

## I'm calling this part of the podcast - I'm a tourist in my own life.

### Loneliness. Creative Hopelessness. Control.

University is hopefully a time of learning. Academic learning. Personal learning and social learning. We all face our own Oxford experiences uniquely. Please don't take for granted the social opportunities your university experience can offer, opportunities that can come in many forms and many guises. Make Oxford your own vibe or era. For some of us, Oxford is a practice area before we move on to other experiences in our life. Oxford is for many, a transitory place full of beginnings and endings.

I don't know about you, but I often feel lost, lonely and confused by life. I feel like a tourist in my own life. There's a sense of it passing by as I watch the scenery.

Loneliness is an increasingly common experience for people of all ages across the world and is a major health issue. The irony of having ever-increasingly easy methods to communicate with an ever-growing body of isolated, disconnected and lonely people is quite striking but that's a different podcast. The Secret Director creates a meta narrative that can feel believable, very negative and overwhelming at times. The Secret Director is notoriously selective – so the good stuff slides away like Teflon and the negative stuff sticks like Velcro. What information does it select for the templates and story, what information does it ignore? Negative information is just too delicious because it is novel, entertaining or threat inducing.

Back to the primary and secondary pain thing. The primary pain is feeling lonely, but now I am worried about feeling lonely, that's a secondary type of pain. I might worry or ruminate about this experience.

- Why am I lonely?
- Am I unlikeable?
- How do I make friends?
- They seem fun.
- Do they all know each other?
- It's too late to socialise now!

## *Is happiness overrated?*

Dr Tim Knowlson © 2025

This narration can become more global, from a thought to me, all of me, and then others, the world, my identity, my jobs, the future and then past. From lonely to I am Lonely. I am loneliness. I try to reframe this as I am not a lonely person, but sometimes I feel lonely and sometimes I don't. The deeper the feeling, the more connected, the more we can feel the urge to avoid because it almost feels there is too much to lose. I am more than the story.

The mind likes to link things together – sometimes completely unrelated things and sometimes connected things. I'm lonely, I must be happy, I have to reduce loneliness, make lots of friends, never be lonely. The mind is trying to help reduce loneliness and improve happiness. But deep down that rule isn't so simple. It's the quality of relationships that matter, quality over quantity and sometimes we can feel lonely in a group of people. In other words, loneliness and happiness are natural transitory feelings, these feelings come and go regardless in how we engage in relationships of all different types and variations. The function of relationships isn't always about staving off loneliness and increasing happiness, but authentic connection in varying formats. To sensing that we matter, that we are noticed. But moving towards this might mean feeling somewhat vulnerable and taking a risk. It's an experiment, so let's try gather some new data. I mean, it's never too late to try something new.

If you do something to stop a feeling or thought, you might get disappointed because those internal experiences come back. It's important to do things for thing itself, not to control or reduce an internal state. This can be called Creative Hopelessness.

What does hopelessness mean to you? Not the best, I guess. I'm currently in my creative hopelessness era. I mean the word hopelessness seems a strange word to mention in a podcast. It is hopeless to control one's internal world, so I might as well get creative in living fully and as authentically as reasonably possible. I try and make some room for the fact that I won't always be happy. I guess it is accepting what I can't change, the emotions, and changing what I can, my behaviours, my choices. Accepting internal experiences doesn't always mean accepting external circumstances, which we can try and change if possible, speaking up and out. The hopelessness part is the realisation of what we can and cannot influence, the creative part is approaching situations with creative thinking and problem solving.

## *Is happiness overrated?*

Dr Tim Knowlson © 2025

Sometimes I might feel lonely alone or in a room full of people. Sometimes it just never feels enough, whatever I do, thank you Secret Director for saying that to me. Accepting painful experiences such as loneliness or unhappiness is very challenging for us. We try and fight and change our internal experiences at all costs. Some of those changes and solutions are workable and helpful, some less so. Acceptance can sometimes feel like quicksand, the instinct is to fight and thrash around but the more you do, the more you sink deeper into the air pockets. Give up the struggle, although this can feel counterintuitive, with slow and purposeful movements, the sand could release you. Can we lean into loneliness and wonder, what could I do with it? So first recognise and notice the emotion, be curious, accept it is there in the first place, and then think what can we do with it and what could we change depending on the context it happens in. The things we can do to help are often small steps, but powerful steps nonetheless, steps that could help with a sense of agency and reduce that trapped feeling that sometimes accompanies recurrent or persistent emotions.

A trick here is to do things for their inherent value, not because they make you happy. I do Zumba, yes, I have outed myself, to move, be social, get my heart rate gently up. If I use it as a control strategy for happiness, I might become disappointed if the activity doesn't bring me happiness. Also, doing things for fun, without the pressure having to do them well, perfectly or make money from them as a side-hustle can be really freeing. It can be helpful to be curious of the motivation behind activities and the reasons we do them. Does this activity follow some of your values is a question to ask yourself.

People sometimes use yoga, mindfulness and therapy as part of the control agenda this is the opposite of Creative Hopelessness. I want to feel happy. I want to stop feeling anxious. Why has my anxiety come back? Either the therapy, therapist or client hasn't worked hard enough, right? I see it differently. Yoga, mindfulness and therapy help you make sense of things, help you to make room for experience, but can't always give what you want, which is a different experience or being pain free. Understanding driven by insight and reasonable change in certain areas of your life is what it's about, namely your actions. Our actions, what we do, is an area where we do have some reasonable control.

## *Is happiness overrated?*

Dr Tim Knowlson © 2025

### Values and goals.

So, I explored with you how changing behaviour can be helpful. This can be guided by values and goals. What is a value I hear you ask me? A value is a lightly held guiding principle, usually a verb or doing word. Think loving, being kind, understanding, finding peace and so forth. It's a guiding star that we can orientate ourselves towards. Values guide our choices and behaviours and are freely chosen, being different to rule orientated beliefs. Rules sound like A should. A must. A have to. How do we want to live in the world? How do our values differ to those of our families? What makes a life good? We can have different values to different aspect of our lives, our health, our connections, our work, our fun and pleasure.

Values can be broken down into goals and tasks. Goals you can tick off. For example, in a relationship, being loving would be a value, but going on a date a goal because you can tick it off. Goals could be workable, achievable. Our values and goals and to do lists are connected but also separate.

It can be helpful to notice when we enter a tourist mode and observe and when move into to an instigator and creator mode. How is it different being in the audience to embodying an actor. To figure out what is doing mode and what is being mode. Switching away from autopilot might mean more perceived or potential risks and activating the Secret Director but connecting to values and goals makes them powerful. And something to focus on. Moving towards values might mean engaging with uncertainty. Uncertainty and perceived risk activate the Secret Director, it wants to keep you safe. Its role is to keep you in that Comfort Zone, but could you notice that sometimes it is a false alarm of warning.

I have realised that I am more of an attender to social events than a creator or instigator. Creating social events feels risky because I fear for my likeability, rejection and being told people are too busy if I ask for something. Can I try and create more social experiences of varying styles even if people are busy? Would I rather feel lonely or take a risk and entertain other experiences. Stepping out of the comfort zone and letting go of control, of competency, of confidence might result in feelings of risk and doubt but could pay off. Intimacy and risk are the price to pay for authentic connection. Why am I going through this internal experience ... for this purpose and meaning.

## *Is happiness overrated?*

Dr Tim Knowlson © 2025

When your work gets hard and challenged, remember why you applied, what values encouraged you to belong here at Oxford. Your values were greater than your fear. When I feel lost, confused and stuck I don't just create a to-do list to bring back a sense of agency but a Tada-list, a list of things I have started and achieved as a reminder of impact rather than just productivity. It's a compassionate and objective reminder of things I have been doing or done because the mind forgets so easily. To shift into a more surplus mode, I like to ponder 5 things I'm grateful for in this very moment, right now, right here. It's about living fully, not just happily. What can I change and control? Mostly my actions and noticing where my attention goes.

## So how does happiness seem to connect to life dilemmas?

Good question. Sometimes knowing our values and then moving towards goals is scary. What direction do we move in? Which way do we go? Our happiness might at risk when we face a dilemma. We face many transitions and crossroads in life. Do I go this way or that way. Relationships, work, travel. Decisions everywhere. What's the right decision, what's the wrong decision (again quite binary options there). The right decision seems often connected to predicting happiness and increasing the happiness chances. But we can't know, we can't predict. The happy choice or the right choice might be more about other factors and considerations.

We make the best decision we can at the time with the information we have.

Either way, whatever you decide might be considered the wrong choice at some point if you feel you aren't happy because of that decision, here enters regret, common with hindsight. We face choices and life dilemmas with uncertainty, predicting the outcomes as best we can.

This comes back to values and purpose and meaning and perhaps less about predicting happiness. Happiness has many sides. Don't confuse happiness with hope, choice, empowerment and living a full life with all its experiences. Humans seem engineered to not be happy, but we are engineered for experiences. We are often more resilient and robust than the Secret Director suggests.

Some people have a sense of Oxford Regret.

- This isn't what I thought it would be.
- Wish I hadn't come.
- This isn't as fun.
- I'm not as me as I thought.

We immediately turn to happiness, but it could be our expectations that set us up to think this. Do you stick at something and wait to see how it turns out or leave and try something else? I hope to make decisions based on some reasoning but also values and what is important in different areas of my life. Mostly in what we can choose, there is also some wriggle room. You can move from a possible feeling being trapped or stuck, to acknowledging you could leave, but maybe choose to stay or not. There is something about who Oxford is for. Is it for you? Your family? Your community? Your Secret Director?

## *Is happiness overrated?*

Dr Tim Knowlson © 2025

When your mind mentions happiness, wonder, what does it mean? What is the meaning and purpose of that word? What assumptions is it making? What experiences and assumptions are behind that word? Perhaps happiness means not being forgotten about and that we matter to others. There's meaning and purpose and an alignment with values. What can I control. What impact can I have on the world, and be impacted on in return.