

How to Find Your People - 3 - Doing the social rounds and reflecting on loneliness

Podcast 3 – ‘Doing the social rounds’ – Networking, circulating at events, attending formals, and loneliness versus solitude. (17 minutes)

In the second podcast, we thought about how you might go about meeting people, both in terms of where you might look for potential friends and what you might say to them when you find them. In this podcast, we’ll focus on networking, circulating at events, and attending formals – all of which are potential sources of helpful acquaintances, some of whom might also eventually become friends, but occasions which many Oxford students might initially, at least, find rather daunting.

So, one thing that many Oxford students seem to end up doing a lot of (apart from work, that is!) is networking, and although this is not nearly as important emotionally as building genuinely close, personal friendships, it can nevertheless be a useful skill to develop and practise during your time at university.

Networking basically involves having lots of the kind of proto-conversations that we’ve already considered, but might involve more time making the other person feel good, as well as including a bit of self-promotion of your own. It’s also important to ensure that you get the other person’s contact details, of course – after all, if they’re going to be of use to you later on, or them to you, it’s important to know how to get hold of each other!

So, in order to have a good networking conversation, many of the principles discussed in Podcast 2 will still hold – introducing yourself clearly and concisely (for example, name, college, degree course, subject), asking the other person about themselves as appropriate to the event (so if it’s a networking event on something connected to your subject, for example, you might ask them about their interest in the subject area, or what they thought about the talk, or whatever the event is that you’re attending), using active listening (nodding, smiling, paraphrasing, asking appropriate follow up questions), but then in this context, you might also tell them something brief about yourself (it’s okay to do a little bit of self-promotion here, but probably best not to do too much of this, so as not to come across as too boastful or showy). Unless you think they’re going to be a potential friend, however, rather than getting too engrossed in one particular conversation, the idea of networking is to establish contact, find out enough about each other to work out how that person might be useful in future (without being too obvious or instrumental about it, or too dismissive if you conclude that they’re not likely to be useful to you), to swap contact details if this feels appropriate, and then to move on to the next person. Of course, if they are someone you think is going to be really important to you professionally, then you might want to follow up with an email or message subsequently, and even the most superficial of contacts is going to need some sort of maintenance, from time to time, to keep the connection alive, but otherwise, you might just want to make a mental note of one salient point to remember to ask them about next time you bump into them, and then to go your separate ways.

It can feel daunting to initiate a conversation at a networking event at first, or even (and sometimes especially) to join an existing one, but one strategy that some people find helpful is to find another person who is there on their own, who is likely to be looking for someone to talk to as well, or to ask a small group of people who look friendly and are not too engrossed in deep conversation if you can join them – it’s unlikely that they’re going to refuse, so a polite, ‘May I join you?’ and then waiting for an appropriate moment in the conversation to say something relevant can be one way of doing it. It’s probably better, on the whole, to avoid approaching two people who are in deep conversation, or very large groups where everyone seems to know each other extremely well, but otherwise, it’s just a matter of taking your courage in both hands and giving it a go. When it comes

to moving on, a polite, 'Well, I mustn't monopolise you!' or a smile along with, 'Well, it's been very interesting to meet you!' (even if it's said through somewhat gritted teeth) will often do the trick, and again, you might well have tried and tested strategies or your own. If there do happen to be other people you recognise at the event, then sometimes, introducing the person you're trying to separate yourself from to someone else you vaguely recognise can also be a tactful way of moving on. A bright, 'I must introduce you to x, I'm sure they'd be delighted to meet you!' can be helpful here. Above all with networking, whilst not being sycophantic, it can be helpful to try to make the other person feel that they are interesting and important to you, as it leaves a positive impression and helps oil the social wheels. Hopefully, you can also say something positive about yourself. The best thing to do is to get out there and give it a go and see for yourself what tends to work (or not) for you personally.

When it comes to attending formals, the formality of the event can feel really overwhelming at first to some people, so if you feel confused about where to start with all that cutlery, which glass is for what, and whether your side plate is to the left or to the right, you certainly won't be the only one who is feeling puzzled. It can be helpful to do what everyone else is doing, or you might even want to have a quick look at an etiquette guide, such as *Debrett's A-Z of Modern Manners* (Wyse, 2024) to help you feel more confident about navigating these kinds of events.

And finally, a word about alcohol. It can be important to keep an eye on how much you are drinking on most social occasions, because, whilst some people enjoy a drink at these kinds of events (although of course, it's not obligatory!), if you find yourself feeling that you need a drink to face socialising, or that you are drinking more than is safe or healthy for you in order to get through them, then please consider reaching out to the University Counselling Service, your College Counsellor, or your College Doctor or Nurse, all of whom will be able to help you think this through and will be able to signpost you for any additional help and support that you might need.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

In his BBC Radio 4 series, *Beyond Lonely*, which you should be able to find via the BBC Sounds App if this is a topic of interest to you, Professor Jason Arday of the University of Cambridge discusses the concept of loneliness and makes various useful suggestions about coming to terms with it. What has been well established for some time now is that loneliness – which might be defined as that upsetting feeling of perceiving ourselves as being disconnected socially from others - is not good for either our long-term physical or mental health. What matters, it seems, is not whether we are objectively socially isolated, but whether we *feel* socially isolated (Holwerda et al., 2014). Feeling connected to and understood by others, then, is crucial for our sense of well-being and satisfaction with life (Baek et al., 2023). Indeed, this feeling of social connectedness is thought to activate regions of the brain that are linked to reward processing, while not feeling understood – a potential risk factor for loneliness - is linked to more negative feelings (Morelli et al., 2013, Baek et al., 2023). But one person's loneliness might be another's relief at getting some time to themselves, so what it is that makes us feel lonely, and what can we do about it if being alone is not something with which we feel comfortable?

Arday points to various factors which are thought to contribute to loneliness, including the impact of technology (which of course, some people find helpful to use for linking up with others, but others find socially isolating), as well as our day-to-day habits - which might, for example, include spending a lot of time on our phones or persistently prioritising work over spending time with our friends - which can slowly erode our relationships with others. Whilst phones, laptops, and social media can all play their part in helping people to feel socially connected, then, it is perhaps the combination of

the impact of technology and the covid 19 pandemic that has led to Gen Z often being considered the 'lonely generation' and to the contemporary era being known as 'the lonely century' (Hertz, 2021).

Now you might be thinking that, as a student at Oxford, you have to prioritise your work over everything else, otherwise how on earth are you going to get all your work done, right? No-one is suggesting, of course, that you prioritise your social life to the complete detriment of your academic work (after all, spending all your time in the bar is unlikely to get you your degree!), but it's worth bearing in mind that very often, when we feel happier overall, we tend to work more effectively. Getting enough social contact *for you* is probably therefore going to contribute to your overall academic output, but as with most things, it's a question of striking a balance.

It is common for Oxford students to refer to 'being productive' academically, but it is also worth remembering that you are a human being, not a factory, and so 'being creative' – that ability to make interesting and innovative connections between ideas - is likely to be just as important to your overall academic performance. Your social needs will also depend on whether you are more of an extrovert or more of an introvert, as well as fluctuating from day-to-day and week to week, so there is no hard and fast rule as to what you might need, and you will have to work out for yourself – often by trial and error – what works best for you. Nevertheless, as well as spending enough time with others, it's also imperative to have sufficient time on your own to process your emotions. Arday draws a useful distinction between loneliness and solitude, and emphasises the importance of spending enough time each day in reflective solitude, doing something which you find relaxing, enjoyable and rewarding, which does not require you to interact with others or drain your social battery. This kind of restful and enjoyable activity is essential in allowing your emotions to emerge into consciousness and to enable them to be processed – albeit often entirely unconsciously - by the default mode network in your brain. This, then, is the network of areas of your brain used for daydreaming, creativity, and self-referential rather than externally focussed thinking. So, having some time each day when you can rest, relax, and allow your mind to wander – and it's usually helpful for this to be away from screens and preferably in peaceful solitude - really is important to your mental and emotional well-being. For some people, that might mean a wander round their college grounds or a visit to the Botanical Gardens, for others, a walk round the Ashmolean or a trip to a café for a quiet coffee, and for others still, a train journey, playing the piano, say, or doing a bit of knitting.

One key question which Arday raises is that of how we invest our time. For some people, working to the highest standard they possibly can is what matters most to them, but of course, if you persistently prioritise your work over everything else, it is likely to have negative long-term consequences for your friendship circle, and you might find that eventually, others are not there for you when you feel you most need them. So, it's a matter of investing both in building friendships and in maintaining them, on a regular basis, over the long-term. Now, everyone is likely to understand that, if you have an imminent essay deadline, or an exam the following day, you're probably not going to want to stay up until 3am socialising (in fact, it's probably a good idea if you don't!). Equally, however, trying to organise your social life so that you have an incentive to get that work done and to reward yourself on a regular basis by spending some additional time with your friends and perhaps also making new ones, is likely to lead to a more balanced lifestyle and therefore, hopefully, to a better standard of work overall.

So, whether you join a book group, a walking group, a board games club, a sports society, or a choir or orchestra, and whether you spend some time on your own painting, doing embroidery, running,

dancing, gardening, flower arranging, or making lego models, striking a balance between socialising and time to reflect in quiet solitude can be helpful to our overall physical and mental health.

Of course, there can also be times – and these are perhaps some of our loneliest moments as human beings – when we feel lonely, even when we are with others. This is likely to be linked to a feeling of not being understood, so finding your people, slowly building trust by testing things out through sharing a small amount of personal information and seeing what they do with it, and then, if all goes well, learning to express and share your feelings with others you feel close to and they with you, is one of the key ways in which we can overcome this often-difficult feeling. Interestingly, there is some recent research which suggests that the neural responses of people who are lonely are often different from those of their peers, so seeing the world differently from those around us, even if they are our friends, might be one of the risk factors for feeling lonely (Baek et al., 2023). Indeed, the ways in which we perceive and respond to the world around us is likely to be similar to the ways in which our friends perceive and respond to the world, too. What is called the direction of this correlation – in other words, whether we become friends with people who perceive the world in similar ways to ourselves or whether we come to perceive the world in ways similar to our friends - has yet to be fully determined, however (Parkinson et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this finding is likely to have important implications with regards to how we make and maintain friendships, and with regards to the number of people in our social circle, and might be more to do with our personal neurology – the way our brains are wired, if you like - and less under our conscious control than we might like to think. And it's important to say that this seems to be equally true for people who are neurodivergent as those who are neurotypical.

So, to conclude, then, whether you are a first-year undergraduate who has just arrived in Oxford or an established DPhil student, a second, third year, or fourth year, or a Master's student, it is worth reflecting on and starting to make some gradual changes, if need be, to ensure that you have the social support that is right for you. And as with making many changes in our day-to-day habits, it is probably better to start small and to reward yourself regularly for any changes that you do make, rather than trying to do everything in one fell swoop. So - whether it's deciding that you are going to spend 15 minutes sitting in the common room in your college every evening for a week, that you're going to give that new book club or walking group a go for a few sessions, or that you will attend that social event even if it's just for half an hour - getting out there and investing some time, as well as ensuring that you have enough down time to reflect and recover, is probably worth a try. And remember that, if you go home during the vacations, you are likely to want to keep in touch with your university friends, but also to continue to link up with some of your friends from home, and that when you come to leave Oxford, your friendship circle is likely to change again, as you find yourself perhaps keeping in touch with some of your university friends but eventually losing touch with others, and finding new friends in whatever environment you move onto next.

And finally, what about those tricky areas – realising that there is a pattern which you find disturbing or upsetting with regards to the people with whom you make friends or with whom you fall out, trying various strategies and still feeling that you don't have friends and that you're feeling socially isolated, wondering if what you thought was a friendship is actually turning into more than a friendship in ways that you find uncomfortable, or negotiating the ending of a specific friendship or friendship circle that you might have come to find toxic, and perhaps falling out with your friendship circle or housemates when you were least expecting it? Well, with many of these issues, whatever else might be going on, your personal history and circumstances might also be playing a part and might be contributing, if not to the situation itself, then quite possibly to the ways in which you are reacting, so please do always bear in mind that, if there's anything you'd like to discuss on an individual basis, then you can always contact the University Counselling Service or your College

Counsellor for a brief series of sessions to talk through any concerns or issues you might be experiencing, and to think about what might be helpful in the longer run. For more complex mental health difficulties which might be impacting your ability to form or maintain friendships, you can also contact your College Nurse or College Doctor.

I hope you've found this podcast series helpful, that you are able to find your people, and that you can not only meet some new people who might prove helpful to you, but more importantly, that you can build close and lasting friendships during your time here at Oxford, and beyond.

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