

Encore: Mental Wellness & Managing Anxiety from Adult Children

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to Inner Challenge, a podcast about mental wellness. Today's topic is, How do I stay sane when my adult children are distressed? You're invited to listen to an unscripted conversation between myself and a woman who is struggling with this real life dilemma. Join us as we increase our knowledge of cultivating mental wellness in ourself and others. Welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad to have you as my guest .

Guest: I'm excited. I can't believe I'm the first. Thank you for having me. I'm excited for today.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Tell our audience a little bit about who you are and what you've done in your life.

Guest: I am a woman with a deep voice in my mid sixties. And, I've raised three children. So I have three adult children in their late twenties. All out there figuring out, these next stages of their lives. I've lived my life around sport and in sport, moving from a collegiate coach to a collegiate athletic [00:01:00] director to a high level athlete myself.

Guest: To someone now who mentors a lot of coaches and educators, and that's why I think what you do is so relevant for me as well.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Told you the purpose of this podcast is to just have conversations about mental wellness. And my hope is in just having a boots on the ground conversation. We're not talking theory.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We're not talking anything but how we understand it and define it in our everyday lives and how that sometimes works well for us and sometimes it gets out of whack. And I just want to begin by asking you to share like for you when you're mentally well, what is that? How do you recognize it specifically and when do you know yep, my mental health is okay?

Guest: Yeah, I think it's a great question and one that I've been doing a lot of thinking about since it's such a, an issue with athletes and students who I work with, but I think it's when you're able to push through when there's [00:02:00] obstacles in life, those obstacles that come for all of us and tough times challenges and when you're able to push through and get to the other side end.

Guest: And you're standing there and you're okay. There's no long term impact, that you've managed those tough moments and the easy moments without a whole lot of difficulty leaving you in a bad place. So that you come out feeling whole and happy and joyful and that gratitude matters. So I take all those things in, but I think it's when you come out the other side of whatever your challenge is, and you've grown from it and you're okay.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So that's awesome because I think it's a fascinating question. I've probably asked it more than 5, 000 times. Even when I just asked you a few minutes ago, this is what we're going to start out with. You said to me, I haven't even thought about that. And I think what I hope to do on this podcast is give people a space to think about it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Because I believe that when we really [00:03:00] Define and put words to what is mental wellness. It's easier for us to cultivate in a super practical way. One is that we feel mentally well when we're happy, when we feel successful, when we're at peace. And that what throws us out of the river of wellness, which is one of the images I use, that when we're in the river, we're happy, we're peaceful, we're able to make good decisions.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What throws us out is just life's obstacles that we can expect that aren't comfortable and part of what I hear you saying is you are someone who pushes through those obstacles to get to the other side. And my hunch is that's probably worked pretty well for you. That skill of pushing through.

Guest: Yeah, and I do think that comes from my life, lifetime, as an athlete and having to push through, not make excuses, having to suck it up and push through.

Guest: Here I am as an older adult, sucking it up and pushing through.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Is [00:04:00] there any time that you can think of when the pushing through might not work so well when it comes to mental wellness?

Guest: Absolutely. Even as a high level athlete developing an eating disorder to deal with some abusive coaching. Obviously, I didn't have the tools to manage that tough experience and so I turned inward and had a long term issue with that.

Guest: That's a long time ago, but even right now, yes, I'm dealing with Some hard times with my kids as they're maneuvering their lives and their sadness and their pain, and I'm the person that they call. And I leave the call just heartbroken and sick inside, not knowing how to help them.

Guest: So in the end, I'm not helping myself either.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So let's talk a little bit more about that because part of what we're going to do on this podcast is deal with real life issues that throw us out of [00:05:00] balance. And you're really talking about one that I think is really common for anyone Who's in a relationship?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You're talking about the parent child relationship. It could be a boss employee relationship. It could be a coach athlete relationship. But when there's a lot of emotional intensity and you leave that conversation kind of feeling wrecked, is that a fair? Can you just tell us what goes on inside of you when one of your children is struggling?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And you are in a conversation with them and they're sharing with you all their pain, all their struggle. Share that with us.

Guest: Since I just experienced another one of these conversations yesterday, I really feel sick inside.

Guest: I feel like I'm failing, them. I feel like, I'm not being heard. I do share things, but it just doesn't matter. And I just feel like, it's awful. It's awful to know my kid is in pain, and, [00:06:00] in real pain, and I don't have the words to help them. Yet, I'm the one that keeps failing. Getting the calls and I was very depressed the rest of the day and I didn't have a good day to be honest with you.

Guest: I was really down. I had a phone call from my sister about some really sad stuff and I actually had to say, I can't have this conversation right now because I've really had a tough day. Can we wait on this?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's a great example. I think for people who have children, there is, this biological connection that when we hear their pain, we hear it often very differently than when we hear the pain of our neighbor.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It is often very different with our children. When you are in those kind of conversations with your children, do you have any strategies that come to mind that you've tried, where you've been able to have the conversations, but not walk away completely?

Guest: With [00:07:00] this particular child, I don't think I've ever walked away feeling I've helped the situation in the sense that, there are times where, she's just calling to vent and doesn't want my solutions. And there's times where, she wants help, she wants something, but I can't give it to her.

Guest: And it's like the phone rings and I'm like, ugh, there's a physical reaction because I know it's going to be a big situation with me, it's going to feel big, it's going to feel heavy, and I can't sit in the pain with her. I try to talk about breathing, like ~~to, I try~~ to help her to manage how she's feeling.

Guest: So I do try, I spent a lot of time yesterday talking about, I'm worried about, the fact that she's not learning tools to help her manage how someone, it's two situations, but [00:08:00] how someone else is making her feel. And she's also experienced some real physical pain right now. And there's not a, there's not an immediate answer.

Guest: And so helping her to breathe and understand this pain's not going to go away right now. How can you learn to sit and manage this pain so that you don't end up such an emotional mess that you can't get out of that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah. So isn't it interesting because what she's struggling with has become contagious and that's what you're struggling with.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You get off the phone and you are depressed and You have to just say, I'm out for the rest of the day, in the same place she is. That's why what's really fascinating about mental wellness is we often offer other people The solutions and we forget to [00:09:00] turn those same solutions toward ourself.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: ~~And so~~ it's a loving thing to do to offer her coaching, emotional coaching. She can accept it or not accept it. But for the purpose of what we're focusing on, I want you to think about real strategies. She's your daughter. She's going to call you again. If you took the wisdom that you're offering her and you applied it to yourself during the call.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What would that look like?

Guest: You do differently? † how can I help you? Is there something that I can do that could make this different for you? She's married, so I threw out there How is your husband helping you to manage those things?

Guest: And so that came up ~~and~~ and I did try to. Distance myself in the conversation, but it was taken so personally by her that I felt she wasn't open to anything more than [00:10:00] me just listening and validating her pain.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah, so what I'm talking about, even that suggestion, which is a good suggestion, how much comfort do you get from your husband, that's something that young couples have to figure out and work with, but there is nothing like a mother.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That mothers have a superpower when it comes to holding their kids pain. And part of what I hear you saying is, the superpower leaves you completely depleted. You're doing one thing that I often recommend. You can't always have success in the moment, but in a time that it's calm to say.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's helpful for me because I'm a fixer, I'm a coach. It's helpful for me if you clarify what you want from me. If you clarify, do you want support from me, or do you want advice? That we often like to give advice because if we can fix the problem, we don't have to hold the pain. If you, at a calm thing, [00:11:00] say, Hey, I'm One of the changes I'd like us to do, an update in our relationship, is just say, when you are in a spot and you're very emotionally overwhelmed, it's helpful for me if you just say, I just need you to listen to me.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Because the things you said earlier are really important things that are developmental. How does she learn to do more of this in a way that isn't going to wipe you out? But what I really want you to see is you have more power to not get wiped out and you might not be using it. So number one, to ask her and to say, do you want advice?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: If she says, I don't want advice, and obviously she doesn't, because one of the things that's helpful to understand when someone is emotionally dysregulated, as it sounds like she is, and we all get that way, that's not a judgment. It's the human condition. Advice is what I think of as speaking German to someone who's speaking French.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And if she is emotionally dysregulated, you're best to use the image of [00:12:00] holding your arms wide and being clear like, Oh, I'm just going to offer you emotional support. So that's really the number

one that you get clear within you. You don't have to fix this. You don't have to offer advice. A second thing is that when we have intense conversations, it's really helpful to not have them in our ears.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So when you're talking to her to put her on speaker, if you can, if you're in a public place, you can't do that. But it allows you to have some distance that way you can listen to her. Doesn't solve the problem or fix the problem, but I think it respects our biology and it also allows you to understand space because one of the things about parent and child relationship is that our children's pain affects us uniquely and more intensely than other people's pain.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So to have her on speaker will allow you to have a little bit of space. Okay. The other [00:13:00] thing is, you're encouraging her to do breath work. I want to encourage you to do breath work while you're listening to her. That you're not allowing her own pain to dysregulate you quite so much by doing some active mental wellness skills.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I call it doing notice, where you ground your feet. Notice where on your body you're feeling all your emotional reaction. Where do you typically feel it yourself? In my stomach. So you would sit and you would be listening to her, hopefully if you could, on speaker, at a distance, at a time when you are free to do it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We're always free to say to people, I want to give you my attention. I can't do that right now. And you go to a private place and you ground your feet and you actually put your hands on your stomach and you're actually doing breath work while you're listening to her.

Guest: Wow. I can just feel that setup. being more [00:14:00] grounding for me.

Guest: Yes, because what shifts in you?

Guest: I think the emotion in the minute, like the emotion of, it, it allows, it gives me a little more distance to process her pain so that it doesn't directly go into my body. It sits out there, it sits out there a little bit more. I feel like that's what would happen.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yes, and I think often for many people that is what happens we often give people the advice that we ourselves need, so that's what I often look for in myself. It's often what I teach my clients. Just notice

what you're asking people to do and see if it might be helpful to you. Your job isn't to take away her pain, you can't.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Your job isn't to fix her pain. Adult children seldom let parents, and we could so easily fix it, but it's their life. They're doing their thing. They're going to do it their way. And in all honesty, most of the time, our fixes are [00:15:00] outdated. It's what we would have done at that time. And we're living in a culture because of the pandemic that everyone, can easily get emotionally dysregulated.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So we need these skills more and more. That you shift it from fixing her to really, What I call tending and befriending your own emotional reaction to her. And that you understand that emotions are a bell curve. And as you listen to her, you're going to have a reaction. That's how we have emotions.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We walk through the world and we react physically to something first. Part of what I hear you saying is your reaction to her pushes in different emotions.

Guest: It's affecting my mental wellness. I'm so worried about her wellness. And what I've recognized as you're talking is I'm not managing my own mental wellness as I listen to her and take it in.

Guest: So then we're both depleted. That's right.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And this is what's happening. It's the dance between parent and child across the country. The child gets dysregulated, whether the child is three or whether the child is [00:16:00] 33. And then the parent gets dysregulated.

Guest: That's so beautiful. Cause I, I do some parent work and it's so easy for me to see that when they're.

Guest: Young, they're in school, but it's absolutely what's happening in my own world with my adult child.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And the issues are often much bigger. The older the child, I think the more intense the more serious the issue. And so it's much more trying. Because at least when the child is three or four and is hurt because somebody took their toy, that doesn't feel so overwhelming for a parent.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: But when it's an adult child who's struggling with a marriage or struggling with a job or struggling because they don't know where they should go, struggling with an addiction, Those are really loaded big time issues and we as adults have to be committed to our own mental wellness of how do we stay balanced when this person that we love so much is very dysregulated and of [00:17:00] understanding that if we practice as we hold their emotion, as we listen to them, as we practice our own That I think will help them in a way that is often surprising because it's often contagious.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Emotional dysregulation is contagious. Emotional regulation is often contagious. If you can speak French to her French, if you can Sit there, listen to her, and try to keep yourself calm. It's hers to figure out. And in talking, she may figure out what her solution is. Or she may just figure out, ugh, there's no fix. We are being asked to live with a lot of unknown. We're being asked to live with a lot of disappointment. We're being asked to live with a lot of cultural upheaval, which causes a lot of inner upheaval. And sometimes [00:18:00] the best gift we can give to each other is listening in a way where we stay emotionally regulated. And we hope for the best that maybe some of our emotional regulation will be contagious for them.

Guest: I love what, I wanted to take notes, but what I hear you saying is that for this next call, I need to prioritize my own mental wellness and stay regulated, process, breathe, as I'm thinking in my head, gosh, if I could just get her to breathe and just sit, I have to be doing the same thing.

Guest: Breathe. And also say to her up front, do you need my support? I can't fix her pain. I can't fix her situations. I can help her if I can manage my own reaction response to her, stay mentally well, so that maybe she feels that calmness and wellness coming from me.

Guest: and [00:19:00] maybe that becomes contagious for her. She has a tendency to elevate me in terms of pain. Oh gosh, I love this child so much, exactly what you said. I want to, and so I have, I've undermined her because I've contacted a doctor like for help and instead of letting her manage that, my god, she's in her late 20s.

Guest: I never would contact a doctor for any of my Dalton kids, but she has put me in such a spiral, I just thought I'm connected. I can help her. Wrong. I need to step back, step out. Love her, be there, as long as it is okay for me as well. I need to self regulate, I need to do a much better job because I'm walking away knowing I'm not helping her, but then I'm living in that pain, instead of I walk away, I feel bad, but I feel like this was Better for her even.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah. It makes a lot of sense. And you [00:20:00] said so many good things out of the goodness of your heart. We try to fix their problems instead of saying to them, the wisdom's in you. The wisdom is in you. Listen.

Guest: It's beautiful.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: But part of that wisdom doesn't surface for many young people until they dump out some of the pain.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: One of the truths in our world today is that parents are the dumping ground. I don't know if that's good or bad. I just try to live with what is, in being the dumping ground, what we really need to do is hold their pain with them. Pain is hard and the things she's dealing with are serious. She's not in pain because she has a paper cut and so what you're just saying is I'll be this spot 10 or 15 minutes, maybe 20, where you express your pain and I'm holding it and I'm managing my own reaction to your pain.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: So I'm [00:21:00] not abandoning you. But I'm also not taking over. I'm just accompanying you in this short phone call as you share with me whatever is your emotional reaction at your life at this time and you trust that when that's done, she'll have some more mental clarity to make the decisions she needs to cope with this situation.

Guest: So I do have a question. This will be a shift. Yes. For us. Is it, can I just be open with her about this shift? Because it hasn't been going right for either of us. So this is how I'm going to help you and listen to you moving forward.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I think I don't have an answer. I think that you have to go with your instinct. Okay. For who this child is. I've done it both ways. Typically, the child does not know that they've dysregulated the parent, unless the parent flips her a lid and starts yelling, then they know. And that happens a lot, that when we get dysregulated, a [00:22:00] parent can go off, and that either escalates the kid, or it does the opposite.

Guest: I always wonder, does she know how she leaves me?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah.

Guest: Because I'm her mom.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And this is what moms do. You could do one of two things. You could run an experiment and just work on yourself. Yeah. I think by telling

Guest: her, you're making her, your problems her.

Guest: Yes. That's what I was thinking. I don't want her to feel bad. So I think that's exactly right. Just manage myself. You've given me a lot of things to think about and to practice before that next conversation.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Yeah, and so I want to end by saying, by picking up on your word practice, we don't often think when it comes to our mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That we should really practice. That we should observe and see this as something interesting and fun and growth filled. It shouldn't be a burden. It should be, we observe ourselves when we fall out of that river where we feel calm and [00:23:00] peaceful and clear minded. To be curious, when we fall out of it, and we either become chaotic, or become rigid, it sounds like yours is more like, you feel chaotic inside because you're spinning and you can't help her, and it feels like you have no energy for the day.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You like competition, so make this a new sport. And that's what, I really think it's fun. I didn't grow up with any emotional regulation, I've learned it on the fly. And I've really seen this as something I challenge myself to do. How long can I make myself stay in the river? How can I listen in a way that I don't take in their emotions, but I actually hold their emotions with them.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I accompany them, but I don't take them on. And that is the art of mental wellness. And there's beautiful science behind it.

Guest: Thank you for being my guest.

Guest: Oh my gosh. . I love the statement, she has the wisdom. She has the wisdom to do this because she does.

Guest: I got so much from this. Thank you [00:24:00] so much. You're welcome.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What a great conversation. Here are my Inner Challenge Insights:

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number one.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Let's begin by admitting the messiness of the noun, adult children.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Just saying it's confusing. Are they adults? Or are they children? When adult children reach out to us, the biggest favor we can do is take a breath and remind ourselves that what we all want is an adult to adult relationship. Transforming and letting go of the parent child roles we all know so well, takes some time, some intention. Some effort and some new skill sets.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number two. When it comes to mental wellness, pushing through difficult times will build our resilience. Yet, we need to notice when pushing through is rooted in healthy coping skills such as positive self talk or small intermittent rewards or unhealthy coping skills such as an [00:25:00] eating disorder or using alcohol and drugs.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Don't see this as a failure, but as a sincere attempt to find a fix, but strive for healthy fixes and seek out professional help. We do this effortlessly with our cars and phones when they break down, so we can certainly give ourselves the same type of care and maintenance.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number three. Parents are fascinating beings.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Fascinating. We are wired to protect our children. This wiring is absolutely essential in the early years, not only for their well being and safety, but also their food source. But as we cultivate relationships with our adult children, we need to update this wiring, so we move from fixing to supporting.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: For most of us, this is not easy and it can feel unnatural, but as we heard in today's conversation, we often want to fix because we do not know how to [00:26:00] sit and hold their pain. So be your own electrician. Rewire so you can emotionally support your children, helping them to connect to their own wisdom.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number four,

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: emotions can be contagious. Learning to regulate our emotions teaches us how to move through emotional distress so we can be present and listen to others in a supportive way. This gift of empathy and

accompaniment does not fix or solve the problem, but helps the person feel heard, helps them not feel alone, helps them to have a sense of belonging, and this, in my opinion, is a superpower.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Insight number five.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Turn your advice toward yourself. Turn your advice toward yourself. 95 percent of the time, our adult children don't want it. Yet, we think it's pretty grand. So why not use it? If [00:27:00] these insights aren't enough, and you want more information on the topics covered today, Please go to my website, mjmurrayvachon.com. Under the Pod Class tab, look at Pod Classes 1 on Mental Wellness, 2 on Notice, and Pod Classes 6 and 7 on Emotional Regulation, and you will learn more information when it comes to mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Thank you for joining me, and as you move through your week, I encourage you to apply the parts of this podcast that seem to speak to you as you continue to cultivate your own mental wellness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: This is your inner challenge. [00:28:00]