

Ep. 74 Mental Wellness: The Enneagram and External Self-Awareness as Pathways to Building Self-Confidence

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: [00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. Today, we're going to pick up where we left off in episode 73 Looking at external self-awareness and the role it plays throughout our life, when it comes to answering the question, Who am I? In last week's episode, my guest actually surprised me when he said two things. The first was, he had never really heard of external self-awareness and the second was his belief that internal self-awareness is enough when it comes to answering the question, Who am I? Put these two things together and mental wellness can easily get off track. I knew in an instant I needed an episode dedicated to external self-awareness. We cultivate our mental wellness in the context of others, so we need to be able to understand what external self-awareness is. And we need a process to hear other's insights about us, so we become more of who we are, not less. Let's pick up where we left off. This is a podcast you will want to listen to because I'm going to share with you a [00:01:00] process I created years ago that can help you gather and integrate external- self-awareness. A special thanks to this guest who was willing to sit down with me again. So let's move to external self-awareness. Have you ever heard of that before? I spoke about it today.

Guest: I don't think I've heard of that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: External self-awareness is coming up with ways that we learn how others perceive us. When you think about how that occurs in your life, you getting feedback from others? How's that built into your life at this point?

Guest: An example I would have is I was a diver in high school, so what happens when you're diving is you do a dive and then right away you're coached on the side giving you feedback and stuff. I think I've been pretty good in my life about receiving feedback. Honestly sometimes that blurs into my self-awareness, my external self-awareness. Because I feel I'm so used to , in these environments, whether it's school or sports or a music lesson, getting feedback and I want to grow from that. And then sometimes I forget to keep that in those settings and then it blends into who I [00:02:00] am and then I find myself getting too lost in these external factors. And that's leads, the insecurity and the

unsureness of who you are. That's why it's a balancing act. I want to be good at receiving feedback but then when it comes to who I am and socially, I don't want to just be constantly listening to whatever people say. I want to be secure in who I am and make known who I am and what I want to be.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: When you think about the enneagram, the information it gave you about who you were was not really connected to skills that you do. Correct? Yeah. Correct. And we typically learn to get external self-awareness by skills that we do. We get grades at school, we get coaching from sports, we take music lessons, and we get that kind of feedback about us doing a particular skill. I think the reason in this study that I was referring to at the beginning, self-awareness was so low is cuz most of us don't have built into our life probably until we'd start dating someone seriously a [00:03:00] way to get external feedback about who we are. Part of the Enneagram is it will give you information of what your strengths can be with others, what your weaknesses can be with others, what your strengths can be at work, what your weaknesses can be. Really the external self-awareness. But it isn't a tool that gives you external self-awareness from others. Mm-hmm. It doesn't say like The disc, which is a similar personality test, asks you to give this questionnaire to three people that know you well and then they give you external self-awareness scores. I think that what we have to do is find people in our life that we trust to give us external self-awareness that isn't connected to what we do, but who we are. Does that make sense?

Guest: That makes sense? I think between internal, external, -you're right, with finding people that really know you. That's very important cuz you need that source of external awareness. If you're just going through life only from your point of view, that's not gonna go well. You need to see these outside perspectives through trusted people. But I also think, [00:04:00] and I guess this could be a hot take or whatever, but I think at the end of the day, your internal awareness is still -at the top of what you should be focused on. It's good to take into account being externally aware. But your perception is your reality. So your internal awareness is at the forefront of your total awareness

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Research doesn't bear that out. Research shows that if people are too internally self-aware and not enough externally self-aware, they actually lean towards anxiety and depression more. Which makes sense. Because one of the truths about internal awareness is that we make up stories. I have this all the time in my office where somebody is , This person hasn't reached out to me. I think they don't care about me anymore. And that's their internal self-awareness. I always say, gotta check out the stories we make up. They check it out and the person's oh, I've had laryngitis for two weeks. I have

not been able to get outta bed I've been so sick. I know I should have text you back, but I just felt crappy. I am so sorry. One of the takeaways I hope people have is it's exactly [00:05:00] what you said in the first part about internal self-awareness. We have to cultivate that. But in the promotion of mental health, I really want people to understand that external self-awareness is the other side of the coin to really being a healthy person with self-awareness. Self-awareness is the tool that drives us, internal and external. I don't think we have many Systems that help us develop self-awareness. One of the things I learned about external self-awareness is when I worked in the junior high and a student did something wrong, I would pull them out of class and I would say, why do you think I asked you to come out in the hallway? 95% of the time, the girls would say, oh, because I was talking to this person or that person, or cuz I turned around in my chair or whatever. Yes. What can you do differently when you go back in the classroom to change that behavior? It would be a 15 second conversation. Actually. They got so accustomed to it. They'd come out in the hall, they're , I know what I did. I'm going to do this [00:06:00] differently. The boys would come out and they would say I don't know. Really? You're a smart guy. And I would just sit in the silence. I am not lying, 80% of them would get teary-eyed. Because that type of external feedback, I don't think they were as accustomed to one is cuz as everyone knows, junior high girls are brutal with each other. They give a lot of external feedback, not that all of it's true. But they get a lot of it. I ran a test once with a class of boys. There were 41 boys in the class, and I said, I want you to go for 24 hours. And they agreed to do this. They were all on board, not talk about sports and not say, this is the normal junior high boy things where they put each other down. The smartest kid in the class raised his hand and he said, MJ will have nothing to talk about with each other. That's why we're running the experiment. The point is that girls probably get more external feedback from each other than boys and we really want to help with this external self-awareness. We want [00:07:00] to be able to find trusted friends that will say, Hey, Can you tell me if I'm stepping out . This happens when people have serious romantic relationships. They begin to give each other feedback. ~~Yeah.~~ They begin to say, that hurt my feelings. That didn't hurt my feelings. Often when I work with couples I can assess their skill when it comes to external self-awareness as to what their ability is to hear the criticism of their spouse. Often this is someone that they've had children with, they've trusted this person enough to raise children. But if this person says, I'm really uncomfortable when you're so angry and this spouse says, I'm not angry, that's fascinating. Why would you not at least say, help me understand why you think I'm angry and give me examples. In that context, cuz you did say you hadn't thought about external self-awareness. I don't think we teach external self-awareness. I think we just think it'll happen, but I don't think it happens.

Guest: Yeah, -I think what came to my mind was communication. Cuz as you were saying with couples I think that's the biggest thing. How else are you going to get that external [00:08:00] awareness if you don't communicate with people around you. I think you're totally right, I've never really thought external awareness, how important that is. Surrounding yourself with people you can trust and know you well and then communicating with them is the only way you're gonna be able to see that perspective? Because we can only see from our point of view. We have to find people that we trust to help us gain that external self-awareness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I think cultivating external self-awareness is trickier than it sounds. Of course we have job reviews and like you said, romantic relationships or friendships but I'm wondering if there's other ways that you can think of that help us cultivate external self-awareness, which is just how people perceive us.

For me, I think a big part of it is because music is so big and I like performing, I'm constantly receiving a lot of external awareness. Receiving feedback from people I'm playing with and people in the crowd. I think it can definitely be a double edged sword because gaining external awareness is very [00:09:00] helpful. Maybe if like a band member hey, you were a little flat on these notes or whatever that's great. That's really helpful. But then it can be too much and you can read too far into things. I constantly, after performances, I'm almost never actually happy no matter how well we did because I'm always reflecting and thinking too far into things. You gotta make sure like you're not putting too much weight. A comment from my drummer is going have more weight than this random person that was watching us. You wanna be aware of where it's coming from and what it's saying and not get too far into it.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: That's a really smart point in order to cultivate external self-awareness, we do have to have trusted sources. We can't allow ourselves to take in every perspective that a person has on us or will get overwhelmed and shut down, and we won't, in a sense, have an open mind could help us improve. Can you think of a time when someone gave you critical feedback, that felt like criticism that we could talk about? I'd love to just [00:10:00] walk you through this process that I have developed on defensiveness, that I think really can be helpful in helping people move beyond defensiveness so we can cultivate external self-awareness.

Guest: Yeah, totally. Sticking with the band example, I think just a few weeks ago my band had a gig and after the opening song , I was getting used to the microphone and the whole venue. After one of the first songs, one of my

bandmates was Hey dude you don't need to say it so loud. You don't need to scream. You either got the microphone there, that's doing all the work for you. At first I was, oh my God, I wasn't sure how to take that. And then adjusting after that was really helpful. It turned out to be really helpful feedback because I was too loud and I wasn't sound that great.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: is it safe to say that there was no way you could have known that, had he not extended that perspective to you?

Guest: Oh, of course. In the moment I was like, oh, this is uncomfortable. There's some reasons why I don't like this, but at the end I was like, how else would I have known that? -Only he could have told me that and corrected that. He's someone that I trust and [00:11:00] someone who's input, I value a lot for my work, for my awareness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I want us to take a little bit of time to unpack that. Defensiveness, is basically when we feel threatened. Because someone has given us feedback about our behavior, our values, our attitude and we armor up. Depending on people's temperaments and personality, depending on the situation, some people go into fight mode. Other people go into the flight mode, some people go into freeze. This is a good example because that is a live situation. If you go back to that situation when he first said that to you, what did your body do?

Guest: I think my body just just paused for a minute. Because it was beginning of a performance, I was already like super stressed, all the typical physiological, like stressors, like a little sweaty and ~~like~~ shaky and all that. I just like you said, froze. I wasn't gonna fight him. I wasn't gonna leave. I just stopped. I was like, oh my [00:12:00] gosh I feel bad. I feel like I'm ruining it for everybody.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: I don't think in my 44,000 hours of clinical work I have ever had a person in my office who I did not have to teach them how to befriend their defensiveness. Defensiveness isn't good or bad. It's just a reaction when we feel threatened, and it's helpful for you to know in that particular response, and you'd have to run your own experiment for the next month and see what happens in other stages that your first response was to freeze and almost to lose your breath a bit. It almost took your breath away, right? What were the thoughts going in your mind?

Guest: A lot of like racing thoughts. A lot of like self doubting and just jumping to oh no, like he's only saying that because we're terrible. Or I don't sound good. We don't sound good. This is ruining it for everybody else. A lot of negative

self-talk. Part of me also is more that defensive oh, no, I don't wanna accept it. I think a lot of me is just being down on myself and negative and [00:13:00] honestly probably taking the comment too personal. With input not everything is supposed to be super big attack. You kinda gotta take everything with a grain of salt like that, right?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: if you understand, oh, okay, this is my relationship to defensiveness. I get in the freeze state and then I catastrophize whatever was said. If you understand that this is the body's threat system. -If we understand this is the body's alarm system to keep us safe. And in this case, defensiveness was I need to be safe from his comment, that made me worried I wasn't doing a good job. And the thoughts were catastrophic. Oh my gosh, this is terrible. And the bodily sensations were like in freeze mode, right? Yeah. What were your emotions.

Guest: I think my emotions at that time were very stressed out, feeling sad and feeling bad, about myself, but also for the band. Because like I was saying, I was catastrophizing and I was like, oh my gosh, I messed this up for us. And that's partly why I guess my problem with feedback [00:14:00] and awareness, I feel like I take it too personal . Sometimes comments like that are to help you out. They're not supposed to be you're doing terrible. It's just a little critique. That's something from my awareness, I wanna be more cognizant of Not everything is dig at you. But I think because I catastrophize in that scene I was very sad and upset with myself and felt bad and responsible.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: This is all occurring in how many seconds?

Guest: -So quick, like two seconds. This is instantaneous.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: It's instantaneous. It's a reaction. It's not a reflection. That's why I have found in working with people, if we befriend defensiveness, we can't stop it. We're going to get defensive, but we have to have a protocol. In order to manage it so we can do exactly what you just said, and that is not make the criticism catastrophic. As you go through your life, if you're like, oh, when I get critical feedback or criticism from someone, I can expect I'm going to freeze [00:15:00] and catastrophize and the antidote to that is to have the internal self-awareness that I think have in abundance. Ground your feet and take some breaths and breathe out that frozen state and breathe out the catastrophe. Our brain always starts with the negative. That's why if we're walking in the woods and we get chased by a bear, our bodies alarms go off and we start running. We don't sit there and think, oh, this might be a friendly bear. We're wired to keep ourselves safe, whether it's a bear or whether it's, Hey, you

were singing too close to the mic. The brain doesn't really know the difference. We have to use our internal self-awareness. Ground your feet, take some breaths and get the front part, the prefrontal cortex, part of your brain online. What was the takeaway from that criticism.

Guest: For me the takeaway from that criticism was really [00:16:00] helpful cuz we're still learning. Once I got past that defensiveness and made the adjustment, I was oh yeah, that makes sense. No one else could've helped me with that. So that just made the adjustment and it was good from there.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You had to make that adjustment on the stage very quickly. You didn't get to go home, reflect about it, have a good night's sleep. I think you should be really proud of yourself, but I want you to think about if the next time you get a criticism like that, if you understand that defensiveness is just a natural reaction and that you can develop a muscle where that freeze and catastrophe becomes less and less, and actually you even seek out that type of feedback. What would that be like for you?

Guest: I think that would be great. That's definitely something I would hope to strive for. Because I think if I could seek out feedback like that, I'd be able to see it for the positive in my life from other people that care. Because at the end of the day the feedback you get as long as it's good and respectful, that's there to help [00:17:00] you. Being able to see that, see the good sides of it, rather than just focus on the negative sides comments from people who love you and are there for you, so I do get past that, initial feeling of feeling bad or offended and see the good and the love that's coming through that. Then that would be amazing because then you can just constantly take all this help and improvements and adjustments from everyone with a positive attitude.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Do you think that would be possible? If just after this conversation of normalizing, oh, of course I get defensive, but I also have a lot of self-awareness on an internal level where I could manage that to really integrate external information I get from people about me.

Guest: Oh, definitely. Like we were talking about, I think you have to feed things like that through both your external awareness and your internal awareness. It's two parts that have to check. If you're listening too much to the external you're probably gonna catastrophize and get defensive. If you're listening too much to the internal, you're gonna be delusional and just not have a real representation of the [00:18:00] world. Yes, I think it's definitely possible and it's very good to practice at both the external and the internal.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: What do you think, feeds the defensiveness?

Guest: I think the defensiveness is fed from feedback at first pointing out something you've done wrong. Even if you're like parent is giving you a comment of do something better. At first it feels like you're being told you're doing something wrong, which in a way you are. If you're taking it at face value, that's true. That's where the defensiveness comes from. But I think if you look further down and see the intention behind, the feedback, I think that's when you can get rid of that catastrophizing and defensiveness. And see that feedback like that is for good, not necessarily just to hurt feelings.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: We talk a lot about growth mindset, but I often think one thing that's missing in that whole concept is the idea that we have to decide to be people who want to have a learning [00:19:00] mindset. If you think about your example, you're learning how to do this. And when we're learning how to do something new, it's a very vulnerable place to be. If we can acknowledge that when I began to learn how to do a podcast, I sent a couple to friends and my one friend said I couldn't even listen to five minutes of it, it was so painful for me to listen to you try so hard. I had the same reaction you did. But as I really sat on it, I realized I am trying too hard, like I need to loosen up. I kept saying to myself, I suck at this cuz this is something I've never done. I shouldn't be good at this because I have never done this. That was really comforting that I can learn how to do this, but an expectation that I would know how to do something that I've never done is really difficult. It's an unfair mindset, right? To think I shouldn't get any kind of feedback that's negative when I'm learning to do a whole new skillset.

Guest: Yeah. In the beginning that's something To remind ourselves [00:20:00] of I think people put a lot of pressure on themselves, especially like when trying new stuff like that. It's oh, like I should be good. They only focus on what they're doing wrong. If you look at the context, like you should be doing it wrong, yeah. You don't know any better.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: You should be doing it wrong again and again. Yeah. And some of the things you might do wrong, the same thing three or four times, and then you don't do it wrong anymore. Because that's learning. The last thing I wanna talk about what I see a lot in my office and that is when people have differences of opinion or differences of preference and what we can learn about ourself in those. When we talk about the Enneagram with you initially, that was a very safe instrument for you. You looked at it, you agreed with most of it. It really helped give you words for what you knew about yourself. There was a sense of exhilaration and safety in that kind of process. But when we have

a difference of opinion with someone, I've come to believe that this is an incredible way that we can learn a lot [00:21:00] about ourselves and in an external way. I wonder if you can think of a time that you had with somebody where you just disagreed on something. In the last four weeks, I had a mother and daughter who disagreed on when the bed should be made. I had a parent and child who disagreed on what should be worn during graduation. - Anything come to mind?

Guest: Yeah. Of course, there's lots of disagreements in my life. I think that's a natural part of being human. One specifically, with band type stuff was, we were recording a song and I suggested an idea about how to do something on the song. And two of my friends were, no that, sounded dumb.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: When they said no, did you just move on to the next thing or did you guys go back and forth?

Guest: No, I went back and forth. I'm like, yeah, I get it. This is your guys' specialty, this part of the song making process, but I know this is a technique that people do I'm ~~like~~ very attentive to music. I study music because of trying to get the ideas for the songs [00:22:00] we do. To get shut down that quickly was frustrating. Prove to you guys that this is something that the professionals do and this technique is something that we could do and I think it would sound cool. So it was not something I wanted to let go right away, even though usually a lot of times when arguments come up I do. Just when I was like, no, I know I'm right. And that's the thing is if I know I'm right or have some truth to what I'm saying, I will fight back.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: When that happened, I want you to try to put words to what was the energy between you and your two band mates when they shut you down?

Guest: After I knew I wasn't gonna win the argument, I was just okay, like whatever. I guess I don't know anything. I'll let you guys take care of it. I felt stupid and just played, alright, like whatever you guys know better. Then after that I think I just was like all I'm not gonna really try in that realm anymore.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: This happens all the time, the energy is disconnecting. I think that we can increase external self-awareness by trying to encourage ourselves, encourage other people [00:23:00] to not have things unfold in a disconnecting way. Think about if you had said to them, could we try this? And they automatically said no, right? So when people automatically say, No what can we safely assume,

Guest: That they don't agree?

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: Or they haven't thought it through?

Guest: ~~Yeah. Yeah.~~

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: One way that we can move from disconnection to connection is to use one of two tools. ~~Is to say,~~ would you be willing to think this through with me for two minutes? I get that it's an automatic no for you. I'm really curious how you are so confident that it's an automatic no.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: And can you share with me your perspective. So you're actually helping them articulate their perspective because you are also starting with a closed mind thinking, I am sure I'm right about this. I'm not saying you're [00:24:00] not. But both of those are disconnecting. And what we want with external self-awareness and what we want for mental health is we want as much healthy connection as possible. You could say to them, out of curiosity, wow, that was a super quick No. Can you just walk me through how you're so confident. A lot of times people will say, I just know. That's not an answer. And then if they say, though, I just know. I just know. Then you could say to them, would you be willing for two to three minutes of just opening your mind and hearing me out? How quickly we say no and it shuts down the other person. All it takes is two minutes to say, oh, let's explore this. And I think often magic happens. I want you to say back to me in your own words what you think I'm suggesting?

Guest: I think when an argument like that arises, it shows that there's this break in energy. And there's [00:25:00] external self-awareness that needs to be had from both sides. usually it's not just one party that's needs, more self-awareness, but usually it's both. Because most of the time when a argument comes up like that and when someone says no or disagrees that fast, it is because they're not fully aware themselves. They need more information too. Just like the person going to them. I think you're right with that disconnect and energy, that's ~~is~~ a sign of awareness, both sides. That does give an opportunity for both to increase their own self-awareness.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: To wrap up, your response was one of shame. And we don't wanna shame each other. It's terrible for our mental wellness. I'm sure that wasn't your friend's intention. Poor communication often shames people. And it could be a thing that they've done this 500 times, they've tried that 300 times, they know the answer, but you don't know the answer. I often recommend in my office is that often the content is not as important as the

energy. It's about preference. The mother daughter, about when to make the bed, [00:26:00] when is the right time to make the bed before school or after school. That's just a preference. What you're talking about is really a preference and that when we shut each other down, then we often unintentionally make people feel shamed. And we are often digging our heels in saying, this is the right way. When it's not about right it's wrong to shoot your neighbor's poodle, but whether you make the bed at 7: 30 or 4:00 PM doesn't matter. The technique that you had, it's a preference. What we wanna try to do, for our mental wellness is monitor the energy and to look for when we're shut down. And to empower ourselves and invite people. Say, wow, you answered back pretty quickly. Not in a negative way, just, neutrally. Could you give me three minutes just to share with you what I'm thinking? People often need that kind of prompt to become open-minded. We can empower. Of course, we'd like people to be better listeners and people to ask [00:27:00] that, but that's part of really cultivating mental wellness is how do we work on being connected. How do we listen better? And when people aren't listening to us better, how do we say to them, I really invite you to listen to me cuz I am not sure I'm right, but at least I'd like to be heard. We can really cultivate external self-awareness on both sides when we do that.

MJ Murray Vachon LCSW: A special thank you, because we ended up doing a second taping on this to talk a little bit more about external self-awareness.

And let me share my Inner Challenge Insights:

Insight number one:

One of the things I've learned from being a therapist is most people favor internal self-awareness over external self-awareness. It's a tough world out there. And I think for most people, the external awareness they got in childhood was often delivered in ways that even years later is a bit bruising. So no wonder we have a tricky relationship with feedback. With a little bit of work and self-awareness most people can move beyond those hurts and find [00:28:00] people who they trust in their lives, who can help them see themselves in 3d.

Insight number two:

Do you know, your defensiveness style? Do you armor up? Put on an invisibility cloak. Become Wikipedia or maybe a theologian. Whatever is your style, come to know it and befriend it. You know what they say? Keep your enemies close. Nothing breaks, relationships more than defensiveness. Notice when the energy between you and another move from being connecting to

disconnecting from curiosity to wanting to be right. Once you be friends, your style do notice on the inside. Ground your feet, take some breaths and commit to mutual conversation using this million dollar line, can you help me understand?

Insight number three:

Not all external self-awareness is negative. Observe what you do when you receive a compliment, do you take it in, I mean, really take it in. [00:29:00] Taking it in means savoring how it feels inside of you. Maybe you feel happy? Proud or valued. Or do you shrug it off? If you are a shrugger, I want you to consider becoming a hugger. Trust me, it will not make you feel arrogant, but rather it just gives you a boost for that day. And over time. Just like money boosts, compound, and can be great for our mental health.

Insight number four:

If you are a parent, a teacher or coach, please think about how you give external feedback to the children in your care. Kids are little. They don't have strong self concepts, whether they're three or 13 and our words shape them far more than we may realize. Just the other day, I said to my two and a half year old, great niece who wanted desperately to drink out of the dog's bowl. Not to do that because the water is yucky and it's not safe. After a few back and [00:30:00] forth, me giving her brain time to change its course, she moved on from that germ idea. I said to her, you are such a good listener. She walked away, quite proud of herself and said, I'm a good listener. Kids don't come out of the womb socialized. They need us to compliment their good behavior, not just set limits or give corrections.

Insight number five:

Are you a boss or a manager? Corrections are part of any job. More often than people realize employees take corrections personally. How skilled are you at giving the people you work with feedback rooted in connection and curiosity. Do you ask your employee to help you understand why they just did what they did? Often people say to me that this takes too much time. Maybe, but when the employee is engaged in the correction process and both sides are seen most of the time in the long run, it saves time.

Thanks for [00:31:00] listening. And as you move through your week, become friends with your defensiveness. That's your inner challenge.

