

Buffy Gorrilla: This is Starting Somewhere and I'm Buffy Gorrilla. During the making of Starting Somewhere, we spoke to some fantastic people. But we weren't able to include all of the wise words that they had to say, so releasing a series of bonus episodes of Starting Somewhere. In this bonus episode, I spoke with Neil Wilson, who's a clinical psychologist and counsellor, working at counselling and psychological services at the University of Melbourne.

Neil was game to talk about everything. From rejection, to dealing with anxiety, to how you can handle competition amongst your friend group. It was a fascinating discussion and I think they'll be a lot of takeaways for people starting out.

Neil Wilson: Oh, yes. My name's Neil Wilson, I'm a clinical psychologist and counsellor here at the University of Melbourne, working to help out the students and staff with any psychological issues that they might be having.

Buffy Gorrilla: Have you done an internship?

Neil Wilson: Yes, as part of my course. Longer ago than I'd like to admit, so yes, I did.

Buffy Gorrilla: What was that, and tell me a little bit about it?

Neil Wilson: Well, it had two facets, there was one posting at a hospital in a general medicine environment. So just going around doing spot treatment on different patients. And one was a childhood facility for adolescents who were too unwell to go to school, but not unwell enough to be hospitalised. So that was my experience there.

Buffy Gorrilla: Do you feel like those internships prepared you for what you are encountering now in your everyday life?

Neil Wilson: Yeah, absolutely. They certainly give you pretty rapid, pretty constant exposure. Particularly the ones that I did, but ... Yeah, it wasn't necessarily even work light, it was actual work. So it was like flooding and very lots of exposure. So absolutely it prepared me for my career in being a therapist, certainly prepares you for everyday life hopefully.

Buffy Gorrilla: How long have you been a therapist?

Neil Wilson: About seven years now.

Buffy Gorrilla: Great. You've got some good experience. So we've come to the right person to help us out with this. Obviously, when young people are starting their internship search, they're sending off loads of applications and hopes are high. Then they start getting some knock-back and that obviously changes their enthusiasm, and maybe a little bit of their self-esteem. Can you talk a little bit about that and maybe what goes on psychologically, and how it can be addressed?

Neil Wilson: Yeah. When we're starting out in anything new, we always start with that burst of positivity that you just mentioned, it's absolutely right. And biologically, it floods our brain with dopamine, which is a motivating chemical. But we need the environment and reality to back us up every now and again if we wanna keep access to that nice chemical in our brain. But when we get constant rejections, it starts to eat away at that and we start to get, as you said, it affects our self-esteem. We start to feel a bit more anxious, and if we're feeling anxious our brain starts to figure out reasons why not to do something, rather than to actually do something.

I mean, it is obviously a very common thing that we start with a head of steam. I think it's more about becoming ... Or talking to other people about what their experiences have been. Like people already in the industry like, "Did this happen to you?" And I would imagine that most people will nod their head knowingly and go, "Geez, yeah. That was terrible, I ended up thinking this, this, and this."

One of the real dangers that interns fall into with rejection is to become quite isolative and push themselves away from people that can help them out. Because we all have to deal with rejection and sometimes if we're stuck in our own head because a lot of this work has to be done alone, sometimes the head gets negative and we need someone else to pull us out of that. Which can be a counsellor, but can also just be someone we know to say, "Look, yeah, this is really terrible at the moment, but we need to keep trying. What can I do to help you out with this?"

Buffy Gorrilla: So what goes on I guess, physiologically? Explain to me what my body might be going through.

Neil Wilson: Most anxieties ... just to reference anxiety, I'll talk about motivation. Anxiety's largely caused by sort of a build-up of carbon dioxide in your brain. Carbon dioxide's a poison, that's why we breathe it out, not in. Which takes away from oxygen, which affects our ability to make concrete, rational decisions. With the motivational part, motivation is caused by a chemical called dopamine, which tells us that this is good, keep doing this. But what anxiety can do is really stress chemicals in the brain, which start to eat away at the dopamine.

So we can get a bit of a vicious cycle of that anxiety after the initial burst of motivation. Starting to affect not only our motivation in general but our ability to think through steps in order to re-motivate. It can be quite a vicious cycle to fall into.

Buffy Gorrilla: How can someone shake themselves out of that vicious cycle?

Neil Wilson: If there's no one else around and they have to do it themselves, the best equaliser that I'm aware of is to get as much oxygen into your brain as possible. It's pretty basic in some ways. Breathing out longer than you breathing in for an extended period of time. The brain also needs glucose, so

you need food. But these are things people forget, especially if they're doing it by themselves.

One of the easier methods is to check in with a supportive human being. They're really good because they also remind us to breathe and eat good and go to bed and maybe get us out of our own head a little bit. That's really, really important. That's what support people are really great at. Because they kind of give you that little clip and go, "No, no, no. Come on." But if it's just you doing it, sometimes it runs away with itself a little bit.

Buffy Gorrilla: A lot of people think, "Oh, no. This is the end of the world. This is my one and only chance." But I would imagine, you would think differently.

Neil Wilson: I do, yeah. You would not be surprised at the amount of interns I've had similar conversations with. Along the lines of, it's a real useful activity to ask them, "What would you say to a friend who was saying the same thing as you?" Right, and they normally go, "Well, of course, I'd challenge them on it and say, no, keep going. Debate this, like you're smart, you know what you're doing, you've studied for five years. You passed everything. This is happening to every intern." So that's a really useful exercise to just get out of your own space a little bit.

Like what would I say to someone that I love and care about if they gave me the same irrationality or the same concern? It would be a very, very different response. I've never had a person that I'm working with answer that question with what they've been thinking. Like, "Oh, yeah. Well, I'd be mean to them and tell them to nut up and just get out of it and go study something else." Every person regardless of where they're from and what they're doing says pretty much something positive, yeah.

Buffy Gorrilla: And on the flip side of that ... You know we're often in competition with our friends. How do you deal with that?

Neil Wilson: That is a toughie, I might have to think about that for a couple of seconds. I think being aware that friends are gonna remain friends regardless of who gets the job. And a bit like what I was just talking about before, I don't think we would begrudge our friends for getting things and it's important to treat ourselves by the same rules and regulations that we would treat others. I doubt any of us would begrudge someone we care about for getting a good job or a good internship, or something good happening to them in general. But I think being accepting of feelings of possible jealousy and envy and concern that other peoples careers might be moving ahead more quickly.

I think we need to accept that in the short term. But in internships, what I found, people who are behind, they do end up catching up but they tend to not catch up at the rate that they truly want to deep down. But they do get there, but because they're not getting there at the speed that they pictured initially, it can be perceived as a failure when it's actually not. This is a progression, life's a process, not an outcome. You are getting there, it's just not the way that you initially wanted to.

Buffy Gorrilla: That mind, it's really doing some business on us.

Neil Wilson: Yeah.

Buffy Gorrilla: So, are certain students or I guess, disciplines, more prone to the anxiety issues compared to others?

Neil Wilson: In my experience, certainly the more, not nebulous professions, but where the path is a bit less structured.

Buffy Gorrilla: Like arts?

Neil Wilson: Yeah, yeah. I was seeing that it in commerce and finance and PR and stuff like that, where there's so many different options that people are not only applying to a million things, it's a million areas. Mine was comparatively more simple than a person I was talking to recently who's doing commerce. She's doing networking and sending out all of these applications to places that she's actually never heard of before. Whereas for me they said, "You're going here. Do this, and at the end, you'll be this." So it was a bit more simple when it's not "do this, this, and this, you'll be this". That's when people get more anxious because I find, is because it's just a bit more nebulous and the steps are a bit more individual.

So yes, an internship as a med student is incredibly distressing as is one as a lawyer. But at the end, you're a doctor and at the end, you're a lawyer. So, people can take solace in that, in the less concrete path to professions. Still, at the end, if we do receive that, we're still not 100% sure what it might be. So certainly, those areas that I mentioned before would, I think, cause the more sort of existential anxiety.

Buffy Gorrilla: So we focus a little bit on day one of our internship. So we're going in, we've chosen our outfit correctly, we're feeling good. We arrive just at the time, not too early but not too late. But I'm really nervous. What can I do to help combat those nerves?

Neil Wilson: There's obviously with anxiety, it's a very physiological condition as we were mentioning before. I would calm down your body and your mind. I talk about how to do that in a second, and then there's some other affirmations that I would have in your phone or written on your hand or something along those lines. If we're getting very anxious and very nervous, that's, as I was saying before, it's a build up of carbon dioxide in your brain. We need to get as much oxygen in there as we can. We need to have eaten food beforehand. That's all basic. If you need to, ask wherever you are where the toilets are. Go there, shut the stall, calm down your senses a little bit, so cut out a lot of different sensory input because we've got eight, and they get quite distressed.

Buffy Gorrilla: What are the eight?

Neil Wilson: Well, there's the normal five, plus proprioception, interoception, and vestibular. Proprioception's creating of movement, so coordination. Vestibular's balance. Interoception's understanding your body on the inside, like when you're sleepy, when you need to eat, stuff like that.

Buffy Gorrilla: When you're anxious, all of those eight can get a little bit out of whack?

Neil Wilson: Yeah. They can become overstimulated. It spreads out throughout the whole nervous system and we get the jittery external symptoms like yucky tummy, change in your heart rate, jittery limbs. If we're getting as much oxygen as we can, that'll calm that down. If we're cutting out actual just sensory input, that will calm that down a little bit too. If our muscles are really causing an issue, probably tense them up as hard as you can until you can't hold it anymore, and then they'll release, and you'll actually notice that you'll breathe out quite heavily at that point in time, releasing more carbon dioxide.

You can just squeeze for three seconds all the muscles in your body that you're aware of, and release for three, squeeze for three, release. That's a really easy exercise to do in the toilet, because you can just sit there and do it and no one's looking at you like you're a complete weirdo because the door is shut.

Buffy Gorrilla: It's day one and you don't want to look like that just yet.

Neil Wilson: Yeah.

Buffy Gorrilla: That's for day two.

Neil Wilson: Yeah. Exactly.

Buffy Gorrilla: Absolutely. Those are excellent tips. If you're in a meeting and you don't have access to the toilet door is there any sneaky, secret ways you can keep yourself in check?

Neil Wilson: There's some very sneaky ways. We can do one part of the body at the time, and we move up with the clenching and just clench a little bit. We start at the feet, we go to the calves, quads, glutes, which is your bum, abs if you've got them, and then pec muscles and your biceps. You can do that one at a time and it won't look too weird. In fact, it won't look weird at all. It'll just look like you're shifting in your seat a little bit.

Buffy Gorrilla: Are you doing that now?

Neil Wilson: No. I was doing it before. Bring so-

Buffy Gorrilla: I had no idea.

Neil Wilson: Depending on what type of drinks you like, I'd bring either a really cold drink or a really warm drink into the meeting, because that's an easy thing to do.

You can just hold the drink and it'll actually start to calm down your peripheral nervous system a little bit so it stops the jangliness, and it's also giving you some nice water which you can then break down in your brain to start to fight some of that anxiety. There are sneaky little ways. We can still do breathing exercises in that respect.

What I would recommend is breathing in for about two seconds and breathing out for three. It genuinely doesn't look too weird because that's how humans should breathe in generally, so those really basic ones. After you've done that, you'll have a bit more access to the rational part of your brain. I'd remember something along these lines, most humans are thinking about their own life for about 99% of the time. The odds that they're having the thoughts about you that you're having about you, about 1%.

Just realising everyone in the room is just as worried about you, maybe not about first-day jitters, but the other guy in the corner sitting there going, "I've got to get my kid to school after this. Can't believe I have to do this on the weekend." Everyone's wrapped up, and that 1% of the time is often trying to concentrate on the meeting rather than judging the intern.

Buffy Gorrilla: That's excellent. Is there anything you can do before you go into day one to help you get into that mentally prepared place?

Neil Wilson: Obviously prepare a bit of a routine for the weeks or week or day leading up to based on self-care and being around at the very least positive, supportive people, who can either grab you when your mind's going way too fast, or remind you to do things that indicate your mind's going way too fast. If you've got a bit of a history of what's called over-rumination, either consult with a friend or a counsellor or just with yourself and your own archaeology and go, "What do I tend to do when I'm about to lose it? When I'm about to get concerned, what do I typically physically do?"

Most people have got a tell. It's a poker term, but it's the same with stress. Some people miss breakfast or some people avoid a call from their mum, or some people do this, that, or the other. If we look at our own archaeology, we typically are able to go, "I tend to do that before I wig out, so I'll do this instead." Or I'll just have someone around who knows me well who can just give me a clip, or just tap me on the shoulder and go, "Ease up."

Buffy Gorrilla: I feel like I am learning so much about myself sitting here. I feel like maybe I should be like, "Neil, what are you doing next Tuesday?" I don't know if you know much or feel comfortable speaking about navigating office politics, and I guess that desire to fit in but at the same time remain professional. Could you chat a little bit about that?

Neil Wilson: Obviously reading through all the stuff that they give you before you start as to what's appropriate workplace behaviour, what's this place like. I think initially it is difficult to analyse the different personalities and go, "That dude's grumpy in the morning. My boss prefers this. The person sitting across from me at the desk has three kids, so sometimes stressed in the morning." Keeping note of that is actually typically the best place to start.

Again, being aware that the amount of judgement that you may be feeling, no one's actually doing that. There's a 1% chance. Your direct supervisor might be doing it, but when they're not within eyeshot it's impossible. It's not a diagnosable thing, but I come across it quite a lot in environments like that. It's called imposter syndrome, it's where people feel like they don't deserve to be in an environment, so they tend to shut down or get a bit worried about what other people are thinking.

Generally if you've got the internship, they've seen something in you that they like. People don't go out of their way to get people into their office if they don't like them, or if they don't see anything there, so really reminding yourself of that. Being professional is just about being nice to people really. If someone's saying something inappropriate that it does need to get pulled up, or in a pleasant, normal way, like, "I actually don't like to be called that."

I try to imagine it like being on the tram and someone bumps into you, but they keep doing it. I like my personal space personally, so it's more just like, "Hey, can you just give me 30 more centimetres here?" Most people are more than willing to oblige. That tends to be how I view those type of situations.

Buffy Gorrilla: Are there any ways that you can get over having that imposter syndrome?

Neil Wilson: One thing that I often recommend is to get people to keep a log of the days where no one actually said that. That concern that we have about ourselves, like it's usually, "I don't deserve to be here. I don't know what I'm doing." It's usually a variant of those two things. What I do ask people is, "Did anyone look you in the eye and say that directly?" When they say no, then it's like, "Well, maybe keep a log of days and hours when that doesn't happen." Because it starts to build evidence in a different part of their brain that can be used later on in life to challenge those type of negative thoughts.

That's what I would recommend of just keeping a log of did anyone actually say what I was thinking. It'll be no.

Buffy Gorrilla: It's like you're seeing into my soul. Do you have any tips for asserting yourself in the office environment when you're just starting an internship?

Neil Wilson: That's a really tough one, I think, because just like on the tram we don't want to offend anyone, because we might be stuck here for a while. Assertiveness is an extension, I think, of self-confidence and self-worth and self-esteem, that whole rubric within us to go, "No. I don't like when people do that." I've got a way to repair it that's appropriate and emotionally reparative.

Attempting to be assertive, I think that also involves trying to figure out whether this person's doing something to me that they shouldn't be doing, or if they're asking something of me that they shouldn't be asking. Obviously, getting a really, really good grasp from the person who's actually responsible for you what you need to be doing, not the person who's not

directly responsible for you. The person who you're reporting to is the person you need to be listening most closely to.

Someone that you don't know walks past your desk and puts something on it, that's not okay. That's not for you. That would be - have a chat with your supervisor about it. Just really understanding what your role is and what the person who's actually in charge of you and your internship wants. If it is inappropriate, or if it's outside of that you can not profess ignorance, but you can profess, "I'm not sure that's my role," particularly to a supervisor. Forming a really good relationship with your supervisor's probably the best thing to do there.

Neil Wilson: Coming back to the self-confidence thing, it's more about making decisions of what's appropriate behaviour to you in a workplace because everyone's got different rules for that. If you know that before you start, then you can start to understand when your boundaries are being violated, and nice, polite, appropriate ways to undo that damage will give the other person an idea of how they can apologise, really. I mean, interns have to say sorry a lot anyway, but you can say, "So, I actually prefer this." Just a really basic example. I used to work in a different ... I used to be a builder. I got a really ... It wasn't even a bad nickname. I just didn't like it, but because I didn't say anything, people kept calling me that.

Buffy Gorrilla: What was it?

Neil Wilson: It was just Scotty, even though it's not my name because I'm ethnically Scottish, so they were up all night thinking about it. I prefer Neilo or Willo. That's pretty good. The appropriate response there is knowing that I don't like being called that is going, "So, just call me this actually. This is an effective thing to call me. Thank you. I'm sorry, but I had to mention that to you."

Buffy Gorrilla: Did you end up standing up for yourself?

Neil Wilson: Yeah. Yeah, but I had to give people another option as to what they could call me, so it was ... I did have to say, "Look, Willo is fine." That's the way. You've got repair. You've got acknowledgment. The person might not have noticed what they did was inappropriate, and then giving them an option on how to repair that particular rupture.

Buffy Gorrilla: Is burnout a common thing that you see across your work?

Neil Wilson: It's a common thing to see in the mirror every morning. Actually, it's really common in our work and in our patients, clients, and colleagues. Again, that's when upskilling other people is incredibly important to noticing when you're just ranting because ranting and the term for when a relationship is going bad is called ... If it's vitriolic, probably something needs to be done here, so letting people know, "Look. If I just keep whinging about my internship, if I keep ranting about how difficult it is, can you just pull me up on it and let me know like, 'For the last three days, you've just been ranting?'"

If it stems for more than a week, you need to sit down and have a good think not about leaving the internship, but about, "How's my mental health? How's my physical health? Is something else wrong?" because I think interns should be allowed to rant about their internship sometimes because it's difficult and you're not getting paid, but if we're doing it for more than a week, we're starting to get into some vitriolic territory, so we need to stop and reassess, "So, what was my initial motivation? What would I say to someone I love who is ranting this much about this?"

So, stopping to re-evaluate often with the help of other people because they have a more objective viewpoint. If you got the opportunity to interact with people who have worked in that particular environment previously, that's a really important step maybe if it's possible. There's usually an outgoing intern or an intern has been there for a couple of weeks that you can touch base with. Say, "Is this normal? Is this how it works around here?" So, stopping to re-evaluate if you're really ranting and becoming vitriolic because that's a sign that something else is wrong. Okay?

Buffy Gorrilla: If you get to the point where you're like, "No, I have been ranting. It is vitriolic. I feel like I'm approaching the end of my tether," what do you do then?

Neil Wilson: Really simple, but frustratingly obvious response that I'm going to give is slow down. You have to slow down because most interns have what's called unrelenting standards. The standards just keep increasing because they're trying to impress people, trying to get better at this, but often, their standards exceed their functional capacity, so they get to a hundred and they go, "All right. Let's get to 120."

Often, when we're becoming a bit burnt out, it's because we're trying to function at an increasingly higher level, but we keep getting it wrong, so our actual mood and physical health starts to drop. There is a saying called, "Stop to speed up," and it's 100% accurate with burnout. If there's an opportunity to take a day off, do that, and then often, interns will say, "Look, I want to show people that I'm dedicated." My response is, "You also don't want to show them that you don't understand your body and how your brain works, right?"

There's a story I tend to tell for when I used to work with young people with cancer, and I absolutely got burnt out in that role within three months of doing it because I just kept sacrificing, and like staying late and "Of course, you can have my phone number," "Of course, I'll come in early." Blah, blah, blah. But what I noted towards the end of that spell of reaching a more burnt out phase was that the quality of my work was coming down.

If you are actually stopping every now and again, the quality of your work gets better rather than the opposite, but interns often don't have the experience or the objectivity to go, "No, I should actually just fight and work smart at the moment." What interns typically want to do is work hard. Companies also like people who work smart. They love them actually.

Buffy Gorrilla: I'm also thinking that is also for people who are starting new careers as well like, "I just got to say yes to everything."

Neil Wilson: Yeah.

Buffy Gorrilla: So, have you heard or seen any cases of interns that feel that they have been exploited in the workforce?

Neil Wilson: Yes.

Buffy Gorrilla: Asking for a friend.

Neil Wilson: It's a good question. Yeah, because ... There is a saying ... I don't want to swear, but it's called, "Crap rolls down hill." Often, interns are at the bottom of the hill, so yeah, they have to wave through a bit of crap, but there are limits. Certainly, I have heard of environments where certain co-workers just aren't doing any work. Yet, the intern seems to be doing that work. That's why it's always important to have a really good close relationship with your direct supervisor and re-clarification is too. "What's my role? What do you want me to do?" Not, "What does Dave want me to do?" "What do you want me to do?"

Neil Wilson: Again, interns just want to say yes to everything, and I think, certainly, I would have been guilty of that myself when I was an intern. "Do you think you can handle this patient?" "Sure. I never met anyone like that before, and I don't know anything about that person, but sure. I'll go down there and review that person." So, we can all be guilty of it. I think we've got to understand our own internal limits and when ... Another little tidbit for when that ranting and that vitriol that I was talking about before, that is often a sign not just of burnout, but also, you doing someone else's job, and part of you is very frustrated by that, but part of you can't scream at that person because they might kindly ask you to leave.

Neil Wilson: I think the interns experience the emotion of helplessness quite a lot. It's hard, and I think if we are starting to feel that way, it's not just a sign of burnout which I was talking about, but it is a sign that, "Yeah, I'm being taken advantage of here. What's my actual role within your organisation?" Because if it is to get taken advantage of, then I signed off on that. I'm sorry. It's my bad. I've got to handle that myself, or I've just got to accept that, but if it's not, it's not.

Buffy Gorrilla: If you get that feeling of helplessness, what can we do about it?

Neil Wilson: I think it comes back to that "stop to speed up" metaphor that I was using before of taking time or yeah, mental health day, any excuse to get away from that environment and having objective viewpoint from someone else or just attempting to be as objective as you can. "All right. Why am I feeling helpless right now? Is it because I'm having trouble with my boyfriend? Is it because mum's being more critical this way? Is it because I've got to pay car rego? Because sometimes, when we're in a certain environment, we don't

think about those things. We just get hooked into one environment, so we've got to take ourselves away from that environment and re-calibrate as objectively as we can either by ourselves or with other people in order to get it right. "Is this why I'm feeling helpless?" That's step one if we got to figure out whether that's the actual reason because a lot of things can make humans feel helpless.

The opposite of helplessness is empowerment. It's a bit nebulous, but just bear with me. "What am I actually in control of at work? What am I actually in control of?" Then, we narrow that field of vision to try and build from there. "I'm in control of the colour of the pens that I write in. Not much, but I'll take it for now. How do I extend that further? How can I discuss with my supervisor what other things I could be in control of?" So, helplessness. The treatment for that is often control, and if we can't control as much in that environment, then that environment isn't going to change for us. We've going to increase our control for the other hours that we're not in that environment, so life should really be 8, 8, and 8. Interns, it's usually 10, 6 and zero, so maximising the control that we have in other elements of our life. Okay. That's, again, a bit of an extension of that fighting smart rather than fighting hard.

Buffy Gorrilla:

Starting Somewhere is brought to you by the University of Melbourne External Relations Team. The producers and editors are Buffy Gorrilla and Ben Pawson. Our supervising producer and original concept is from Dr. Andi Horvath. Thanks to everyone who has made Starting Somewhere a reality.