

## **Working Life for Everyone podcast: Panu Pihkala**

**Interviewer:** You are listening to Working Life for Everyone, a podcast where we broaden our horizons about the world of work and discuss the inequalities of the Finnish labour market with people who have dedicated their careers to doing something about them. My name is Jarkko Immonen, and I am one of the career counsellors at the University of Helsinki's Career Services. In these podcast episodes, we will be exploring the first part of our premise by discussing careers in the era of ecological crises. My guest today is Panu Pihkala, a researcher, writer, trainer and active participant in the public debate, who is known especially as an expert on ecological emotions. Welcome Panu, it's a pleasure to have you on.

**Panu Pihkala:** Thanks.

**Interviewer:** Let's start by explaining the concepts and context. What does research on ecological emotions involve?

**Panu Pihkala:** I use the word 'ecological emotions' to describe the various emotions that are significantly related to the environment. I say 'significantly' on purpose because people's emotions are pretty complex. What we feel at any given moment may be shaped by lots of things, such as how well we slept the night before. What we see on the news also affects us and our experiences. But people's emotions today are increasingly affected by the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. It's the most important reason why ecological emotions are now more studied.

**Interviewer:** You sort of responded to this already, but let me take it a little further: why is this research topic relevant for universities or society? What is the best or most important thing that can be achieved by studying this topic?

**Panu Pihkala:** Emotions affect our wellbeing and our ability to function, and also involve ethical issues. This has been highlighted in the discussion centring on the terms 'eco-anxiety' and 'climate anxiety'. We can talk about them more in a minute. So if, for instance, children really feel hopeless and anxious because their future seems to have been cancelled, as some young people have said, that's a significant ethical challenge as well. Of course, it's an educational and communicative challenge too. So taking emotions into account can help us not only understand the world, which is traditionally seen as one of the aims of scientific research, but also make the world better. It's not always that simple, but we definitely need

a variety of information to be able to bring about change. As for the latter part of your question, about what's the best thing this could lead to, was it something along those lines?

**Interviewer:** Yes, the best or most important thing that could be achieved.

**Panu Pihkala:** Well, of course if we're talking about the ecological crisis, the best or most important thing we could achieve would be some sort of sustainability. If we're thinking of ecological emotions, then it would be that people would be better able to handle those emotions constructively. This is very important. I suppose we'll never reach a situation where we can approach everything as constructively as possible, but even with a fairly small amount of focus we can make significant progress.

**Interviewer:** Why is it important to talk about climate anxiety and other climate emotions or ecological emotions? What, at minimum, should each of us know about this issue and why?

**Panu Pihkala:** I think all of us should at least understand that these emotions are diverse and that practically all of us feel at least some of them, regardless of whether we have ever taken a moment to consider them. Often when you have a practical workshop or lesson where people consider this issue, they have all sorts of moments of revelation: "Yes, I actually feel a bit confused about this issue" or "You're right, I do tend to feel guilty even though I wouldn't like to be held responsible". That's what many people say, there can be a wide range of attitudes. We can often identify some of these emotions, but others are quite difficult to pinpoint. It takes a great deal of effort and often support from others. And you have to remember these emotions may be very different. Even the same emotion may be manifested in different ways in different people. I think this is an important aim for research: to highlight the fact that you can't assume that, say, environmental guilt is always felt the same way in all situations. We need more detailed research on the type of environmental guilt felt and how it's manifested in each situation.

**Interviewer:** How has research or public discourse on the topic evolved? What do scholarly facts and the public, or the general, narrative have in common?

**Panu Pihkala:** The topic has only been studied fairly recently. Research on emotions has, of course, a long history, although Western scholarship has been criticised for sidelining emotions as something we don't have to pay much attention to and seeing reason, or cognition, as the main premise. As research has progressed, we have realised that emotions and related phenomena affect us quite a bit also in terms of decision-making, providing all the more reason to put emotions under scholarly scrutiny. Actual ecological emotions have

been studied in environmental psychology for several decades now, and pioneering research has been conducted in ecopsychology, a field of psychology that focuses even more on natural environments. Difficult ecological emotions, such as grief for the felling of a local forest or losing an animal species that's important to you, could be described as countercultural themes as recently as the 1990s.

In the 21st century, with climate change and the climate crisis, as it's now called, gaining in intensity, people have also realised that the climate crisis stirs up various emotions. You can call them climate emotions. Actually, it's thanks to climate emotions that research on ecological emotions has really taken off in the past five years. Right now, a lot of studies are being published across the world, but back when I started focusing on this issue in 2015, I was pretty much on my own. There weren't that many people in the field.

**Interviewer:** What are the most common misconceptions or myths about ecological emotions and attitudes? And what's the strangest assumption or most profound piece of wisdom you've ever heard?

**Panu Pihkala:** This is related to the latter part of your previous question, which I haven't really answered yet, regarding the relationship or differences between public discussion and scholarly research. Environmental and climate issues spark political passions and create conflicts because with them comes the expectation that we must change. We have discovered that current social models cause biodiversity loss and excessive climate emissions, so we have to do something. This means the issue feels close to home and makes people resist change, which is also an emotional response. As this is psychologically quite a challenging topic and a pretty challenging emotional landscape if you think of the fear associated with the fate of the world, it's not surprising that it triggers different reactions.

Some react by distancing themselves from the issue, for example, by claiming that climate anxiety doesn't exist. At one point people were saying that this can't be a common phenomenon. But surveys and interviews have shown that it is actually fairly common and can take various forms. Another way to distance yourself from the issue is by saying, "Okay, so maybe it exists, but we shouldn't worry about it, things are pretty good and technology is evolving and will solve these issues". So that's the type of challenges that have come up when people have tried to keep the phenomenon at arm's length. And there's also been polarisation, particularly around the term 'climate anxiety', because it's been used by political parties as well.

All this also affects research because it affects how people hear these words and respond to them. For instance, today in Finland you couldn't carry out the type of survey that was conducted in 2017 on people's responses to climate anxiety because it's no longer neutral territory. Now you must carefully plan how you will examine things and what you will ask.

**Interviewer:** Why is climate concern or climate anxiety, or other ecological emotions, often seen as something that only afflicts young people?

**Panu Pihkala:** For lots of reasons. One is that, statistically, young people have more to look forward to so they are naturally very interested in the future. And when we compare Finland with other countries, young people here have received high-quality environmental and climate education, although there's always room for improvement. We also know that young people often have quite a strong sense of ethics. It's a stage in life when you are motivated and keen to change the world and tackle injustice. All these factors combined mean that young people are more likely than other age groups to express their fears, concerns and anxiety about the environment. Sometimes this makes people draw the erroneous conclusion that environmental anxiety, for example, is something that only occurs among young people, which is not true. You find people in all age groups who feel it. But clearly it appears to be more intense among young people. Of course, social factors also play a role. For instance, if your friends talk about their concerns for the future of the world's environment, it naturally creates a culture where you find it easier to talk about these issues. Then again, if you're an older person and no one around you is talking about the topic, or if someone does mention it, they do so in terms of "Young people shouldn't feel anxious about all this", it doesn't really encourage you to bring it up. So there may be many reasons that give the impression this is something for young people only.

**Interviewer:** What is the most important insight you have had in your work?

**Panu Pihkala:** It's difficult to choose only one because it has been a very interesting journey of exploration. Perhaps that emotions are actually your friends. I wasn't familiar with this sort of discussion before I began my research and started to explore previous studies and literature on emotions. It's important to make the distinction between problems and emotions. If you have a problem that gives rise to various emotions, such as grief when dealing with a loss or change, sometimes people think the grief is the problem, but actually it's the change or loss. If we can use the emotion of grief appropriately, it can help us respond to the problem. I think that's one of the key insights I have gained.

**Interviewer:** Let's look at the theme of sustainable careers from the human perspective. Sustainable employment or careers are usually defined as something that feels meaningful. You often hear people say that your job or career should evoke feelings, especially positive ones. When people talk about work, they frequently use expressions and phrases such as 'find your passion', which, though well-intentioned, makes many people anxious. What if you don't feel passionate, and your job is not always fun and inspiring? So the question is, what is the difference between meaning and passion? How do you distinguish between them and keep them clearly demarcated?

**Panu Pihkala:** Your question and its framing are quite loaded. In general, it's very important to examine the current world of work and understand that the environmental crisis, or the socio-economic crisis if you want, is associated with lots of social issues. It's a multi-crisis or multi-transformation that is increasingly affecting work as well. Even to the extent that employers are interested in what they should do to retain young adults as employees. We know that young adults, on average, rate environmental values very highly, and if this is not reflected in the workplace, they may just up and quit. Talking a bit more about the relationship between meaning and passion, I personally think, and naturally I have some research evidence to back this up although I'm not an expert in the field, passion is something that makes people excited about their work and helps them keep working, cope and be active. But like anything else, passion can also be misused. The idea that we should always feel excited and passionate doesn't really do justice to the reality of human life. In my own work, I've talked about the idea of 'mental seasons', meaning that it's only natural for your moods to fluctuate. We can't always be positive. A good model for life would be to feel both joy and sadness, depending on the situation. As for passion, if you go back to the roots of the word in different languages, it also has the meaning of suffering. If we took a really typical Finnish approach, we could say that we must suffer passionately at work to succeed, but that's not what I'm after here. I just mean that everything in life has a spectrum. When you really care about something, you often experience the positives of passion but also some sort of pain, because important things often involve struggle.

**Interviewer:** Can your job be your passion? What would be sufficient enthusiasm for your job?

**Panu Pihkala:** This is of course a question that everyone should answer for themselves based on their own criteria. As for what you just said, I think that in terms of these mental seasons, employers shouldn't always expect people to be in a particular emotional state. I mean, they can certainly expect a certain level of professionalism. There are also many things you can do to ensure that emotions are taken more effectively into account in the workplace. Doing so can also help in achieving many economic goals. But if you haven't felt any excitement or passion for a long time, you should, of course, take a moment to consider why that is. If the situation continues for a very long time, you are at risk of falling into depression and cynicism.

**Interviewer:** What can your job and, in particular, career consist of? How do you understand the concept of a career? How can, for example, a person with climate anxiety channel their anxiety into action with an impact through their various roles, including as a citizen?

**Panu Pihkala:** As a concrete image, the Finnish word 'ura' refers to not only a career, but also an imprint or trail left behind after much use. You can apply this metaphor in many ways, say, to a society having several common trails or paths that people have taken and that are therefore easy to choose. Then again, you can create this trail yourself, so that's another view you can take of a career. Personally I have experience of both types of career. I've had jobs that have matched my degree, but several times I've also changed direction based on what has felt the most important and effective choice. For instance, studying ecological emotions was not encouraged or recommended. It was seen as an odd choice, but I was convinced of its importance. I decided to follow a new trail. It was uncharted terrain, but you create a trail when you explore it long enough.

As for the second part of your question, about channelling your climate anxiety into constructive action, this is incredibly important from a practical perspective. I was involved in a practical project called *Toivoa ja toimintaa* ('Hope and action'), carried out by the Finnish Association of Biology and Geography Teachers and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. I was hired to work as an advisor. The project produced two types of material. The first type encouraged inclusive action and was geared to secondary and general upper secondary schools, although it was pretty widely applicable. The second type was intended to help people connect with their emotions about the state of the world, where the environmental crisis and the climate crisis naturally play a key role. This kind of model where you are in touch with your emotions and engage in action is widely recommended in psychology, too. You need the ability to handle emotions in a different way, and you should also find a way to feel that you're contributing to a better world. That helps a lot. There are many different ways to do this.

**Interviewer:** On a related note, can a researcher be an activist? Are you an activist?

**Panu Pihkala:** If climate anxiety is a loaded word that involves polarisation, activist is another example of a pretty loaded word. We have some literature on this topic in Finland, for instance the *Taisteleva tutkimus* ('Rebellious Research') collection of articles. Social responsibility and impact are also mentioned in university guidelines. If I think about the essence of these matters, it's clear that it's long been important for me as a researcher to try to influence society and give back what I have gained through the expertise developed thanks to my education. So I wish to provide as accurate research-based perspectives as possible on current issues. I'm also an environmentalist, but whether I'm an activist depends on the exact meaning each of us assigns to this term. I think there can be a wide range of activities which are connected to this term.

**Interviewer:** What kind of careers can we have in this era of environmental crisis? What should change, either in the workplace or in the concept of work, for it to even make sense to carve out a career in the midst of an existential crisis?

**Panu Pihkala:** We often use the expression 'business as usual' to describe the kind of behaviour typical of humanity where we just carry on as normal. But now the effects of the socio-ecological crisis are becoming so prominent that a growing number of people are questioning the business-as-usual mindset. Sure, from a historical perspective, change has been in the air for the past five years when you consider, for instance, how the world of finance has finally begun to take environmental issues more seriously. But this change has been fairly slow to come when you remember how long these matters have been discussed and how it's now been 50 years since the *Limits to Growth* report was published. So although it's been in the air, it's taken a long time for us to react.

Now we have reached a situation where many young people quite rightly question what professions and job descriptions would best serve the very broad change that is clearly required for human societies to become more sustainable. I think this issue needs to be taken seriously, and we must discuss and reflect on it together. It's not an easy topic at all, especially when there are always other pressures as well, relating to the finances of educational institutions and all sorts of global crises, be they pandemics, the war in Ukraine or whatever. But somehow we must try to find the time and energy to deal with the situation because otherwise the risk is that some people decide they've had enough of business as usual and feel compelled to look for something else.

**Interviewer:** Is there something you wish you had known when you embarked on your career?

**Panu Pihkala:** Sure, lots of things. I'm thinking of the old French adage that you could roughly translate as, 'if only the young knew and the old were still able'. Partly it's of course about the learning and growth that are part of life, that you learn some things along the way. But I think it would have been good to be more aware of the benefits of multidisciplinary when I was pursuing my master's degree at university. I mean, my degree did include some multidisciplinary elements, but as is often the case with any degree, people tend to pursue questions that dominate their discipline and the research field within it. I'm strongly in favour of an all-round, multidisciplinary approach. I wish I'd understood that a bit better at the time.

**Interviewer:** What would you like to say to students reflecting on their careers in this era of environmental crisis?

**Panu Pihkala:** I think it's terribly important for each of us to find people we can trust and with whom we can talk about how we feel about the future of the world and how it affects our career and education choices. Good peer support is so valuable. I come across many

young people who are very conscientious and care a great deal about the world. But this can also lead to a culture where you demand a bit too much from yourself, something we Finns have excelled at even historically. In the National Survey on Climate Change and Emotions in 2019 carried out together with Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, feelings of inadequacy were among the most widely identified climate emotions in Finland. So I would like to encourage people to practise self-compassion too, and to remember that although you can do a lot, you can't do everything. Learn to live with that sense of incompleteness.

**Interviewer:** How do you instil hope?

**Panu Pihkala:** That's a short but pretty big question. I write most of my research papers in English, but I've also authored some Finnish-language non-fiction books, such as the one published in 2017 which is in front of me right now, entitled *Päin helvettiä? Ympäristöahdistus ja toivo* ('Going to hell? Eco-anxiety and hope'). Indicating the question mark with a rising pitch is pretty important when you're on the radio because it tells you a lot about the approach. In this book, I discussed different notions of hope in the context of the environmental crisis and more generally in philosophy and other fields of research. So the first question I would ask as a researcher is, what hope are we actually talking about? It's not always the most relevant question because just using the word 'hope' points to a specific direction, but it's fairly important to determine whether we're talking about a very optimistic, Pollyannaish type of hope or a more sustainable type of hope.

Researchers have actually examined empirically what notions of hope people have and how a constructive or realistic type of hope could be encouraged. They have discovered that it must include personal participation, that you must somehow act in line with what you would like to see happen. Otherwise it's just wishful thinking, "If only someone would take care of this" and "I'm sure things will pan out". But what I mentioned earlier about connecting with your emotions and inclusive action – that's been investigated a great deal in connection with the notion of hope. People may say that hope springs from action, which is true, but sometimes you just don't have the energy. What you need then is to connect with your emotions and just take it easy. Questions of finding meaning in life are part of this, as is the word 'meaning', which we mentioned in passing in this podcast when talking about passion and jobs. If you succeed in retaining an adequate sense of meaning, usually hope will live on too.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up this interview?

**Panu Pihkala:** We've discussed many things, although I'm sure there are still lots of other perspectives we could take. One thing I might add is that sometimes we divide emotions into positive and negative ones, but if you look at it critically, all emotions can have a life-



serving role if we are able to deal with them constructively together. So we shouldn't distinguish between good sheep and bad sheep, or whatever animal metaphor you wish to use, but explore different emotional landscapes together.

**Interviewer:** Thank you so much for the interview, Panu Pihkala. It was an honour to have you on the podcast.

**Panu Pihkala:** Thank you very much.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for listening to Working Life for Everyone. This podcast was brought to you by University of Helsinki Career Services.