

4000 Weeks Interview

Oliver Burkeman: [00:00:00] Life isn't a dress rehearsal, but how I use this week is something that matters in life.

Yael Schonbrun: That was Oliver Birkman on psychologists off the clock We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high, Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the upcoming book Work, Parent, Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of be mighty and the big book of act metaphors.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

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Debbie Sorensen: Hi, this is Debbie and Yael and I are here today. We, we co interviewed Oliver Berkman. He's the author of a few books, and we, interviewed him about his book [00:02:00] 4,000 weeks time management for mortals because. We both loved this book so much, we just kind of had to do it together. And one of the things that happened with this interview, you know, I grappled with time management.

I have the podcast on top of my, you know, my day job as a therapist and other things that I do. And I'm a parent. So this morning the interview happened pretty early for me here in Denver. because of time zone differences. And I couldn't find my headphones, which were missing from where they normally are.

And I was in this big tizzy trying to get myself going without headphones. Scrambling around trying to figure out something, which by the way, if my audio, I don't know if my audience, if you can tell or not, but it might not be quite as good because I had to improvise. Um, but one of the reasons that happened is because yesterday I took my daughter skiing.

I had actually a pretty light day, but I was going to catch up on everything and get ready for [00:03:00] this interview. And I had a bunch of other things I was planning to work on and I just really needed that time to. Because I had a light clinical load to, to get some things done. And it was really important to me have this time with my daughter, we played hooky and we went up together and we, you know, just spend a few hours skiing and we had fun together and it felt important to me for a number of reasons to do that right now.

And it was just an interesting timing to be talking with Oliver about his work on. Into being intentional with time and how we only have so much of it. And often the important things get lost in the shuffle.

Yael Schonbrun: Yes. And that was such a great example, Debbie, of making a choice about using your time with eyes open, but also not getting to avoid the cost of that. There's always opportunity costs when we choose to use our time in one way and not another.

The heart of the book is that we [00:04:00] can't do it all. We don't have all the time in the world. And so yesterday, when you made a choice to play hooky and go skiing, I gave you a lot and it was values consistent, but it also meant that

you weren't clearing the deck on other things that felt important or that were gonna kind of come back and haunt you the next day.

That doesn't mean it was the wrong choice. It was just a choice, like any other, which has benefits and has costs. And I think that is where values really fit in that you were clear on your values and that you can accept that, that also might have other, things to deal with in, in the long run.

Debbie Sorensen: And one of the things I think that any listeners will get out of. Interview. It's just that very high level perspective, right? Like really zooming out and thinking big picture, this isn't going to be like, oh, here's five steps for how to be really efficient or give you a very concrete time management system that you can use.

But rather it's going to help you look at the big picture of your life and how you're losing your time. [00:05:00] But there are a few concrete strategies in there as well. I think from what Oliver does in his own life. And. That kind of thing, but I also think it's, it's really more of a perspective shift.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And some of the, some of the concrete things are really attached to the perspective shift. So for example, he talks about the amount of time that he spends on work, which is actually less than you might expect, but he does it very deliberately and focused kind of a deep work kind of approach, and then really takes a very flexible approach to the rest of his day.

And he thinks some of those tips, as well as the tips around building patience and the value of building patience in a world that is so impatient, , are just really helpful. So the. High-level ideas of accepting our finitude of realizing that we're always making choices and that we can't do it all help lead to some of these concrete choices that we each can make day to day and hopefully in a value aligned way.

And that when we do that,[00:06:00] we feel less encumbered by the limitations of time and more present in what is, we can be more inside of the process as opposed to panicking that we're not getting to the outcome that we're looking for.

And that fits in Debbie to the work that you and I do. You're writing a book about burnout in work and I'm writing a book about working parenthood. And so I think this is something that we'll continue to talk about in future episodes

around our work, and hopefully have guests that bring in some of these similar ideas to Tal over Berkman around, , acceptance of.

Mortality making value, aligned choices and figuring out how to engage in the roles that are most important to us in the most effective ways possible.

Debbie. And I are here today with Oliver Berkman. Who's a journalist and the author of several terrific books, including the antidote happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking, which is one of my favorite titles. And he has a new book, 4,000 weeks [00:07:00] time management for. Also another great title.

You have a knack for good titles, Oliver. this new book is about making the most of our finite lives in a world of impossible demands, relentless distraction and productivity techniques that mainly just make everyone feel busier. So we're really excited to have him here to talk about this very, very important topic.

Welcome.

Oliver Burkeman: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, we rarely have two co-hosts interview, an author on this podcast, but it turns out that we were both vying for president of the Oliver Berkman fan club and decided that neither of us could miss out on this amazing opportunity. Which ironically goes very much against your advice of finding the joy in missing out.

So I thought that that might be a fun place to start because you talk about a hard reality that nobody wants to confront, which is that we will miss out on things, but you recommend embracing limits and hard choices. So I wonder if you can sort of. Start us off by talking about this idea of approaching and being open to neglecting things and actually [00:08:00] finding joy in doing so.

Even when, as you know, many of us want to like Kafka live more than one

Oliver Burkeman: Right, right. Oh, and me too. Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I think it's useful here probably just to begin by making this general point, that what I think I'm trying to do in this book, who I see myself trying to do is, um, Is point out certain things that just are already true and that we go to quite great

lengths to sort of avoid confronting and feeling, uh, fully in ourselves, as opposed to suggesting that people change.

What's true. Right? So it's not about, um, going from a life where you don't miss out on things to a life. where you do. It's about seeing that. Are inevitably missing out on most things by virtue of being a finite human in a world of effectively infinite possibilities, obligations, opportunities, demands.

And so, um, the, the, the, the [00:09:00] solace and the extra meat sense of meaning comes from sort of stepping more authentically into the situation that you're already in, as it were, um, seeing that. You know, since missing out is completely inevitable, uh, since every decision to, um, commit to any project or relationship or anything like that is by definition, a decision to repudiate the other ones, at least for now.

Um, and that, since you don't have any choice in that matter, if you do it more consciously, firstly, you make wiser decisions because you're no longer kidding yourself that you're not. Tough choices. And then secondly, there's a kind of a sense of affirmation in doing that, right. There's a sense of really having chosen it.

So if I, if I think something's wrong with my life, because I have to choose between, uh, spending time with my five-year-old son and doing some work project that I'm excited by. Then I'm constantly going [00:10:00] to be trying to find ways to, I'm not going to be fully present with each of these things. I'm going to be thinking that sometime is coming in the future.

When these things are not going to have to be traded off against each other. Um, and it's going to be very stressful and less fulfilling. But if I see that, like, that's just how it is, right. I could use this hour for one thing, or I could use it for the other then almost whichever I choose. Uh, not always my choice, of course, when I, when, when it comes to looking up kids, is it, but, but, um, you know, but by seeing that I had to choose the choices sort of imbued with meaning it's easier to be present in that choice and to sort of not feel that terrible sense of like, oh, should I be doing something different?

Because on one level, The answer to that question is always yes. Like, yeah, there are, there are a thousand useful, valuable, important things you could be doing now. So, um, so yeah, you could be doing something different, but that's okay.

Yael Schonbrun: I love, I love that example of the tension between work and family roles because I do [00:11:00] think there's this myth in our culture, that if you have a conflict between two roles, it's something to solve and what you write about. And what you're saying here now is that there's, if we sort of accept that as the reality, as opposed to fighting it, then we can make more deliberate choices and feel better about whatever we choose.

We're choosing one thing and therefore not choosing the other, but that there's no alternative. You have to have to.

Oliver Burkeman: right? Absolutely. And it's like, yes, there are all these kinds of ideas. Work-life balance is one of my particular least favorites that imply that some sort of. Final, um, reconciliation ought to. be possible between those kinds of clashing roles. But what if it's always going to be the case that yeah, if you, if you, I mean, I think if I, if I wasn't constrained by the human condition in the ways that I am, I would love to give even more time than I do to being a, uh, present parent.

[00:12:00] I would also love to see. You know, 10 hours a day reading into whole new areas of philosophy and another 10 hours a day, um, hiking in the Hills here now where we live and, you know, very quickly I'm way more than 24 hours. And plus I need to sleep. So, so, um, yeah, that would be great, but it's, but it's not a realistic assessment of where we are.

And so you're only going to add to your sense of stress and you're second guessing of yourself. If you think that it's a problem, that, that situation. Exists. I think it's another example of this idea of like treating life as some kind of problem to be solved, which I think probably runs through a lot of what I'm, why I'm reading, writing.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, one of the ways that I think you make this point really well in the book and it's even embedded into your title is by giving us the dose of reality that our time is finite, right? That we're mortals. we're all going to die eventually. Right. And I think sometimes we don't want to think [00:13:00] about that, but actually thinking about that can really give us some perspective taking when it comes to how we use our time and time management.

So Oliver, why do you think it's important to tap into that sense of mortality? If you're really going to be deliberate about time.

Oliver Burkeman: I mean, as you say with your sort of jokingly using the word newsflash, this isn't something that people don't realize mainly, uh, maybe some people don't realize, but it's something that we don't sort of internalize and face up to in a way that we. So we know that we're going to die. We know our time is finite, but we sort of act this unit Seneca, the Roman stoic made this observation.

This is old, old, old, but we sort of act as if we were a muscle even while knowing, and feeling sort of haunted by the fact that we're, that we're not. So we go through our days as if we had all the time in the world. Um, I don't think that, uh, it, it it's necessarily about sort of thinking a lot about [00:14:00] death and dying.

You know, there's a role for that. I write about that a little bit in the earlier book, but it's more just to do with this ramification of being of diet. It's a consequence. One of the consequences of the fact that we die, which is that our time is, is finite with that, that you can't constantly put off the meaningful parts of your life into the future because at a certain point in the future, we'll run out.

And so the, the useful thing about sort of stepping more fully into this realization is not, I think that you'd go around all day thinking about death. Um, but that you, you just sort of see the stinks from minute to minute, a little bit more clearly. So you see that like, How you use an hour is an important question.

And, um, you see that, uh, telling yourself that some point you're going to get everything in working order so that you can do everything is, is a, is an illusion. And I don't think this needs to be a stressful recipe for like, oh my goodness, am I making the most out of [00:15:00] life? That's the other thing I'm always at pains to sort of push back against.

I think it's liberating and relaxing because you get to say, well, okay, certain things are not possible for me as a human. Pleasing, every single person fulfilling every single ambition that occurs to me answering every single email, somebody might conceivably send me a fulfilling every social pressure that I feel from the society.

Right. Doing all that is off the table. So now I just get to have a bit more agency in choosing which handful of those things I'm going to focus on.

Yael Schonbrun: I think you're bringing up something really important that you, that you write about in, in the chapter about cosmic insignificance therapy, that there's this paradox of when you recognize that life is finite and that. You can't accomplish all that you want to that instead of making you depressed, it can actually be helpful.

And in fact, you offer an invitation to pursue a modestly significant life. And so I wonder if you can, and I'll just read a quote from your book that I thought was terrific. [00:16:00] Um, but the idea is that this kind of treatment can help you drop back down from godlike fantasies of cosmic significance into the experience of life as it is concretely finite.

And often enough marvelously really is, this is kind of like a mind blowing idea that recognizing that we might live a fairly insignificant life can actually be helpful. So can you talk us through that idea?

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. I mean, there's lots of different ways, ways into this. One of them is just to say, like, you know, it's that familiar reminder when it comes to a big decision, that's sort of churning you up inside that, um, you know, ask yourself who's going to care, which way you decide. And in a hundred years, or frankly, In 24 hours quite often, right?

There's some freedom in sort of just lowering the stakes, uh, and, and it, and it actually can free you up not to, you know, live a life of despair, but to take bold choices and make risky, [00:17:00] uh, decisions, you know, because of, because actually the stakes are lower than you than you thought. And I guess to get a bit more profound or something with it, there is this idea?

That we go about with very, some very unhelpful definitions, I think in our minds of what counts as a meaningful life and what counts as fulfilling our potential. And, you know, that may be for some people, um, becoming very famous and successful and huge professional success and they have. Uh, you know, there's, that's important and I don't want to put that, um, you know, to, to suggest that, that it isn't.

Um, but at the same time, I didn't think you'd want a definition of meaningful activity in life that, that left all these other things that we do in our lives, cook nutritious meals for our children, or, you know, keep some small part of our neighborhood looking more beautiful than it otherwise might or care for an elderly [00:18:00] relative or, um, I don't know, a million things like this, that, that we, you know, we just instinctively we know are part of the, of a

meaningful way to spend our time on the planet, but they probably don't meet this criteria.

And of like, you know, you've got to put a dent in the universe to quote Steve jobs, or you've got to do something that is really extraordinary or, or unusual. Um, so I think it's just important to. Work with a definition of a meaningful life that is fitted to our scale as humans, because otherwise, you know, maybe Shakespeare and Einstein get to have meaningful lives, maybe in Steve jobs, but then the rest of us have no hope.

Yael Schonbrun: Right. And these ideas all fit in with the kind of therapy that Debbie and Jill and I do acceptance and commitment therapy, which you talk about in the antidote.

I believe you interviewed Steve Hayes, right?

Oliver Burkeman: Uh, I wrote about him yesterday. We, we had a little [00:19:00] communication and then I wrote about his, um, use of. Chinese finger trap

Yael Schonbrun: He right.

Oliver Burkeman: uh, the idea that some about that sometimes I'm trying too hard to change your emotions is, is a sure fire way to make your self feel, feel worse

Yael Schonbrun: Right. And I mean, it's sort of interesting how similar, some of the recommendations for happiness. two recommendations for time management, sort of like accepting the reality, leaning into the discomfort is actually the most freeing thing that you can do. And that's one of the core processes and acceptance and commitment therapy is acceptance.

And I think the way that you write about it is so eye-opening, I think for people outside of the field of psychology, so, um, You know, I think that is a tip of accepting the uncomfortable realities rather than trying to run away from them or solve them when they can't be solved, because they're so fundamental to human existence is such a powerful truth.

It's an ancient truth. It's a modern truth, but you know [00:20:00] what laboratory science and psychologists, social scientists have discovered is that when we kind of open up to those uncomfortable truths, they're not as

restrictive. They're not as terrifying. And so I think that's, that's a big take home from your, from your writing.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, I don't, I'm, I'm fascinated by that. And I don't know enough about, um, acceptance and commitment therapy to sort of say much more. But I do think that, I guess I see it as occupying some or seeking to occupy some space between between sort of cognitive behavioral therapy with its intense focus on, on interventions.

And change and then, you know, psychic psychodynamic therapy with its focus on understanding and insight, and maybe, maybe also just sort of reconciling yourself to the, to the human situation. , so I sort of appreciate, I appreciate that in it. Cause I think that's that, that sort of ground. Where you, where it's [00:21:00] not just a question of seeing how things are, but also not just a question of fixing what you imagine to be your problems is, is really powerful. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, in speaking of that discomfort and avoidance, I would say that sometimes there can be almost an addictive quality to being busy or to this fast paced living that we all get into, where we have all these tasks to do. And we're constantly busy and I can relate to that in my own life. Right? Sometimes it feels very.

I dunno, I get a little jolt of dopamine or something when I'm just checking things off my to-do list. , but I think there's some costs of that. So I was just curious if you could talk a little bit about that cycle. Why do we get into that cycle of just productivity and efficiency and busy-ness and, and what do you think are the costs of that?

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. So my, my hunch that I sort of pursue in the book, the most recent book is that, is that a lot of the ways in which we think we are trying to, be good and diligent [00:22:00] and productive. Uh, our best understood probably as forms of forms of emotional avoidance, ways of trying to not feel the impact of, of our limitations and the fact that?

we're always having to make tough choices about our limited time so that, you know, and partly, this is me talking about my own journey.

So it might not be a universal thing, but I think that, um, that sense that you're, you're building systems. Disciplining yourself to become more and more efficient, so that at some point in the future, because you never quite arrive at it,

do you, you're going to get to this place where you are just effortlessly, optimized, and handling everything that can be thrown at you, realizing your potential meeting your obligations.

That that is that's performing seems to be a very obvious and useful, but ultimately detrimental psychological job, which is it's helping you feel. Okay.

I don't have to actually confront the fact that this is it. Life isn't a dress [00:23:00] rehearsal, but how I use this week is something that matters in life. I can, it's all makes it all provisional and waiting for this moment when you're sort of fully optimized and productive.

And you know, if that didn't get in the way of leading a meaningful life, then maybe there would be no problem with that. I may, I'm not, I'm not sure. I think that there's something intrinsically good about connecting. Reality, but, but there's something very practically good, which is that, that, that sort of treadmill of productivity, um, firstly it causes you to sort of generally to sort of focus entirely on the future and to put the meaning of life in this kind of like when I finally get through this stuff and it turns everything you're doing now into something you have to kind of get through.

To get to something good rather than something that could be good in itself. And then there are all these phenomena to do with Parkinson's law and what I call the efficiency trap. Right. Which is how actually getting more efficient at things like email or life admin, um, [00:24:00] beyond a certain point anyway, uh, we'll just generate more of more email and more admin.

So, um, it's not even an effective way of getting through those things because the supply is effectively infinite. So going faster just means you, you do more and feel busier, but you don't get any closer to getting to the end of the,

Yael Schonbrun: Well, and I want to jump in with an example of my own, that's related to your book because when, uh, I was ready to order your new book, it was out of stock. It was so popular. You've done a

Oliver Burkeman: oh, tell me about it. The supply chain crisis has hit me as well as, as well as the whole of a American industry. Yeah, yeah,

Yael Schonbrun: Well, it's the supply chain, but also I think people are really hungry for, this kind of conversation. So it was out of stock when I wanted to

order it. So I ended up, um, listening to it on audible and I love audible book. Because it helps me to multitask.

I can consume books, which I love my husband's always telling me you're not reading, you're consuming and I'm sometimes half consuming because I'm distracted. And I admit that, but, but it's, it, it feels really good as Debbie [00:25:00] was saying, you know, there's sort of like that I'm getting things done. Um, and I will admit to that.

I listened to my auto book set at one point. Time speed, because it's very efficient.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah.

Yael Schonbrun: And as I'm listening to it, I'm also, you are the one reading it, which is lovely. And you you're sort of recommending patience and slowing down and, and so thinking about this concept of patience as I'm listening to your book at 1.2 times speed, while I'm doing my morning runs, so I wonder if you can talk a little bit about sort of the history of this virtue of patience and why it's really gotten off trend and what the costs are to it.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, sure. Um, I want to give you credit here too. Um, Jennifer Roberts, who's an art historian at Harvard who I write about in the book and who really switched me on to this way of thinking about patience briefly in terms of my thesis. I think that, um, Impatience is generally an attempt to sort of get the [00:26:00] world to go as fast as you think it should.

And frustration that the fact that it won't, and that's all connected to this idea of our limitations and the fact that we don't get to dictate reality. And the way that we, that we wish that there are one of the limitations we have is that certain things take the time that they take. But, um, Jennifer Robins points out that, you know, historically patience seems like a very passive, uh, kind of virtue.

So you imagine sort of, um, You know, um, young Victorian women being told about the necessity to be patient because it was the, because there, they were meant to stay home. And, and it was the men who are living the engaged lives in the public sphere. Or you, you think about how patience could be, uh, you know, abused in a million different ways to tell people or groups that like for now, they just have to deal with the fact that.

Privileges or they lack control. Um, and it's, it's sort of a way of reconciling yourself to, [00:27:00] to lacking control in society. But Roberts makes this brilliant point. I think that as society accelerates and as we've become completely geared towards doing everything as fast as we possibly can, the capacity to be patient in lots of contexts is actually a sort of form of agency or a certain self-assertion or even of control.

It's not, it's not something you do to. Make it more tolerable to be a doormat. It's something you do to actually kind of, I don't know, gain a professional edge apart from anything else, because if everything is moving so fast, And yet certain things just require certain amount of time reading, thinking, creative work, all these kinds of things, where so many of us are, are seeking to make our living.

You actually, it's really beneficial to not just succumb to the social pressure, to go as fast as you can, and to be able to feel the discomfort that comes from. Uh, letting things take the time they take, which is why, uh, Jennifer Roberts asked all her incoming students to do this [00:28:00] exercise where they have to find a painting or sculpture and go and look at it for three hours straight.

And, uh, why I did that too. When I went to interview her and chose a painting in the Harvard art museums, and just sat in front of it for three hours. Um, just as an example of this, right? There's immense discomfort associated with this. You feel incredibly impatient and antsy because like you're just not using.

Being dictated or I'm not used to having the tempo of life dictated to me in the way that this rule was doing that, you know, you had to be there for three hours, but on the other hand, you literally, I don't mean metaphorically. I mean, literally see things in a painting once you've looked at it for an hour or so that you did not see before that moment right there, the, the experience is completely different because actually, as it turns out a good painting.

Has things in it, but the repay that kind of patience. And I think that generalizes, I don't think it's just about art [00:29:00] appreciation. I think it is most definitely. For example, about parenting small children.

Yael Schonbrun: just gonna say that I was going to say, have you applied that to parenting your small child? Because I, I think that is another area where we don't get to dictate how quickly things go. And when we push, we miss out. And when we slow down and allow our children to have some say in how long

things take, we sometimes learn a lot more about them than their texture, their depth.

Oliver Burkeman: Totally. Yeah, absolutely. I mean like any, like any parent I'm sure these days have a five-year-old I find myself thinking like, Oh, no, like he can't, he can't stay focused on something for more than five minutes without wanting to do something different. Is this like modern technology? Is there too much screen time in this house?

And then this literally happened to me a couple of days ago. I was like, Okay. I'm going to do this thing. Everyone always says I should do. And just be like, like, let's just really, I've got three hours now. Let's just make it like your choice. What do you, what are we going to do there? Here I'll make like a few rules [00:30:00] about spending money and Eating all the unhealthy food in the cupboard or whatever, apart from that, like you get to choose and, and, and I'm going to be there and enter into it. I didn't say it in these terms to find yourself, you know what I mean? Um, uh, unless you want to do it on your own, which is fine. And then instantly we're involved in imaginative play that lasts literally an hour and a half.

Right. But there's no sense of, of, of a short attention span or anything like that, just because. Actually what kids want from us. I think so often it's just to enter as fully as we can into their experience. And so, you know, maybe the reason that he doesn't want to draw a picture on his own for more than five minutes is because he's well aware that I'm the other end of the kitchen, like distracted trying to do something else.

You know, It's like, I'm not, I'm not there as much as I, as much as I could or should be. And as soon as you are, which involves the willingness to. Let the thing unfold, uh, his own pace, suddenly all these things that I think are [00:31:00] wrong with, I dunno, my parenting or how I'm raising myself there. They're not there. it's, just because I generally speaking, I'm wanting things to go on my agenda too much.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.

Oliver Burkeman: If that makes sense. I don't know.

Yael Schonbrun: that makes so much sense. And you offer these three principles of, of patience. And I wonder if you can share what they are cause

there's such great practices and ways to think about patience in, in a helpful way.

Oliver Burkeman: So the first one is, is what I phrase as developing a taste for having problems. , and I think what I'm, what I'm trying to get at here is just this sense that, , Part of what's happening when we're sort of impatiently racing through life is not just that we want to get through specific things, although that's certainly the case with some unpleasant chores or distressing experiences, but we're actually we've got some unarticulated fantasy that we're trying to raise through to some point where we don't have problems at all.

I think a lot of us I'm speaking from experience, but I know it's not just me sort of have this double. [00:32:00] objection to the problems in our lives. Like, firstly, you've got a problem you've got to solve. And then secondly, you're kind of a fronted on some level that you even have to deal with problems in your life.

, and you.

forget that actually. If you're, for example, if you're employed in a job where you use your brain, um, big part of why you got that job is precisely because you're, you've got some aptitude for solving the unexpected problems. If it, if it was all plain sailing, it could probably be done by a robot, but solving the problems is that is the thing that, human engineer T is, is required for.

And so it's just very, very liberating in a way to realize that. You're never going to get to a point in life where there are no problems and that you actually wouldn't want to, because what is the problem? It's just like a challenging thing to which you have to apply your yourself. And that has. Value to you.

That means something too. That's just the substance of life. It's not something to be got rid of. Obviously there are particular bad problems that I wouldn't wish on anyone and that you probably do want to get rid of, [00:33:00] but this notion that there's a golden age of no problems coming, I think makes people even more impatient about that, about the ones that they have in the moment.

Okay. Uh, the other two rules. One is to embrace radical incrementalism and this idea that actually there's an enormous amount of power and being able to work for just a small period of time, but day after day after, day on a, on a project, um, for being willing to make progress slowly. And what you can actually get in return for that is much more.

And even in a sense, faster progress, right. Than if you than, if you try to make progress in huge binges and then you're exhausted for weeks and don't do anything more on it. Or if you build projects up in your life to such a large picture in your mind that they're too intimidating to actually get around to and you procrastinate on them. The third one is about originality and unoriginality, and there's a very long story here that I won't go into unless you ask me to. Um, but the, the end result of it is just this notion, especially in creative [00:34:00] work that you sometimes have to be. And I think maybe it plays to relationships and things like that as Well, You sometimes have to be patient, um, to get through a period of learning at the beginning of something like this, that, that feels where it feels like you're not really, Doing something original. If it's creative work, we are not really getting into the really deepest part of it. If it's a relationship or an activity that that, to which that would apply.

that actually there's patience involved in just sort of being willing to feel it for the time being you're doing something the same as everyone else, you know, you're not being sufficiently extraordinary in your life or something in order to get to the more extraordinary parts of those seemingly ordinary experience.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, I, I, I would welcome you to share the story because I think that this is a part of how we get into the creative process. And it's important that patience is a part of that.

Yeah. Go for it.

Oliver Burkeman: I don't know what kind of podcast [00:35:00] this is. I mean, you can always add, you can always edit it out. Um, uh, so this is a, um, this is a story that. the, um, Finish-American photographer, Arno Minkin and tells him he's told it to his sort of, um, graduating photography students. And so this is with reference to developing a career as a photographer, but I think it applies much more widely, , He uses the analogy of the, the, the Helsinki central bus station, where all sorts of, bus routes start from the same platforms.

And then they follow the same. They stop at the same stops for quite a few stops, uh, while they're still within the city limits of Helsinki. And he says that if you think about each bus stop as a year of your career, what often happens to people is they will sort of take. Photos, I'll develop a portfolio, they'll take it to a gallery and they'll realize there'll be told that it's really derivative.

It's really similar to some established, um, photographer. And [00:36:00] they, uh, they get ready to press this, like, oh, this my bus was on the same route as

this photographer. So I've got to go back to the central bus station and choose a new route. So they do it again and choose new route. Same thing happens. They find out that actually the route they were on is the same one stopping at the same places.

Famous photographer has gone before them and it can go on and on and on, and you sort of waste your professional life constantly trying to be original. And we're always finding that you're not. Um, and Minkin, and after the question, you know, what's the solution and the solution is to stay on the fucking bus because the point is that.

Well, just stay on the bus. If you need a different piece of audio that doesn't involve that word. Um, uh, because it's after those initial stops, I hope there's analogies holding. Um, it's after those initial stops that the bus routes begin to open off and to Go into unique individual destinations around the suburbs and the countryside outlying Helsinki.

It's not it's you. What the mistake you made was thinking that [00:37:00] because you weren't going on a completely original path at the beginning. That you were destined to be on an unoriginal path. Actually it was having the patience to stay on that, on the original path for a few stops. That, um, is, is how you get to the bit where you really truly begin to feel like you're doing your own thing. There's a related idea that in a very famous bit of quotation from IRA glass, the radio, um, producer, this American life. Creator about how it often depresses people starting off early and radio that like, because their tastes are so refined, but their skills are still being formed. They think that what they're producing is terrible rubbish, but it's actually because they are already connoisseurs and, and they are, and they are seeing their own product for the beginner product that it is.

Um, but it's not because they're bad. It's actually because they have real taste and, and that their abilities don't. Match up to that taste.

Debbie Sorensen: Wow. I can relate to that with podcasting [00:38:00] yet. We're tough on ourselves because even though we're amateurs at this, we're, you know, we have high standards, I think.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, and the science on. This is so interesting because it reminds me a lot of the work on grit or mindset that it's sort of like, we think

that natural talent should breed creativity, but there's almost like no such thing as natural talent it's effort and persistence and sticking with it.

All comes down to patience and yet, because we absorb these things and we don't see the effort that goes into it. We just see the outcome. And so we compare ourselves from wherever we are in our, early, around in our bus route to the outcome that other people have.

And it feels like, you know, we'll never get there because we don't have a deep understanding of how long it took the person who were witnessing their excellence to have gotten.

Oliver Burkeman: right. Absolutely. And I mean, you know, if you, I always think about, especially, it's actually a lovely thing about the sort of digital [00:39:00] era that there's a very one-sided or a lopsided way that this works, right. If you think. Putting out a podcast and it does, and it's great. Then it picks up listeners and it, and it spreads far and wide and people love what you do.

If you put out a podcast, that's no good. Cause you're still learning. You don't get like generally speaking, you don't get blood publicly humiliated and do huge damage to reputation. It just doesn't get noticed by anybody. Um, if you put out a, if I put out an idea, Well, my email newsletter on Twitter or on the online or something that catches fire with people.

That's wonderful. If it doesn't just doesn't really get seen by anybody. So, so there's actually even less reason to feel paralyzed by this than, than they used to be. Um, when. Maybe if you're doing this for a old fashioned kind of newspaper or something, there is more at stake. If you put something in there that's, that's uninspiring.

Um, that there's even less reason to worry about this. You know, do things, put them out there. [00:40:00] Realistically the worst that is going to happen at scale anyway, is that they're going to vanish without trace while you, while you make some more until you get better. And, um, and so this notion that like, everything is riding on you already being perfect at it is, is really it's unnecessary. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: So I want to get a little bit into the details. Time and using time here. And I think, you know, you've mentioned you have a five-year-old son you're, you're creative and prolific in your writing and your world of ideas,

and you also have some hobbies and I'm sure you have daily stuff that we all have to deal with.

Emails and laundry. How do you, as a busy person, if you were to think about the typical day in your life, right? Like today or tomorrow, how do you approach. Sorting through all this and, and kind of like, you know, creating a day for yourself.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah.

well, I love talking about this. So stop me if I go on, if [00:41:00] I go on too much, um, and I can't use today or yesterday because my, my wife is away for five nights and I'm instantly stunned by the fact that anyone has ever a single parent. Filled with admiration for anyone, who managed to be single parents and do anything else at all.

, so, so it's not a very typical time because I, my standards for what I'm going to do apart from a little bit of work in the middle of the day and parenting are out the window, uh, as I do it all myself, instead of as a shed. But, but, um, I mean, one of the things I've really benefited from in terms of work is to be very sort of modest in terms of the number of hours I'm going to expect of myself to do hard focused brain work.

And here, um, I draw partly on the work of our mutual friend jail. Um, Alex Pang, who in his book rushed, , has, has, you know, gone into great detail about this mysterious regularity. That's so many kinds of authors and artists, scientists, mathematicians through history. When you look at their daily routines, we're [00:42:00] not ever trying to do more than about four hours of really focused, intense brainwork.

Uh, and I try to take that kind of approach to writing because then what you do is you, you really fight quite hard to wring for it. If you mean you fight quite hard to ring. That time, but in return, you kind of, don't try to all about the rest of it and you don't worry about the fact that the rest of it is scattered has lots of interruptions.

Um, so, you know, on a typical day, I'm trying really hard, um, to, you know, have a few appointments before about midday as I, as I can, but then I'm not trying to be a recluse the rest of the time. Um, I, it's great to talk to people and I,

and I wouldn't want to be. Or at least, but it's that sort of, it's a very sort of limited period.

And, you know, it turns out that even if I had eight hours to focus on writing, I wouldn't actually use those eight hours because I would be sort of exhausted by the, uh, by the effort for that time. Um, [00:43:00] and then, yeah, I suppose I do try also to, low-ball the number of other things that I think I'm going to tick off any list, uh, in the, in the course of a day, so that you get that satisfaction of having actually done the things you're able to do instead of , 10% of the things that you aim to do.

I think, you know, working from home and being parents of a small child and, and, you know, all the rest of it, one of the things that I have definitely struggled with. How you plan the day when you don't want to create a sort of overly brittle or rigid plant and you don't want, like, you know, I don't want it to be a failure of my day if it turns out that it's best for me to now spend an hour with my son talking about all the things he did at school, like it's, something's gone wrong with the planning.

If, if my system is. Oh, well, today didn't work because that thing, that thing happened, you need boundaries, you need arrangements with your spouse so that it all can be as balanced and fair as possible and all the rest of it. But like, you don't want to create these sorts of boundaries that are so [00:44:00] from that life keeps sort of banging into them in unhelpful ways.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. So, I mean, this kind of fits in with the concept of psychological flexibility. So you try to set some boundaries, but also to kind of roll with it when the plans get overturned, because you have a five-year-old and a wife who might have other things that need to happen, that that need accommodation by your schedule, but it does sound like you try hard to.

Adopt that four hour a day of deep work and be as dedicated as you can, sort of within reasonable limits, which, which I think is, is, is brilliant. And then it really does kind of free you up to be more relaxed in, in the non deep work time. So I think it's a really great take home tip. I had a follow up question.

I was listening to another interview with you and, I think it was with Dan Harris on 10% happier. And you talked about meditating every day, and I'm just curious how you fit that in maybe not, maybe not in the past five days with

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, I was going to say, well, That was a long time ago that I recorded that podcast. And I do not currently, , meditators regularly or as, for as long as I did when I, [00:45:00] when I did that podcast. so the answer is I don't fit it in

I mean, I do, try very hard to make space for things that sort of fit into that category for me, of, of activity.

So something that I do do pretty much every day is get up early enough to do a sort of 14 minute, uh, morning pages, you know, writing on journaling on.

sort of three sides of a narrow ruled. notebook, you know, um, which takes me about 40 minutes. Um, so again, not every single day. Um, but, but that's something that I think is, is related.

It's it has some of the same, it's giving some of the same benefits of meditation. And since we moved from Brooklyn to here in the Yorkshire countryside, I'm also trying really hard to make sure that I'm like outdoors. An hour, at least every day, sometimes sort of running and, and, and strenuously exercising, but sometimes just sort of wandering around, uh, sometimes with [00:46:00] the family.

Sometimes it's has to come out of my, of my Workday. That again, I think is fulfilling somewhat the same, purposes and is just kind of the difference that it makes is just enormous. So some of those you do just have to be like, this is too important. I'm going to make it work. And, um, and something's going to have to give, uh, and then others of them, as in, as, as with my, the 45 minutes of meditation or whatever that I was doing when I did that podcast, uh, they do give for awhile and, uh, you know, fair enough, I suppose.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. There's like phases of life, but it sort of sounds like there's a few different pockets of things that you try to accomplish in a given day. Some deep work, some time with your family. And then some time that's like either meditative in nature, whether that's journaling or time outside. And Debbie and I both found quite a lot of delight in reading about this idea of the importance of hobbies and your example of rod Stewart. And so I wonder if you can talk about the importance of [00:47:00] non-productive hobbies that, and maybe, you know, we can think about what pocket that category of activity fits into.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. I mean, I think the thing about hobbies above all is that it's, this idea of doing things for themselves and not always having an instrumental goal behind what you're doing. It does. Absolutely. It doesn't have to be a hobby, but I think that hobbies are a really interesting phenomenon because they're sort of frowned upon in a way almost today, right. Or sneered at or something. We're a bit, it's a bit embarrassing sort of admit that you spend a significant amount of your time doing, doing the things that we classify as, as hobby. And I make the point to the book that, you know, if it's a side hustle, because you're making money out of it, then it's kind of cool.

But if it's, if you're just doing it for itself, then, um, it's a little bit embarrassing. Cause Rod Stewart has this model railway hobby where he's a sort of internationally known rockstar, but apparently all the way through this career was like building this intricate, , layout of an American city with model railways and it, because, and you know, it's so [00:48:00] unrelated. Personal brand that you have to conclude. He must just do it because he really loves it. And I think there's something in that idea that we should all have something like that. Now, in terms of my regular day, I mean, probably the bit about walking and hiking is this is where I is, what I'm doing in that respect.

I am not currently, I'm also finding time to build an enormous miniature railway

Yael Schonbrun: Or tickle the keys, right? That

Oliver Burkeman: Right. Well, I do also mention yes, playing bad, playing piano badly. And I mentioned that partly because I think it's actually sometimes quite helpful. If the hobby you have is something you already mediocre.

I get some time to do that. Maybe just 10 minutes in a work break or something, but what's so freeing about that is that there's no pressure because I, I, I'm never going to earn a dollar for my kind of piano guaranteed. Um, unless I go somewhere public and take money to stop playing or something, you know, So there's none of that pressure that I do feel with writing and with all my sort of main work [00:49:00] operations, which is that you , you want to do them well and they might not work out.

And so the pressure is there and with a few sort of hobbies where that just doesn't matter, I think are incredibly important thing to have in the midst of the life.

Yael Schonbrun: You break a bunch of myths in your book about how we get trapped into thinking about time in unhelpful ways. One of the things that I love that you talk about is this idea of are focused on.

The importance of freedom and how we choose our time. So, you know, we want to be able to choose, you know, how we structure our day, how much time we spend on work versus how much time we spend with our families. You know, when we wake up, when we go to bed yet, total freedom over time, you talk about has some.

That might be surprising where constraints might actually help us out in surprising ways. . So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the costs of free time and how we might newly see the value, the positive value of time.

That's not freely split.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, I think the kind of freedom that we're talking about here is that [00:50:00] individual freedom. Isn't it it's that idea that you may have all sorts of constraints on your time, but the, the ideal that we seem to reinforce as a culture is that in the perfect. You would get up in the morning and it'll be completely up to you, what you, did with your time and, you know, maybe some of that would absolutely be spent commonly, but nonetheless, you would get to decide like, you know exactly when you did things.

And the sort of a pitch of me of this these days is the notion of the digital nomad, right? The person who can just sort of work from wherever they want with their laptop and is unconstrained by, by anything. Limitations on their time. And what you find, if you talk to those people, is that there's, are there advantages to that lifestyle, but it can be really lonely as well, because actually an awful lot of the benefit that we get from how we spend our time is in, The way it's coordinated with other people and it's, and it's, and it's to do with, you know, rituals and traditions and ways of doing things that, that, that line [00:51:00] up our time with other people so that we can use it.

Uh, so you find in countries where they have a very strong social, maybe even legal norm of, Some of vacations will be taken at the same point. That, that there's a big happiness benefit to this, , , out in the world, because people are happier when they're on vacation at the same time as lots of other people, because you get to hang out with the people that you want to see, or because

you know that no, one's trying to steal your job behind your back and the emails aren't, flooding in.

Um, and then these very little ways that we don't think about, right. I mean, . If we didn't have those rhythms at all, , we wouldn't be able to do all the things that, that give us value, whether it's in work or relationships or activism or anything else that requires that, that coordination of time.

So yeah, if you, if you end up one thing I find as I sort of a freelance laptop person, right. Is . I have total control over my schedule in some ways. Um, and so to quite a lot of my friends, it's impossible to find a place in our [00:52:00] diaries to meet up, you know, when we're all free to meet up, because we're all out of sync with each other because we all have this degree of, control and the best times are when you sort of, you start, I dunno, you start a book club or you join a society or. Until COVID anyway, used to sing in a choir all the time where you give up that, right? It's like, no, it's Wednesdays at seven o'clock that's when it happens. And if you want to be part of this, that's when you have to do it and you have to work with that and fit your schedule around it. That's what enables the fact that this great thing can happen.

So, yeah, that's all I'm

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, it reminds me of, of the re the research from Emile Durkheim, who was a French sociologist. And he published the study on suicide, looking at predictors of suicide. And what he found was that no matter how he categorized, he collected data from across Europe and found that people with more role constraints who had more demands, more obligations, or less likely to commit suicide.

So you're kind of getting at it from a different angle, but it's this idea that. [00:53:00] We're sort of constrained in these ways because of ties to other people. It is a loss of freedom, but it's a gain of connection and meaning because we're doing things within, for in service, or just connecting in the joy together with other people.

And there's something that's, that's a human need that we have that is hard to fulfill. If we don't have those kinds of constraints or obligations.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, right. We're sort of held in that web and supported by it as well. And you know, it's definitely, um, there's an ambivalence here because. you wouldn't want to build a society that the schedules, all of it's

people's time all the time is a totalitarian one by definition. And, you know, there's certainly been times and places in history when.

People have sort of suffered under having their time controlled far too much for them or by societal norms or whatever it might be. But you don't want to assume that this sort of ultra libertarian alternative is actually where you should be headed. So, yeah, it's just something to something to keep in mind.

If you're [00:54:00] someone who does have freedom over your schedule or is seeking to increase the level of your freedom you have over your schedule. It's like there's a flip side to this.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. So since we have you here for a few more minutes, I want to ask you some advice for my life. Okay. Because I you've alluded to this a couple of times today and in your book, I always think I'm right around the corner from being caught up on. Right. As soon as I get this deadline that I have on Friday, and I finished these couple of things that are hanging, then I'm going to have more spaciousness in my schedule to do these relaxing, enjoyable things.

I also feel like I'm constantly. I think you call it clearing the decks. I'm trying to clear the desks on certain top. Right? I never catch up on my emails. I'm always a little behind on my therapy notes. Sometimes a lot of, a lot behind on my therapy notes. I'm never caught up with laundry. So it's like, I'm trying to.

Get ahead of the game with these big items on my to-do list. And then I'm trying to, [00:55:00] as soon as I'm folded all the laundry and I've caught up on my notes, then I'm going to chill out. What advice do you have? And I know, I mean, I talk to therapy clients all the time who struggled with this thing thing, the sense of like, I'm almost there and have it just pushed through, but of course, right.

So what advice do you have for me?

Oliver Burkeman: I mean, I feel a little, um, I feel a little conflicted because I still totally get, get into that mindset. Right. I don't want anyone to think listening to this.

Debbie Sorensen: You haven't, you haven't totally mastered it

Oliver Burkeman: have it all now, what it is, what really helps. I mean, there's a, there's an attitudinal point. And then there's a tactical point, I suppose.

The attitudinal point is just that what has changed for me is that I can sort of see through this a bit, even while it is descending upon me. Right? So there's a kind of disillusionment in the positive, in a positive sense, uh, uh, that, that.

Happened for [00:56:00] me so that, you know, sure. Maybe in the back of my mind, while I'm going through my email is, is the notion that I'm going to get on top of it all forever.

But I can also sort of see a little bit that that's, that's just my old same old stuff doing, it's doing its thing and I know what's going on there. Um, so in a way you can just become a little bit more sort of, um, accepting of your own.

Ridiculousness in that respect. And then you can sort of take the edge off it that that causes the stress, right?

Because it's, it's not, it's not a problem to be entertaining that slight daydream, that you're about to be on top of everything, unless it's kind of causing you suffering, but it doesn't need to cause, or causing you to sort of, um, distort your priorities in a way that, that, that you otherwise wouldn't.

And then tactically, I kind of find that this. What, what I call and has been called by others. A fixed volume approach to productivity is really, is really helpful here. So if you tell yourself.

today is the day I get through my inbox, [00:57:00] then you're really just sort of exacerbating that mindset. If you say, you know, today this time I'll dedicate an hour to, to getting through my inbox.

Even if in that time you are still, you know, uh, the wretched by that, by that fantasy of sorting it all. That's okay. You know, and it's got some boundaries around it and you're going to be reminded when the, when your timer goes off or have your handling this to it's time to get up and go and do the next thing.

Um, you can sort of use the energy of that, of that. Um, the thing you're talking about without becoming totally sort of governed by it, because you're sort of putting boxes around your time. You're the, the basic, the most basic level here is just your. First of all, what time do I have available? And then watch I fit into that time rather than first of all, what tasks do I have to get through and how the heck am I going to make sure that I get through them all by the end of the day,

which is just a recipe for the planning fallacy, [00:58:00] you know, vastly insanely overestimating, how much you're really going to get around to.

So I'm definitely spend time doing something that I would call clearing with ex still today. But, um, But I do it for, you know, maybe an hour, an hour and a half. And guess what? They're never clear, but that's okay.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, that's, that's one of the reasons I'm I really wanted to be involved in this interview is that this perspective shift I've used it with a lot of clients. And also just an occasional reminder to myself. Since I read your book, that it is something about coming to a sense of reality, and it's not your fault for not being caught up.

It's just so liberating. It's like, it's not like you're not productive enough. It's that you're trying to do something. Impossible it's unrealistic. And so you actually have to just kind of like find a little bit of peace with that, to let yourself off the hook and be like, maybe I'll never catch up on some of these things.

That's okay. I still have to like live my [00:59:00] life in a way that's meaningful to me. And if, if I'm going to be constantly behind in a few areas, you know, okay.

Oliver Burkeman: Right. It's inevitable and it's difficult for everyone. And it's a function of the standards that you're holding yourself to rather than your failure to have exerted enough. Self-discipline yeah.

Yeah.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, Oliver, thank you for spending one of your 4,000 some odd mortal hours with us, where we are honored and just delighted to, to steal an hour of your time. And we will definitely, link to your website. Is there, are there other places that listeners can find out more about you and your work

Oliver Burkeman: well, the book is finally now back in stock. Uh, pretty much all the places books are sold. . And obviously ebook and audio book have always been there. I've been there all along. I know my website, Oliver, berkman.com is where to find everything else, sign up for the newsletter and all the rest of it.

Yeah.

Yael Schonbrun: Thank you so much.

Oliver Burkeman: It's been a pleasure. Thanks very much for your questions and the conversation.

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