

EMERGENCY PODCAST! Mental Wellness & Inside Out 2

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast. This is my first emergency episode ever. Yesterday. I took my two adorable nephews, age six and eight to Inside Out 2 ,the Pixar sequel about the emotional life of Riley, a girl from Minnesota who loves hockey. I loved Inside Out 1 ,so I was really excited to see the sequel, which I assumed would be a Pixar visual delight with a message that no one could love more than a therapist. Especially a therapist like myself that has worked and studied extensively the life stage of adolescence, which is featured in Inside Out 2. Let me first say the movie is visually gorgeous. Does a magnificent job illustrating how our brains work in a fun and accurate enough way. Though, this may be a little bit lost if viewers do not have a solid understanding of the brain. What it does not do well is try to present a healthier view of the teen years than is currently being peddled to [00:01:00] our young. I want to Disney to be Disney, you know? Aspirational. Hey teens. Hey parents. Hey communities. Hey schools. Hey, the United States of America, we can do better! I mean, if we are giving this message to princesses, toys and cars, why not our beloved teens?

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: I wanted the movie to look at the cultures norms that we have turned adolescence into and see that they are causing this huge mental health crisis. And I wanted the movie to show us a better way. Instead, they normalize our culture's obsession with competition, individual greatness and success at all costs. Without even tying it to the mental health crisis that kids feel day in and day out in our country. As I always say, just because it's normal does not mean it's healthy. I would like to remind [00:02:00] us that adolescence , Always a very challenging life stage, has not always been a Petri dish for mental health issues. I'm not advocating that you do not go to this movie. Actually. I think you should probably go to this movie. What I am advocating is that you listen to this podcast and use the film for discussion because it portrays the emotional life of a teen as rooted in anxiety, without even questioning the infrastructure of values and expectations that take poor Riley down this path. So here are my insights each ending with a discussion question. I hope this is really helpful for families.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number one.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: There are two main characters in the movie, Riley and her anxiety. The movie tells us that would Riley hits puberty anxiety takes over. The context that the movie does not tell us is that this is a new

phenomenon. We have all the data that shows teen anxieties have soared in the [00:03:00] last decade. In the movie, they present anxiety as the main character in Riley's adolescence. Yes, this is cute and entertaining. But it does not need to be this way for teens.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Discussion question number one. What made Riley feel so anxious? Do you think that all teenagers are doomed to such anxiety? Why, or why not?

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number two. We have lots of data and the recent book by Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, helps us to understand the increased anxiety portrayed in the movie for many teens not all, is lifestyle based. Too much competition. Too little sleep. A diet full of sugar and fat. An expectation of greatness. Not enough outdoors and exploring. Not to mention the number one culprit. A really crappy best friend. You know the phone. We now know that the phone depletes, the dopamine [00:04:00] system, and one of the consequences is anxiety. Want more information? Read *Dopamine Nation* by Anna Lembke it's an easy read and informative. The phone is decreasing sleep, replacing the important skill of asking others for help. Way too much sitting and not enough doing. And it's distorting the normal process of teen comparison into an almost compulsive process that leads Riley to these very painful words: I am not good enough.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Discussion question number : two. what does make us good enough?

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number three.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Most movies have the classic duel between good and bad. This one is inside Riley's brain. The movie depicts this well, but mirrors, what I believe to be a dangerous dynamic in modern day adolescence. The movie, like most Americans, have conflated self-worth and self-esteem. In a nutshell, [00:05:00] we are born worthy. We don't need to earn our worthiness. It is our birthright. Our worthiness is given to us, not just by the families that we're born into and the people who take care of us but the community and the culture in which we are a part. It is worthiness that allows us to feel loved. Allows us to love others. It is our worthiness that allows us to feel our own dignity as well as the dignity of each other. Our worthiness, no matter what happens, never ever changes. We're born with it. we may not tap into it, but it is our birthright. Our self-esteem is basically how are we doing on the tasks of the day? Riley is feeling the normal and healthy nervousness of being the new and youngest kid at high school hockey camp. [00:06:00] But her

experience is much more intense because she finds out that her friends will not be with her on this team next year. Like many of us, she doesn't really know what to do with this unexpected loss. Instead of turning to her friends or her parents for comfort. She sets herself in motion and decides to comfort herself by being the greatest kid who's ever been at the camp. She gets busy doing when it's actually her being that needs to be tended to. This eventually sends her into a panic attack. This certainly can and does happen. I see in Riley, what I see in so many young people. I'm not feeling so good inside. So, the way that I can feel better is to be great at something. I need to be great at a sport, academics making money, beauty [00:07:00] gaming, getting likes or whatever. This is our self-esteem run amok. Our young are trying to fill an emptiness inside that can only be filled with a sense of really connecting to our worthiness. Our sense of being loved, our sense of being valued. It is what Hedy said on my last podcast. Is connecting to our essence, which is rooted in relationship.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Discussion question number three. Is being the best at something the same as being loved?

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number four.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: The most disturbing part of Riley's inner battles is the portrayal that she is on her own. Her lifelong best friends announced they are going to another high school and she does not share how sad and scary this is for her. For all our communication devices, teens today, turn to Google to figure out how to manage such challenges. Trusting Google is a terrible substitute for a [00:08:00] conversation with a friend, relative, Journal, or even a big cry when we're upset about something. Riley is on her own. And her biggest battle is with herself and she shares this with no one. Only one girl intermittently reaches out to her in the movie. There are no deep conversations. No sharing of heartbreak. Face-to-face. This is modern adolescence and I find it heartbreaking. The phone has made teen, so image conscious that they don't like to share what is really going on in them Even though one of their deepest values is to be authentic. As a teen said in my office a few weeks ago. I want to be authentic, but the kind that looks really good. Riley needs a village: eyeball to eyeball.

Discussion question number four.

What do imagine Riley was feeling inside when her friends told her they were going to another school. If something like that happened to you, who [00:09:00] would you talk about it to?

Insight number five.

My experience with teens and often their parents is they keep looking for that magic self-esteem solution to soften the pain and challenge of growing up. Unfortunately, the only way out is through and success is a band-aid and being loved, cared for and belonging to a healthy family and community where teen contributes is the antidote. Let me share with you a clinical story. A few years ago, a college freshmen came to therapy to try to understand what was wrong with her. Her presenting problem. She did not want to self-harm. She did not want to smoke pot. She did not want to cheat in school. She hated porn and did not want to hook up. She shared all of these concerns with me, with tears in her eyes and she ended with this question: what is wrong with me? I was speechless and heartbroken. It [00:10:00] is my most powerful example of how we have normalized very unhealthy behavior. I spent the next 15 to 20 minutes helping her understand that what has become normalized in adolescence in our culture is not healthy. And that she developmentally was in a really healthy place. You might be saying, Hey, MJ, this is what teens have always done. Yes. I agree. But what motivated teens when I worked with them in the eighties and nineties and at the turn of the century was independence and curiosity.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: There was an awareness that their behavior was wrong and a bit daring. That is not what I see with today's teens. Many, not all, feel that they're using substances and porn to soothe the stress of the demands of being successful and cutting corners in order to get everything done that is expected of them. That is the price that they must pay in order to have [00:11:00] individual success and perhaps greatness. Riley is 14. She is a girl hockey player. Let's be honest. Hockey most likely is not the key to her future. In her mind, she believes it is. Her parents are her biggest cheerleaders, as we all hope to be for our children. Yet, the movie does not show them offering perspective, putting hockey in its proper place. They may be doing this beautifully, but Disney nor Riley does not let us see this. Riley has conflated her self-esteem and her self-worth. Her push to be individually great skates over her lifelong friends and her integrity, when she breaks into the coach's office to read his scouting report about her. In her mind, like so many teens this is the cost of greatness.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Question number five: how can Riley excel at her sport and stay true to those parts of her self-worth that should never

[00:12:00] change: her honesty, her integrity, her desire to be collaborative. A real teammate.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number six.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Back to my non-client. This young woman and I sat and talked for about 90 minutes. Obviously there was no charge for a session where there was no problem. But she taught me so much. She had immigrated to the US with her family seven years before. She had a strong sense of being loved and belonging in her family. She contributed to their wellbeing by learning English quickly and helping her parents and siblings not only become more, fluent. But figure out the maze of the United States of America. She had worked part-time from the age of 13, contributing her money to household expenses. She loved high school, played a sport, worked on the school paper. She was in college and living at home excited to become a teacher. She had [00:13:00] many friends and a flip phone. And as we talked, she said off the cuff, I see my friends a lot because I only have a flip phone. She had a sense of light and a purpose that was beautiful. She left the session with so much gratitude. It was a professor who suggested she come see me. On the way out, she said, This was really helpful. You've said a lot of the same things my mom and grandma had been saying to me, But I guess I needed to hear it from someone else. Yep. A normal teen. Yep. It takes a village. Her village made her feel loved, integrated and a real contributor to her family. ironically, due to her family's financial constraints they gave her the wonderful gift of a flip phone, where she had to be out and about with her friends.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Back to Disney. Disney is Disney. It is not real life. They have not given us an aspirational film, but rather a painful look into the mirror [00:14:00] of many teenagers lives today in the U S. It is time that all of us help give teens a healthier adolescence. It must begin with a collective strategy for phone use. This is finally beginning to happen. Indiana, not a state known for progressive policy has just passed a bill, banning phones in the classroom. Please parents, I beg of you. Do not say that your children need them in case of a school shooting. The teacher will have a phone and one of the ways to keep safe in such an emergency is to be silent. Now that we know the damage, the phones are causing our teens, we must put the phone down, join hands and get the phones out of school. Parents must take them at bedtime so everyone can sleep. I want limited minutes, like the old days to be the norm for teens under 17. Trust me, one parent at a time cannot do this. School systems, legislatures, clubs, [00:15:00] parent groups, and businesses can. Secondly, we must lean into collaboration and decrease the competition in teens life. Our over-emphasis of competition leaves, many kids despairing and giving up by

junior high. I am not suggesting banning sports or any competition, but rather right-sizing them so kids love them, but are not so over committed that they're at best grumpy and at worst cheating in order to stay afloat. We must stress self-worth and educate the normal variability of self-esteem. One day sunny the next day, stormy. And we can do it, especially if we have enough sleep, friendship, and family support.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Discussion question number six: rank in importance, these parts of your life. Values/ faith. Family friends, activities, academics, self-care. Is [00:16:00] the energy you spend reflective of the importance of each of these in your life. Is the energy you spend going to point you in the right direction as an adult. Where you grow into someone who is productive, contributing and compassionate. In the community that you live in.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: Thanks for listening.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: I hope you go to the movie. And I hope it's an incredible discussion between you and your kids.

M.J. Murray Vachon LCSW: This is your Inner Challenge.