

PSYCH 218 -- Psychology of Death and Dying -- W 7:00-9:50 P.M. (Fall 2009)

Instructor: Christopher T. Burris, Ph.D. **Office:** STJ 2016

Phone: (519) 884-8110, ext. 28213 **e-mail:** cburris@uwaterloo.ca

Office Hours: M 2:30-3:15; M W 6:00-6:45; by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Armand Munteanu (STJ 2021; 519-884-8111, ext. 28256; stjpsych@artsmail.uwaterloo.ca)

Course Description (*Undergraduate Calendar*): “Variations in the meaning and significance of death and dying will be considered from a psychological perspective, with particular attention to the contexts (e.g., cultural, familial, life-span developmental) in which these variations occur.”

Course Purpose and Structure: The primary goal of this course is to expand your understanding of the pervasive impact of the phenomenon of death on the human experience from a psychological perspective.

PLEASE NOTE: The topic of death is a source of considerable unease for many people. As a result, some deal with it by avoiding any reminders of it. Others deal with it selectively, holding to safe conceptualizations of it and ignoring others. My approach in this course will be to confront death as frankly and honestly as I am able -- this may sometimes involve images, ideas, and discussions that some people might find upsetting. It is my responsibility to educate; it is your responsibility to decide whether or not taking this course is in your best interest at this time. Please choose wisely.

Because most of us have experienced losses, and because all of us will die, reflecting on one’s own experience is inevitable and is, indeed, encouraged in this course. We will address loss and the prospect of our own demise in various ways throughout the term. Having said that, it is important to note that *this course is neither intended nor designed to serve as group therapy*. Thus, persons (or those with loved ones) who are experiencing significant feelings of anxiety, anger, or grief linked to death-related issues are encouraged to seek out support from qualified mental health professionals.

Confrontation with death often elicits reactions that are intensely personal and individualistic. Although this diversity can be fascinating, others’ expressions can sometimes elicit feelings of threat or offense. Please be aware of this potential in yourself and in others, and strive to maintain an atmosphere where people can respectfully disagree.

Required Readings and Course Schedule:

Traditional death and dying textbooks take a topical approach to the content domain. For example, they may offer a chapter on suicide. In this course, however, we will focus on multiple, interrelated levels of analysis. Thus, rather than doing a unit on suicide, we may reflect on suicide in the context of examining death from the perspectives of culture, religion, and family systems, for example.

Consequently, I opted for a *Courseware package (available at the Copy Centre in Dana Porter Library)* of selected readings rather than a traditional textbook for this course. I’ve tried to achieve a balance between general and specific, and between readable and technical. I also included some specifically Canadian content. The reading list is being continuously revised: *Constructive* suggestions for improving it are welcome. That is, rather than simply stating that a given reading was “too hard/long/boring” (or “too easy/short/exciting”?!), offer specific suggestions for alternative readings or topics.

The reading schedule begins on the next page. *TIP: Read through the weekly topics carefully, and think about how and why these levels are fitted together the way they are.*

16 Sep - Introduction; Animate Level

Kastenbaum, R. J. (2004). What is death? In *Death, society, and human experience*, 8th Edition (pp. 45-77). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

23 Sep - Species Level; Human Level

Masson, J. M., & McCarthy, S. (1995). Grief, sadness, and the bones of elephants. In *When elephants weep: The emotional lives of animals* (pp. 91-110). New York: Delta/Dell.

Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T. & Solomon, S. (2002). A perilous leap from Becker's theorizing to empirical science: Terror management theory and research. In D. Liechty (Ed.), *Death and denial: Interdisciplinary perspectives on the legacy of Ernest Becker* (pp. 3-16). Westport, CT: Praeger.

30 Sep - Historical/Cultural Level

DeSpelder, L. A., & Strickland, A. L. (2005). Perspectives on death: Cross-cultural and historical. In *The last dance: Encountering death and dying*, 7th Edition (pp. 87-123). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Northcott, H. C., & Wilson D. M. (2001). Dying and death in Canada today. In *Dying and death in Canada* (pp. 35-56). Aurora, ON: Garamond.

07 Oct - Test 1; Medical Level

Prendergast, T. J., & Puntillo, K. A. (2002). Withdrawal of life support: Intensive caring at the end of life. *JAMA – Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288, 2732-2740.

Rainer, J. P., & McMurry, P. E. (2002). Caregiving at the end of life. *JCLP/In Session: Psychotherapy in Practice*, 58, 1421-1431.

14 Oct - Legal Level

Oshofsky, M. J., & Oshofsky, H. J. (2002). The psychological experience of security officers who work with executions. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 65, 358-369.

Vandiver, M., Giacopassi, D. J., & Gathje, P. R. (2002). "I hope someone murders your mother!": An exploration of extreme support for the death penalty. *Deviant Behavior*, 23, 385-415.

21 Oct - Religious Level

Kearl, M. C. (1989). Death and religion. In *Endings: A sociology of death and dying* (pp. 170-203). New York: Oxford University Press.

28 Oct - Arts/Media Level

Trend, D. (2003). Merchants of death: media violence and the American empire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 73, 285-308.

Doss, E. (2002). Death, art and memory in the public sphere: The visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America. *Mortality*, 7, 63-82.

04 Nov - Political Level

Stover, E., Haglund, W. D., Samuels, M. (2003). Exhumation of mass graves in Iraq: Considerations for forensic investigations, humanitarian needs, and the demands of justice. *JAMA - Journal of the American Medical Association*, 290, 663-666.

Pollack, C. E. (2003). Returning to a safe area? The importance of burial for return to Srebrenica. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 16, 186-201.

11 Nov - TEST 2; Relational Level

Walsh, F., & McGoldrick, M. (1991). Loss and the family: A systemic perspective. In F. Walsh and M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *Living beyond loss: Death in the family* (pp. 1-29). New York: W. W. Norton.

18 Nov - Individual Level 1 (Developmental Considerations)

Griffith, T. (2003). Assisting with the “big hurts, little tears” of the youngest griever: Working with three-, four-, and five-year olds who have experienced loss and grief because of death. *Illness, Crisis, & Loss*, 11, 217-225.

Christ, G. H., Siegel, K., & Christ, A. E. (2002). Adolescent Grief: “It never really hit me... until it actually happened.” *JAMA - Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288, 1269-1278.

25 Nov - Individual Level 2 (Personality Considerations)

Neimeyer, R. A., & Van Brunt, D. (1995). Death anxiety. In H. Wass & R. A. Neimeyer (Eds.), *Dying: Facing the facts*, 3rd Edition (pp. 49-88). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

02 Dec - TEST 3

Marking: TEST 1 = 35%; TEST 2 = 40%; TEST 3 = 25%. All tests are multiple choice and use computer cards, so be sure to bring a couple of pencils and an eraser on test days. Also, ***be prepared to present identification (your WAT card) during tests***. The tests are weighted in accordance with how much material they cover; they are not cumulative. Any material covered in class or in the assigned readings is testable, including material covered in class immediately after a test. I realize that writing a test can be draining (they’re not much fun to construct, either!), so I will not try to make your brain explode after one... but I nevertheless wish to make the best use of the limited time we have in the course.

Test results will be posted on the Psychology bulletin board between offices 2016 and 2018 as soon as they are available. Please check your mark after each test, as I do not release marks over the phone or by e-mail, and university policy prohibits final grades from being posted prior to the end of the examination period.

You are entitled to test rescheduling for *legitimate* medical, compassionate, or religious grounds. Alternate test dates/times will not be granted because you forgot, overslept, were in a bad mood, had a plane to catch, didn’t come to class or read the course outline, had a bird poop on your head, etc.

Whenever possible, please inform us **PRIOR** to the scheduled test to arrange an alternate writing time. A make-up test should be written as quickly as possible upon your return to classes, with the obvious provision of access to missed material (see Class Attendance below). When arriving to write a make-up test, please have the appropriate documentation in hand to support a medical, compassionate, or religious claim, in accordance with UW regulations. Make-up exams may differ in format from the original.

The mark received for a test stands – it will not be dropped, re-weighted, etc. because you weren’t feeling well, had a lot on your mind, etc., nor will “extra” assignments be given to students who are dissatisfied with their grades. My goal is to be fair to everyone. If you request an exception in extreme or unusual circumstances, ***you need to be prepared to explain why making an exception for you would be fair to the other students in the class.***

Class Attendance: Whether or not you choose to attend class is entirely up to you, but you are responsible for all material covered. Should you miss class, for whatever reason, it is your responsibility to find a classmate who would be willing to provide you with the notes you missed. If your absence is *legitimate*, then I will be happy to answer questions about the missed material once you have consulted with a fellow student. To make the most of consultation time outside of class, come prepared with specific questions regarding whatever material you may be

having trouble with, and be prepared to discuss what you know (or think you know) about a topic -- that can speed up and simplify the clarification process tremendously.

Special Needs: “Students with documented or suspected disabilities (i.e., physical, learning, or sensory disabilities or chronic medical conditions) are encouraged to contact the Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD) to determine eligibility for their services. OPD is located in Needles Hall Room 1132 and can be contacted at 888-4567 ext. 25082, TDD/TTY 888-4044.” In the event that you require an adapted learning or testing environment, please provide me with OPD documentation *at the beginning of the term.*

Cheating: *I think cheating is lazy, disrespectful, and immoral, and I find it very sad that some people may try to get a course mark, or even a university degree, without having earned it honestly. I really hope that you’re not one of those people.* “All students registered in courses at the University of Waterloo and its Federated University and Affiliated Colleges are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for their actions. Students who are unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or who need help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating), or about rules for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, TA, academic advisor, the appropriate St. Jerome’s departmental Chair, or ultimately the Appeals Officer (currently the Associate Dean) for St. Jerome’s University. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy #71, *Student Academic Discipline*, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm. Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve in accord with Policy #70, *Student Grievance*, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm.”

On Doing Your Best: As an alternative to cheating ;), there are some things you can do to put in the best performance possible in this class: 1) Come to class! Be alert, ask questions – either in class or later. Do more than mindlessly write down whatever appears on an overhead: *Think* about the material – try to come up with your own examples and illustrations by applying the material to people you know, media happenings, etc. 2) Do the readings! Ideally, read them at least once before the relevant week’s lecture, and at least once after that lecture. Don’t mindlessly run a highlighter over the words: *Think* about the material – write down questions, observations, possible examples, etc. as you read. 3) Look for connections! We will be dealing with a lot of specific phenomena in this class, but there will be some big themes that will keep recurring throughout the term. Look for them. Look also for connections between lecture and assigned readings. Think about what *this* theorist might say about *that* topic, etc. – even if we’ve never addressed this in class. 4) Test yourself! Don’t simply assume that certain concepts are “easy” or “common sense” – often, they are not. Can you explain an idea to someone else, without reciting your notes, in a way that that person will understand? If given a blank page, could you reproduce the structure of ideas I use to organize my lectures? Can you create a structure of ideas that accurately summarizes a reading’s main points? Can you recognize sets of information in lectures or readings that might make good multiple choice options, and can you explain in what ways the members of a set are similar or different?

I realize that these exercises may sound difficult, especially if you have gotten by with plain old memorization in the past. Having said that, I strongly suspect that you WILL do better in this class (and others, too, most likely) if you put the above suggestions into practice.

Classroom Etiquette and Contacting Me: Please TURN OFF cell phones, etc. when in class. When addressing me in person, by phone, or by e-mail, please call me “Dr. Burris.” I welcome your questions and comments in class, but keep on topic, and don’t insist that you be heard on every possible occasion or interrupt others who are speaking. For questions outside of class, use scheduled office hours whenever possible. When office hours (or before/after class) are not convenient, use e-mail for small questions (be sure to include your name, your UWID#, and the class, and allow at least 24 hours for a response), or make an appointment for bigger questions. When my door is open, you may also drop in, but be sure to knock and ask if it is a good time to talk.

Good luck in this class -- I hope it is a good experience.