

A Guide for Freshers (podcast)

Transcript

You've lived with the fantasy of Oxford for a long time.

The real experience of Oxford is not going to be the fantasy experience.

I can't say whether it will be better or worse.

But it will almost certainly be different.

Try to accept that.

And approach the gritty reality of this Oxford with an open mind.

It's OK not to love Freshers' Week.

The truth is, for lots of people, Freshers' Week is awful.

Overwhelming, bewildering, exhausting, disappointing.

Why do we have it then?

Because it's a pretty difficult thing, working out a process to help thousands of complete strangers across the threshold into a new experience. And love it or hate it, this is what our society has come up with.

Some advice?

Try not to put any pressure on it.

It's just a few days of encountering more people and more information than you could possibly keep track of. When you're struggling to be even minimally adjusted to your new surroundings.

Don't be afraid to, to find some time for yourself if you feel you need to, in the frenzy of the first few days, and don't hold back from settling to do some work early on either.

Don't deny yourself that chance to do something you're good at and you value.

But things will get much better as you settle in.

And it is really, truly OK for that to happen slowly.

Even after the madness of Freshers' Week dies down, life in Oxford can feel crazy.

There's just way too much to do than to accomplish, and there are never enough hours in the day.

It takes time to work out, to engage at a level that is right for you.

In the meantime, chances are you'll feel you're doing it wrong.

Do too little and you worry Oxford is passing you by, do too much and end up overwhelmed and exhausted.

Don't worry.

You'll figure it out.

Be forgiving of yourself if it takes a term or two or longer.

Be as open as you can to meeting people, and not only in the first few days.

You cannot tell now who you will want to be friends with in a year.

Don't be too exclusive. Don't shut down interest in meeting other people as soon as you've found safe people to spend time with.

Don't confine yourself too much to college.

This can be claustrophobic. At the best of times.

But there may be special situations, for example, when you've just broken up with a boyfriend/girlfriend who lives on the next staircase and is friends with all your friends.

When you need the option of being around people who have nothing to do with this particular drama.

Invest in meeting some of these people now.

Know that lots of other people are feeling the things you are, even if none of them show it.

Anxiety about whether they're smart enough. A little freaked out at being surrounded by so many obviously amazing people.

Can you really be amazing enough to keep up, Google 'impostor syndrome' if you don't know what it is.

Even some professors have nightmares that in the middle of a lecture, they'll be outed as a fraud.

Don't worry about making mistakes like embarrassing yourself at the bar, wearing something really stupid to the Bop, or saying something insensitive.

Oxford has an astonishingly short memory for this sort of thing. Maybe because there's always more recent news to displace the old news.

Just try to learn from your mistakes and move on.

You are, after all, here to learn and develop and not taking risks, attempting to get everything right and not make mistakes will just be counterproductive.

Homesickness may take you by surprise.

Sometimes people whose homes are nearest to Oxford are the people for whom homesickness is the biggest problem.

Perhaps because maintaining more awareness of home can increase its gravitational pull.

Also, if home is near enough that you can realistically go home, whether or not to go home is something you will think more about.

Be patient.

The homesickness will resolve with time.

Immersing yourself in Oxford life fully will help.

It may feel like the clock is ticking, and if you don't make friends right this minute or find out about all the extracurriculars on offer and sign up for some right this minute. Oxford Life will pass you by.

Not so.

You have lots of time and will probably have a number of phases in your Oxford life in which you spend time with different people. Involve yourself with different activities. And so on.

Be forgiving if your plan to reinvent yourself at university doesn't immediately succeed.

It's healthy to try new ways of being new ways of relating to others, but it's a process.

If you're able to do anything even a little bit better than before, celebrate that.

You have plenty of time to build on it.

Make a list of the things that have worked for you in the past, helping you to feel healthy, balanced and happy.

The list might include routine, exercise, eating, drinking, socializing.

Chances are that these things will be key in helping you to feel happy, healthy and grounded in Oxford.

So make them a priority.

Being at university.

Especially this university.

It might seem as though you've signed up for some kind of sinister sleep deprivation experiment without your knowledge or consent.

Suddenly sleep is encroached on from every direction. The need to work, the opportunity to socialise, the level of noise and disturbance around you.

You may have the illusion that you're managing to function perfectly well without any sleep or at any rate with much less sleep than you've been accustomed to in the past.

But there is overwhelming evidence that lack of sleep impacts your performance in every category of life.

Whilst also making you more vulnerable to depression.

Commit yourself to getting enough sleep.

And take radical action to make this possible.

Turn down some invitations.

Buy some earplugs.

Hang a 'do not disturb' sign on your door.

Other things that have worked for you in the past may **not** work for you in Oxford, and you may need to relinquish them.

At the very top of this list.

Is perfectionism.

At school it is at least theoretically possible to do everything asked of you and to complete every piece of assigned work meticulously.

At Oxford, you will routinely be set more work than any human being, however brilliant can possibly do.

The sooner you learn to be pragmatic.

And to make reasonable compromises between the demands of work, sleep, extracurricular activities, social time, and quiet time on your own.

The more successful you are likely to be.

Notice what scares you.

And respond to that by over-investing in developing skill and confidence in that area.

If it's the actual writing process associated with the weekly essay that scares you, and you notice that you are responding to that by extending the period of reading more and more so that you're left with very little time to write.

Reverse this.

Make a point of investing time and effort to understand how best to write an essay.

On the other hand, if it's socialising that scares you.

Over-invest in developing some social skills.

And over-investment doesn't require you to get at yourself. If you work at something and it doesn't go as well as you hoped.

To develop.

You need to be patient with yourself as well as pushing yourself on.

Other resources on the counseling service website can help in most of these areas.

Oxford does ask a lot of you.

But it is not a sink or swim environment.

This is an environment in which there are countless people completely committed to helping you. If at any point you find yourself in difficulty, no matter what kind of difficulty, no matter how you got there.

Let them help you.

You'll probably find friends you can talk to. Don't be afraid to start to open yourself to people as you get to know them.

There will very likely be peer supporters in your college who are very good to talk to too.

You might want to contact a member of the welfare team in college or the counseling service or the Disability service.

It's perfectly normal to struggle at times.

And to seek help when you do.

It's a sign of strength.