

Ep. 61 Mental Wellness: Training the Brain & Tending the Mind!

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast. I have some great news for all of you, my listeners. I'm partnering with Michael Joseph McDonald, a producer, director, filmmaker and global disability activists to create Inner Challenge: The MasterClass. I cannot tell you how much fun I am having working with this creative, talented and kind soul. He has the most unique way of filming. He listens to my material on how to cultivate mental wellness and then asks questions that are so insightful and nuanced. Google his work and you will be as excited as I am for this next iteration of Inner Challenge. Since I'm in the studio all week, my time to edit a podcast is non-existent. So, I'm sharing with you an encore episode, Mental Wellness: Training the Brain & Tending the Mind. I realized as I embarked on this project, had I not put this information into practice in my own life, I would never be able to create this MasterClass, with a sense of calm, alertness and [00:01:00] peaceful purpose. I hope you enjoy this episode and I'll be back in two weeks with a new one. As always, thanks for listening.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Let's look at today's question. Do you train your brain and tend your mind? As we continue to have this conversation about mental wellness, I hope it is becoming apparent to you that we cultivate mental wellness with a little bit of information and a little bit of self-awareness and self-reflection. I think today's topic is the perfect integration of information as well as self-awareness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We don't need to become neuroscientists in order to have mental wellness. If you're like most people, myself included, for much of your life, You think of the brain and the mind as the exact same thing. Yes, they are interconnected and they have many important and useful similarities. But there is also some differences that we can really [00:02:00] employ in our effort to increase our mental wellness. Even though these words are often used interchangeably. I encourage people to not only have a clear definition of them, but also to think of them in a separate but connected way on a daily basis. Again, if you're a person who likes to take notes or follow along on my one pagers, please go to my website, mj at mjmurrayvachon. com. For podcast number five, and you will see another beautiful one pager created by my friend and graphic artist, Cathy Hall. What is the human brain? First of all, and most importantly, the human brain can be seen. The human brain is a really complex organ, and it's connected to our central nervous system, and basically, it controls our thought, our emotion, Our memory, our emotion, our touch, our [00:03:00]

motor skills, our vision, our breathing, our temperature, our hunger, and every process that regulates our bodies. Thank you JohnHopkins. org, that's their definition. Let's be honest though, you already knew it. Of equal importance, you can probably conjure up an image of it. Yes, the brain has a consistency of butter, its gray matter, and it's pretty squishy. If I asked you, can you see it in your mind? Most likely you can. Hmm, that brings up the next definition with a little bit of a problem. The mind. If I asked you to conjure up an image of your mind, could you? Have you ever seen a picture, a photo, an x ray of someone's mind? Now that you think of it, no. The mind cannot be seen. Our mind is our consciousness and subjective and unique feeling of being [00:04:00] alive. Our mind promotes self-regulation and energy and information flow. It takes all that is happening in us and around us and it makes sense of it. You could say it's our mind that helps us create our life story. Let's take a few minutes to really digest this on an everyday level. Our brain is an organ that's a lot like the engine of a car. It makes the vehicle, our body and mind, run. Our mind is more like a steering wheel. It can move to where we direct it. Or if we take our hands off the wheel, it'll just go wherever it goes. This is not a perfect analogy, especially if you're a neuroscientist. But the point I want to make is that we have more agency over our mind than you might think.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So, let's run a little experiment. What I want you to do is [00:05:00] notice what happens in your mind when I say a particular word. Get ready. Put your feet on the floor, take a breath, and move your awareness to what happens in your mind when I say the word, holiday. Next, I want you to remember a good holiday experience, and I want you to run a movie of that holiday experience for about 15 seconds.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Ready, set, action.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Cut. Next, I want you to one more time run a movie of that same holiday experience, but adding and noticing [00:06:00] details, colors of people's clothing, maybe smells, maybe music in the background. Ready, set, action.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Cut. I want you to notice three things. Number one. You just steered your mind. This is a lot more important when it comes to cultivating mental wellness than you might think. Right now, we are in love with the brain in our culture, as we should be, but mental wellness is not just about treating the brain.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's about noticing and tending our minds as well. Number 2. I can guarantee, having done this experiment with many people, that

none of us ran the same movie. This is the mind's subjective, [00:07:00] unique, and storytelling superpower. Number three, while our movies are different, our brain, the organ, was working in a similar fashion when it came to how it retrieved memories, how it added details, how the limbic system got fired up should you have an emotional reaction that occurred.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: in remembering that holiday experience. For our everyday purposes of cultivating mental wellness, we can assume that our brains are all working in similar fashion. Our minds help create and yes, retrieve our own unique stories and memories. This is why none of our movies are the same because I doubt any of you were in Target looking for a horse named Butterscotch.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: In cultivating mental wellness, it is really helpful to understand that the mind and the brain are [00:08:00] separate but very connected. What we do for one helps or hurts the other. But in today's world, I think we often treat the brain. And forget about tending and training the mind. Let me explain. Sometimes the brain needs to be treated.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Should someone have moderate to severe anxiety, Depression, ADHD, or other mental illnesses, treating the brain is the compassionate and right thing to do. It is no different when it comes to mental health that we treat these conditions as it is with our physical health when we set a leg or make sure that someone who's diabetic has insulin.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: This type of mental health interventions can involve medication. Supplements are brain stimulation therapies like TMS or [00:09:00] neurofeedback, yet what often happens when people get this type of brain treatment is they think, oh, I'm done, I'll be all better now. This is like getting a knee replacement and skipping physical therapy.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Brain treatment, should you have some type of condition, It's just the beginning, but training the brain and tending the mind for mental wellness using the tools and techniques that I'm going to talk about in this podcast, really help your treatment of your brain to flourish. If you don't have any of these conditions, You still need to be able to know how to cultivate mental wellness because in our world, it's very demanding that has lots of anxiety floating all around it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: All of us need these types of tools so we can be mentally well. [00:10:00] So you're probably asking what do you mean by training the brain and tending the mind? Not Sudoku, please, no. I'm sure that's

good, but that's not my purpose here today. Let me share with you an experience I had. When I took a course called How to Understand the Mind from a Buddhist Psychology Perspective, well, I learned many interesting things in this course.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The most interesting was this very simple concept that most of us just let our minds run amok. I don't think any of us would have to spend too long coming up with examples of where our mind just took off. Yes, this mind running amok can be quite uncomfortable. And also, it can lead us to different stories that often are not that true.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: As a way to encourage us, the Buddhist monk [00:11:00] asked the participants in this class this question, what do you do when you cross the road? Of course, all of us answered, we look both ways. Then he said, how many of you have been hit by a car? Fortunately, none of the participants in this class had been. He said then, how did you learn to do such a good job protecting your body?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And as we thought about it, the process of crossing the road is something that takes young children's years to master. And they master this by having adults who care for them, teach them, hold their hands, and encourage them to look both ways and be very, very cautious. And eventually, the child becomes old enough, wise enough to cross the road safely.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We know how to protect our bodies. We are all trained to do this. But by contrast, most of us have had [00:12:00] very little to no training to protect our mind. So, we just let it run amok. It's not unusual for us to watch our mind go round and round about something again and again. It feels like getting stuck in a roundabout.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: By learning how to tend our minds, we gently put our hands back on the wheel and we learn how to move our mind in ways where we get more mental clarity, peace, calm. agency, not only in our mind, but in our entire body. Let me share with you a story that a former client of mine shared with me. Towards the end of his work, he had gained enormous ability to tend his mind and to really cultivate clarity and mental wellness when under duress.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The client shared this story. That his business was just about to [00:13:00] close on one of the biggest deals of a lifetime. Yes, this would be a life changing deal. One week, he unexpectedly had a few things

go wrong, and this threatened the success of his deal. He came into therapy full of worry and fear, a bit paralyzed.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Now maybe you've never had a big business deal almost fall through, but you've probably had a child who desperately wanted to make a team, but you've had to wait on a severe medical diagnosis. Yes, all of these can cause us lots of mental distress. Back to my example, I just want you to understand that the process I'm going to talk about is a one size fits all when it comes to mental duress.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So, my anxious and worried client goes out to lunch with a colleague who totally empathizes with the state that he is in. My client says to him, if I get this, my whole life will be different. His friend says to him, [00:14:00] Hey, I totally get it. It's a great opportunity, but trust me, if this doesn't work out, there'll be other opportunities.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: As my client was telling me this story, he said that his first reaction to this man, his friend, was to get angry. He looked at him and he said, I don't think you really understand. And then my client realized, oh, my mind is digging in. It's becoming rigid. It's thinking it's all or nothing. This deal has to work out.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: My client said as he began to realize what his mind was doing; he took a couple breaths and he calmed himself and his whole body began to relax a little. Notice, that had his mind been chaotic and just wanting to stay around in the roundabout of anxiety and catastrophe, he might have missed that little nugget of gold that his friend offered him.[00:15:00]

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: But instead, my client had the ability to do it. In the midst of lunch, in the midst of duress, to do a tiny bit of inner work that allowed his mind to shift. When we do inner work, we're putting our hands back on the wheel of our mind and we're actively putting in a little bit of effort to work to get our mind to a better mental state.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yes, that's how we begin to tend the mind. Basically, by doing notice on the inside. How am I doing? It may be that our body is our first signal, our shoulders are tense, our stomach is clenching, our thoughts are racing. Yes, often doing notice on the inside is the beginning step of tending our mind. But once we do that, I want to give you a couple other steps that my client just demonstrated for you.[00:16:00]

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: First, when we begin to see our mind running among, I want you to get curious and I want you to ask yourself this question, thanks to Brene Brown, the story I'm telling myself. Yes, my client was telling himself that this was a deal of a lifetime and if it didn't work out, his whole business life would be terrible.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The second question I want you to ask yourself, once you've asked, answered the first, is this story true? Is it the whole truth? Yes, I want you to cross examine your mind. Most of us have the skill of cross examining very well developed. We just apply it to others and not ourselves. What I want you to do is gently cross examine yourself.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Is this story true? Is it [00:17:00] the whole truth? When my client asked himself, Is this story true? Is it the whole truth? He really remembered his friend's insights. Trust me, this is not the only deal out there. Notice how asking oneself if the story is true automatically employs the tool of coherence. Yes, remember the five words in the River of Wellness?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Flexibility, Adaptive, Coherence. Coherence is the part of us where our insides and outsides match. Inside, our mind is saying, if this doesn't happen, it will be a catastrophe. But outside, when we ask ourselves, is this the whole truth? We gently fall back into coherence. [00:18:00] No, of course it's not the whole truth.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: If my child doesn't make the team, it will be okay. Michael Jordan got cut from basketball in 8th grade. When we intervene using the truth serum, it automatically makes our mind more flexible. We begin to be adaptive and think of other opportunities, other solutions. We stop either or thinking, and catastrophizing, and move to both and.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: When we do this, We then become more energized and stable. Yes, when our mind is more coherent and more flexible, we find other parts of the story. And then what happens is we're really being able to see more of the whole picture. Yes, this is tending the mind. It's an inside job. We often put a lot of effort into trying to make things fall [00:19:00] into place outside of us in a certain way.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I really want to encourage people to tend the mind by using the simple technique of notice on the inside, asking the question, the story I'm telling myself and following up with, is this the whole truth? When we do this, we really allow ourselves to live in a way that's much more honest,

that's not quite so intense, that allows us to move with a mind that's more peaceful, more calm, and not quite so out of control.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The other thing is we often move from the fictionalized state that our mind likes to create to living our present life. Yes, my client still had to carry a certain amount of anxiety because the business [00:20:00] deal had still not closed, but he moved his mind from catastrophizing the worst to the present.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Picking his children up from school, enjoying dinner out with his family, catching his dog that got out of the house and answering his emails. So, the point here is we need to think about tending our mind. Once we begin to do this, we really can have fun with it when we see how our mind at times can make up really fictional stories that are full of catastrophe and things that never happen.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: The best response is to laugh at yourself and gently put our hands back on the wheel and begin to drive on the road that is presently in front of us. So that's tending the mind. When we tend the mind, we actually train the brain. The mind and the brain work very well [00:21:00] together. So, I want to encourage you to tend them and to train them.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: As you move through this week, when you're in a situation where you feel stressed, where you find your heart racing, your mind catastrophizing, stop. Do notice on the inside, then ask yourself, the story I'm telling myself is, and lastly, cross examine yourself. Is this the truth? Is this the truth? The whole truth.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: As you move through this next week, observe your mind, not in a critical way, but be curious and use this process. This is your inner challenge.

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