterday. She put her hands on her heart. The self-awareness she was connecting to was regret and she breathed and stayed with it .When she was [00:08:00] done, she said, wow. I did feel the pain of regret, but by staying with it, it broke open some new possibilities. Self-awareness is really important. The only way to have it is to tune inward, and sometimes that is enlightening and easy. And other times, as the guest in this episode tells us it is hard and uncomfortable, but we can do hard, and it usually only lasts for 60 to 90 seconds. If you're interested in more on adulting, check out episode 23.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The second Inner Challenge insight that I want to share with you that falls under the umbrella of self-awareness is Episode 31: Taking on the Mental Wellness Challenge. In this episode, a follow-up to episode 30 where I shared with our listeners the images that I use for Mental Wellness. I borrowed [00:09:00] this from Dan Siegel and his image is the river of wellness. Where our mind is calm, alert, and peaceful. On the sides of this river, our banks, one where our mind is rigid, the other, where our mind is chaotic. In these two episodes, I challenge my guest to follow her mind for a week and apply the tools that help us move from the bank of rigidity or chaos back into the river of calm, alertness and peacefulness. These tools are:

flexibility being adaptive to the situation. Being coherent with the situation, and when we do that, we bring our mind back into a place of stability and energy. Faces: flexible, adaptive, coherent brings us energy and stability. I want to share with you her response to that challenge after moving through the wee [00:10:00] k with the image and trying to challenge her mind, trying to challenge her actions so when she was on the bank of rigidity or chaos, could find herself back in the river. She said, it's been really awesome to grow in self-awareness because even if it feels uncomfortable, I feel a sense of agency. I am no longer powerless to my mind. I can take steps to calm down or whatever I might need in that moment. Maybe it's not about solving all the problems or all my thoughts, but just staring at it, pointing it out, that feels so good. To no longer let something have power over my actions. Mental Wellness is exactly what she says. It's actually moving our agency to our mind and trying to get our mind to be calmer. That way it will be more alert, we'll have more clarity, and that will [00:11:00] often help us make better decisions, which brings us more peacefulness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The last of the insights that I want to share with you in the category of self-awareness comes from Episode 22: Traveling the Road to Loss and Grief. One of the things I am so proud of about this podcast is people of all ages have been my guest. This was a woman who I believe is in her early eighties, and she shares with us the incredible transition from being a wife of someone for more than 40 years to being a widow, living on her own for the first time in her life. One of the skills she talked about was that she has an ongoing conversation with herself. She actually turns inward and listens to what she is saying, what her reactions are, and from that episode, this was one of the insights that I shared. Do you have an [00:12:00] ongoing conversation with yourself? I hope so because not only are you fascinating, but turning inward and really listening often puts you in touch with your deepest needs. These needs don't surface as we rush through our days, but if we're brave enough to have a little solitude or move through a big cry, what we need, really need to take care of ourselves, will surface and it probably won't have anything to do with ice cream shopping or sports. In this really busy time of year, I encourage you to take a bit of time, five minutes, seven minutes, 20 minutes, and just sit with yourself . At first, what's going to happen are all the to-dos or there'll be a lot of uncomfortable static within you, but if you can just breathe a bit and let go of that. Your mind will transition to a deeper part of you. You don't need to do anything but listen. Let it inform you [00:13:00] of what it is that you really need at that moment or in that particular problem in your life at this time.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Mental Wellness can't just be sitting around and reflecting. It also moves us to action, and that's my next two insights I want to share with you that I really loved from episodes 33 and 42.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Episode 33 was Mental Wellness and Weight Loss. I was swimming and I met this man in the pool who told us that he had lost 125 pounds. Wow! That is impressive! But what was even more impressive to me is he did this at age 67. The insight I want to share with you is this: we are never too old to change! We are never too old to change! We are never too old to change! Unless we think we're too old to change.[00:14:00] I challenge all of us, myself included, to always be open to change. In some ways, the world changes so fast it makes us want to grip and hold on to that which is familiar, and some of that is fine and wonderful and awesome, but we have to continue to change and look at those parts of ourself that we are not happy with. Then to figure out how to lean in to making those parts a little healthier, a little better, and we're never too old to do this. In this category that Mental Wellness does ask us for effort and action, another one of my favorite episodes was Episode 42, Mental Wellness and Legally Blonde. This was the episode where a dear friend of mine, in her early fifties, decided to go to law school. Episode 42 was part of a four-part series I did on [00:15:00] ages and stages. This guest was representing adulthood two, a rather new stage in Erickson's human development that Mary Catherine Bateson added. Adulthood two, because we're living so much longer is a stage of great potential. We can really share our skills and figure out how to repackage them for the benefit of others. That's why I found this particular episode so inspiring. Come on, who goes back to law school in their fifties? One of the things that was really clear was it wasn't easy, but because she was older she was able to navigate the obstacles, many of them related to her age and not take them so seriously. She was able to have her mind be steady and calm when law firm after law firm said, we love to hire you, but you're just too old. We just don't think we could form you. And she just let all that roll off her back.[00:16:00] I love that episode, and if you're contemplating a big change, whether you're 30 or whether you're 50 or 80, I would encourage you to listen to it, not only for inspiration, but for some really practical tools. The insight I want to share with you from that episode is this: in adulthood two, the strength is engagement and the weakness is withdrawal. Don't you want to be like this guest who needed me to explain to her what it meant to withdraw. Once you listen to this episode, this will make sense. But as she was telling and sharing with us her story, I made reference to the weakness in this stage is withdrawal and she literally said to me, what do you mean by withdrawal? Wow. Isn't that an amazing spirit? Especially after the pandemic where many of us were forced into a withdrawal. And so many people have stayed there may be only 20 or 30 or 40% but it's [00:17:00] important that we step out and push ourself to connect. Whether we're in our twenties, we have all the data that says they have not stepped into really connecting again or whether we're in our eighties, and we have to continue to create within our mind ways to engage, ways to connect. I loved that action step that this person took.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Of course, part of Mental Wellness is being able to manage challenges. I've never been a fan for creating a five-year life plan. Because what I have found is that anyone who creates a five-year life plan never puts on it year three, I'm going to have this health scare or year two, this person who I love so much is going to die. What ends up happening is we lean towards always thinking that our life is going to be positive without these challenges. On episode 24, I invited Marcus Ingle to talk about what for any of us would be [00:18:00] incredibly tragic and challenging. When Marcus was in college, he was hit by a car and he lost his sight. He shared with us his journey and how he continues to this day to cultivate Mental Wellness. The insight from that episode that I want to share with you is something that he said that is so important. " Our bodies often give us the first hint that our Mental Wellness is going to hit the banks. Our shoulders get tense, our stomach feels queasy, our palms begin to sweat. Turn your vision towards your bodily cues and calm yourself with a little bit of breathing. Make it simple. See the ocean in your mind, and breathe in and out." One of the things that Marcus really helped me understand was that his body, because he doesn't have sight, really is his guide to his Mental Wellness. And this is something that I've said many times on the episode, thousands of times as a [00:19:00] therapist, but he gave me a deeper understanding. For those of us who do have sight, we tend to get distracted by what we see from the information and the cues that our body gives. I really want to encourage people to turn inward, to listen to our body. As one of my guests recently said, to drop into your body. Because it really is an incredible font of information that can help us cultivate our Mental Wellness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: For many of us, when life challenges us, our first response is anger. The most listened to episode of the 52 episodes I've done is Episode 32: Mental Wellness and Cancer. On this episode, I interviewed Jay and Lyn Caponigro, it is so much more than an episode about cancer. It really has very little to do with cancer. The [00:20:00] Caponigros are a beautiful example of so many things: of marriage, of family and of relationship. The insight I want to share with you comes from my favorite line in the episode when Jay said, " I'm not afraid of being angry, I just don't find it useful." In my 37 years as a clinician, more than 45,000 hours of therapy sessions, 30 years as a Mental Wellness educator, and 63 years as a human, the least productive response to anything is anger. For many of us, that's often where we start, and there is nothing wrong with having our first response to something be anger, but it is not healthy to stay there. For Jay to say this, when he was just six weeks away from dying, is so powerful. I can't stress enough that if there's one skill you want to work on to make yourself [00:21:00] feel better, to help your mind feel more peaceful and calm, it is the skill of transforming your anger into something that is more productive, more connecting, and more loving. Anger is informative and it is certainly a really natural part of being human. One of the

things that I think is true about anger is most of the time, at least for me, maybe not for you, we're angry because things aren't going our way. Yes, sometimes we are angry about an injustice. for others, but a lot of times anger is just, it's not happening the way I think it should. It's not happening the way I wanted it to. Again, a superhuman place to start. But part of cultivating Mental Wellness is learning to identify our anger, not flip it into blame, not flip it into unclaim, but rather sit with it and understand what's underneath it. [00:22:00] Brene Brown says Anger isn't really an emotion. It's actually an umbrella for many other emotions, such as shame, hurt, pain, sadness, frustration. So, in 2024, I will be doing some episodes to help all of us recognize our anger and move to a place where it is the springboard for healthier responses and action. Thank you Jay Caponigro .

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Another insight that came from an episode that is incredibly dear and near to my heart. An episode that was one of the most shared episodes of the year is Episode 26: Staying mentally well when Your Child Isn't. I have always said that mental illness is the no casserole illness. I have such deep empathy for families who are supporting, struggling and trying to help a family member with mental illness. [00:23:00] I was talking to someone a couple weeks ago, a mother of a child who's really struggling with their mental health, and I said this to her, it isn't like cancer. If your child had cancer, your front porch would be full of casseroles. She said, I know it's a very lonely place. I don't really want people to know. While I think in my 37 years, we have made incredible progress of being much more understanding and compassionate towards mental illness, there still is a lot of shame and secrecy surrounding those families who are struggling with mental health. The reason why I say families is because there is no individual that can deal with their mental illness on their own. They have to have a community of people. In that community, our mental health providers, physicians and other professionals, but also their closest family and friends. I have such [00:24:00] deep gratitude for the mom of this episode who shared with us her experience. I would encourage you to pass this episode on if you know a family who is really in the thick of helping their loved one become healthier. Here's the insight that I want to share with you from Episode twenty-six : Parents must do their own Inner work so we can change our perspective. The anger that's so natural in the early stages of a family member's mental illness gets transformed into compassion. Shame gets transformed into knowledge. Let's be honest, most of us can't do this work on our own. So, find a therapist and a spiritual path that guides you to learn how to be more loving, patient and compassionate. A whole person. It is my deepest wish that parents can look back and say to their child or their family member, thank you [00:25:00] for helping me become a better person.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The next insight I want to share with you comes from Episode 18: Life's Wisdom for Kids from one to 92. This is the second most listened episode of this year. It was part of that series on sharing Erickson's ages and stages. From that episode, I wrote this in sight: Integrity is living into the life stage we are currently in, in an honest way. Each life stage has gains and losses. We put our kids first during the parenting years, ask the question, who am I now in our sixties? And do the hard work of accepting and working with our own unique limitations in old age. This type of integrity is for our own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of those who love us the most. Makes me wonder if the opposite of integrity in our later years is not dishonesty, but stubbornness. [00:26:00] An addendum to this most special episode was a phone call that I had a week ago with the woman who taped this with me. She is now 93. She has lived independently her whole life and is now preparing to move into assisted living. This is not what she wants. I really flashback to sitting with her in her condo a year earlier and having her just share her wisdom and how she wanted to stay independent as long as possible. On this phone call, I could hear the sadness in her voice. I could hear the disappointment that her eyesight, her back pain had progressed to a stage where living independently no longer seemed possible. But what touched me the most was when she said to me, I feel like I can do this, but my kids really don't think I can do this. I know they have jobs; they have their own [00:27:00] children, and I really have to do not only what's best for me, but what is best for them. Wow.! Talk about being brave. Talk about being a person of deep integrity. Talk about a person who has been so independent but hasn't tainted it with such stubbornness that she didn't have the capacity to think of the people who love her the most at this time in her life. Episode 18 now should be: Life's Wisdom for Kids from 1 to 93.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The next insight I want to share with you comes from Episode 25: Animals and Mental Wellness. This is the episode that I taped with my sister Anne Cole, who is the owner of Anne Cole's Training Center. Ann has a horseback riding program that is so much more than just a horseback riding program. It really is a community for teenagers [00:28:00] and young kids to share their love of horses, but also learn how to treat each other with respect and honesty. I think, one of the challenging parts of Mental Wellness, is really understanding our relationship with control. If we want to be in the river where our mind is peaceful, our mind is calm, our mind is alert. We have to have the internal self-awareness, as well as the external self-awareness of when our desire to control puts us on the bank of rigidity. It must be this way or the bank of chaos where we're spinning because our mind is out of control. One of the things that Anne said was this insight: "Horses teach us about being in control but not being controlling. I think that's a pretty cool life lesson." This particular insight has so much meaning for me because just yesterday, one of

Anne's most [00:29:00] precious mini ponies got sick and had to be put down. I watched her in the 24 hours as the horse became sicker and sicker, seemed like he was going to be okay and then died. , she Was heartbroken. But she said to her, beloved vet, I trust you. I don't want the horse to suffer. Yes. Part of life is suffering being able to understand when we have to let go of control, when we have to make choices for ourself and for others where they don't suffer, they don't hurt. We're not putting them in unnecessary pain. If you're an animal lover, but more importantly if you are parent or grandparent. This is a really beautiful episode. Ann has a deep wisdom when it comes to really being able to connect [00:30:00] with horses, with children, or with grandchildren. I encourage you over the holidays to listen to Episode 25: Animals and Mental Wellness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: My number one favorite insight of this year, not surprisingly, comes from Episode 32: Mental Wellness and Cancer. The insight is this: what if our culture's number one value was relational affluence, where our main ambition was not money, not winning, but rather a high RAS score, Relational Affluence Score. We would look at people like Jay and Lyn like we do star athletes. People who we admire for their relational affluence. People we're glad to have on our team, team Earth. If relational affluence was the number one goal of an earthling, we would coo with babies and hope they grow up to be kind and honest and real [00:31:00] contributors to the wellbeing of others. Even at times, putting their own wants and needs second. As parents, we'd lose sleep if our child was being selfish or was prone to fits of anger because we would wisely know such behavior might bring down their RAS score and if they carry that into adulthood, we would really understand that it would cost them a happy and good life. We would cheer for the neighborhood kid who got the last spot on the team, or maybe the lead in the play as much as we would cheer for our own child's accomplishments. We would understand that maybe our child was disappointed, but this was the time in our child's life to learn how to lose gracefully. To learn the invaluable lesson, we don't always get what we want and we must trust those who are making those hard kinds of choices for they see the bigger picture that parents and children cannot. I received more [00:32:00] texts and emails about this Inner Challenge Insight than any other that I have written. I think it helped all of us shift to really understanding that in order to cultivate mental wellness, we must really have good relationships with ourself, with others, whether they're close and intimate friends and family, or whether they're the barista or they're C checker at Martins.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: I want to thank you so much for listening this year. I'm excited about 2024 because as we go into an election year, a year

where internationally things are quite unstable, it will be important that we commit ourself to Mental Wellness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: I'm looking forward to being a resource on that journey. If you'd like to be a guest, send me an email at mj@mjmurrayvachon.com. Have a great holiday and I look forward to more episodes in the new year.

[00:33:00] Thanks for listening and keep cultivating Mental Wellness. This is your Inner Challenge.[00:34:00]