

Encore: Mental Wellness & The Immigration Journey

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 0:27

Welcome to Inner Challenge, a podcast that takes the mystery out of mental wellness. In today's unscripted conversation, I'll talk with a young man who gives us some insights about immigration and mental wellness. Welcome to the Inner Challenge podcast. I want to begin by asking you just to tell our audience a little bit about yourself.

Guest: 0:46

Yes, I am currently a student that is still attending a university.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 0:51

I always begin by asking people to Answer the question, how do you define mental wellness?

Guest: 0:58

Well, there's always like an imagery in my head rather than words to describe what mental wellness is. Sometimes I see like a glass of water and sometimes I see clear blue skies with the stillness in the water. That clear blue sky with the peaceful waters is what I usually see when I think of mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 1:22

When you feel mentally well, when you feel that clear blue sky, what does that feel like for you?

Guest: 1:29

Usually there's a pulsating feeling, like it being between my eyebrows. Usually that part feels fuzzy. But my body doesn't feel stressed. It feels relaxed. There isn't much thoughts that are going through my mind. It's described in the words called, kind of like surreal. Like You realize that you're living, you're alive.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 1:49

Do you do anything to help cultivate mental wellness?

Guest: 1:53

usually I either play a few games or I go for a walk. sometimes just hearing the trees rattle along with the birds chirping with the sun shining on my face and just taking deep breaths and usually the less I think, the better I feel.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 2:14

The less I think, the The better I feel. I'm not sure truer words have ever been spoken. I want us to set the context for this episode and that you come with a very unique life story. Your family immigrated. here from Asia when you were around, how old?

Guest: 2:34

I was six years old when I moved to Brooklyn.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 2:36

Okay. And then for the next nine or so years, you were on the East coast, you moved different places. Then you moved again. And I want you to share with our audience, what's it like to be a child that leaves a homeland.

Guest: 2:53

The one way I would usually describe it, is when you're just a seedling, you became a sapling, but then soon after you have to be uprooted, transferred to a different place and replanted. Then once again, you have to be uprooted once you already took root and then moved once more to take root somewhere else. The soils in every different place is different. The resources that you will have will be different. The nutritions that you will have in those places will be different. But even in the process, going back to the analogy of the plant, it will shock you in the same way the plants will go through a shock when it is become uprooted and transferred. And it may take a while before the plant get used to like the soil and the moisture in the soil and in the same way a person can be

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 3:50

Wow, I think it's one of the most beautiful descriptions of immigration I've ever heard.

Guest: 3:57

Thank you.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 3:59

Is there much support for a child who is being transplanted again and again?

Guest: 4:05

My parents never really understood that when you move from one culture to another, there's going to be something called a culture shock. My parents, they only really told me in the past. Bear with it. It will be painful, but this is the best thing for you. As a kid, it really confuses me because it's painful what I'm going through. how is this the best for me when I feel so helpless, how is this the best thing for me when I don't have support from my peers, neither from my parents, because of the lack of understanding in the same way.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 4:42

Tell me a little bit about what it was like to be in relationship with your peers.

Guest: 4:48

I would say it was like a very hurtful experience because in the same way it felt like betrayal. For them it might just be a joke, for me it's a lifetime of trauma. Maybe the exclusivity in the group. can leave one person down a very dark path, but nobody will know because everybody has a dignity to save or guard in a way, and that's like how I felt when it comes to talking with them as Many of them are raised in the area of Suburbs, they can never really understand what it's like, like, for a person that doesn't really have the most amount of resources, doesn't have the most amount of money to be able to go places, buy things, even if you're in the same room, it's felt like a wall between the two of you. You can hear each other, but barely.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 5:45

Was there ever people who were curious about What you were going through?

Guest: 5:50

Yes. There's this one best friend that I still keep in contact with. When I first met him, it was during second grade. I didn't know him. He didn't know me. We both just gave each other the death stare. I didn't like him cause he was staring at me. He didn't like me cause I was staring at him. We lived across from each other. He was my neighbor. And you can say kind of like, he saved me. Cause in the worst time of my life. He really brought almost like a beacon of light for me. He was that fertilizer that I needed.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 6:26

If you were going to get specific, what did he do that fertilized you at 8 years old?

Guest: 6:32

Showed me that not everybody would betray me. And that not everybody would throw me under the bus. Helped me for a while, for a little bit. Thank you. But certain cuts are a

little too deep for just like a sudden it might be like a sunglasses It might block out the Sun for a little bit, but it doesn't take away from all the Sun that exists around you

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 6:57

Right, not total healing.

Guest: 6:58

Yeah, it's not total healing,

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 7:00

but it is kind of a salve to help you cope

Guest: 7:03

Yeah

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 7:04

did he just, did you guys just play together? Did you watch movies? what was it that concretely he did?

Guest: 7:12

There was some times where we were able to hang out, maybe we were able to get a group together during middle school, so then we would have a group of friends. But, my parents business and school, like they always presented like the two dynamics that weighed on me. It felt like they are the two hands that keep tugging on my wings in a way. I couldn't fly because it felt like there's always something holding my wings down. And school, the people I didn't trust along with my parents as a business, both are the two things that I had to always, whenever I take flight, drag me back down to earth.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 7:57

And was the dragging because each of them had, you had very serious responsibilities in?

Guest: 8:03

Yes,

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 8:04

that you took school seriously and you worked in the business.

Guest: 8:07

Those two are the two things that my parents cared about the most at the time, business going well and my education going well, but 6th, 7th, 8th, I got mostly straight B's here and there, maybe an A minus.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 8:26

So you're in this time in junior high where all people want to do in adolescence is fly. Yeah. And It's harder than it sounds. We know from, and I've said this on the podcast before, that the teen brain has this incredible growth spurt from 12 to 25. And what the teen brain wants is emotional intensity, New experiences, social engagements, friends, and creative expression. And you had a lot of pain. I mean, your wings are being held down through just feeling apart and excluded.

Guest: 9:11

Of

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 9:11

I think we live in a country that doesn't know what to do with difference. We're not a particularly curious people.

Guest: 9:18

No, not at all. Even just growing up knowing that I was always the butt of the joke when it mentions anything about my race, I was always the one person that tanks all the jokes in terms of even if somebody thinks they may have I've thought of something creative, I've probably heard it a thousand times,.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 9:37

And you're a child, so you think, this is about me. You don't have the context of, that kid in my class isn't comfortable with difference. So what he does, is take his nervousness inside and throw it on you. We understand that when it's physical challenges, if you have to jump off a diving board and you've never done that before, that's a different experience and people are nervous and people tend to be fairly supportive. we don't do that well when it comes to relational difference. When someone looks different, when someone has a different language, a different skin color. So you take in that.

Guest: 10:20

We often think that if you don't look at the pain, it will go away, but it's like an untreated wound. It doesn't just cauterize by itself. You must take care of it. you must disinfect it and you must put gauze on it to make sure that the wound itself has time and also the

resources to heal. But at the time I didn't have any gauze, I didn't have any rubbing alcohol. It was like my own attempt at putting a band aid on a cut wound It doesn't fully cover everything up. Maybe seals it for a little bit, but eventually the blood will start dripping once more

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 10:58

Yeah, and you were talking about emotional pain, relational pain, which we don't heal with gauze We heal that with words. We heal that with physical touch We heal that with listening to one story and letting somebody share.

Guest: 11:17

I try to focus on all the good things that's happening as that will be the only way I feel like I can get hope in my life rather than just a temporary feeling of relief.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 11:30

I want to thank you for doing this.

Guest: 11:32

I

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 11:33

think you have really shared the hidden pain. We supposedly are a country of immigrants, right? My grandparents immigrated here when they were seven. My son is married to a woman who immigrated, and her family immigrated here, yet it's heartbreak that we don't have more curiosity. And it's the human condition to be connected, and there's actually, it's actually the human condition to be a bit afraid of difference. And one of the things I've really learned is that we have to intentionally challenge ourself to be curious. Because one of the things, and I've worked with all kinds of people, Everybody's the same once you sit and talk to them. you lose their age, you lose their skin color, you lose their educational background once you really sit and have a conversation. What's remarkable when we think about your life story is we underestimate the pain of being a sapling, a young child. who's transplanted and of the demands it puts on the child. When the fertilizer, the ground isn't the same, the child needs, you know, to know these social norms, that language, none of it's explained. And part of what you've shared with us today is really, I think it will make a difference of really encouraging us to be brave, to reach out to people different. Than ourself. Mm-Hmm. Especially young people. Yeah.

Guest: 13:13

Mm-Hmm.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 13:14

And also what you said of going for a walk. Yeah. Where you listen to the trees. That's real connection. So I really wanna thank you for being on.

Guest: 13:23

Thank you for having me.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: 13:25

Here are my Inner Challenge Insights Insight number one. We often don't really consider the impact immigration has on mental wellness. This young man's word helped us understand how difficult it is to be a transplanted sapling, where the nutrients of one's life are changed, often overnight. I hope his words soften your heart the next time you interact with someone who has immigrated, be it your doctor, neighbor, cashier, or classmate. Be aware of their unique struggle to take root in our land. Insight number two. It's helpful to have images for us to aspire and cultivate mental wellness, to really understand that our mind can be a healthier place. I love this guest's images, a still glass of water, a peaceful blue sky. These images help us remember our mind's natural state. Insight number three, going out for a walk never goes out of style. It's great for our mental wellness. Try it. Listen to the birds, the trees, Just notice and be present. Insight number four, the less I think, the better I feel. The less I think, the better I feel. Go ahead. Think when you take a test, do your taxes or drive, but tame your mind of worry and rumination. By bringing it to the present and learning how to make it still. To put it simply, stop shaking the glass of water. Insight number four, be the power of one. Help break down the wall of indifference or difference. Who would have thought you could save someone by inviting them to play a game? Insight number five. Many Americans are not aware of how hard children of immigrants work. Their emphasis on education, family, and work seems unparalleled to me. Their children often have a resilience that leaves me in awe. Insight number six. Any joke about race is not new, and it is always wrong, and it hurts mental wellness. Understand that difference can make us nervous. Observe how you react to difference. Do you become curious and ask questions, such as, Oh, what was the country you came from like? Or do you find yourself nervous and backing away, and maybe even judgmental, thinking, Wow, their English isn't that good. How's your Mandarin? Manage your nervousness. This is the perfect time for that old adage, if you don't have anything nice to say... insight number seven. Relational pain hurts mental wellness and comes in many, many forms. Loneliness, exclusion, disrespect, stereotyping,

and not having others be interested in your life story. Relational pain cannot be healed by gauze. In fact, it can only be healed by other healthy relationships. Thank you so much for listening. And as you move through your week, remember, it takes a village to cultivate mental wellness. This is our Inner Challenge.