

PSYCH/HLTH/GERON 218 -- Psychology of Death and Dying -- W 7:00-9:50 P.M. (Fall 2011)

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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: Death is a source of considerable unease for many people. 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.

Most of us have experienced losses. All of us will die. Reflecting on one’s own experience is thus 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. Still, 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. This diversity can be fascinating, but 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 in which 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. **Please note that the reading list has been extensively revised as of Fall 2011, and so older versions of the courseware package will not meet your needs for the course.**

14 Sep - Introduction; Animate Level

Kastenbaum, R. (2009). What is death? In R. Kastenbaum, *Death, society, and human experience*, 10th ed. (pp. 35-69). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

21 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.

28 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. (2008). Dying and death in Canada today. In *Dying and death in Canada*, 2nd ed. (pp. 39-64). Peterborough, ON: Broadview.

05 Oct - Test 1; Medical Level

- Ashby, M. (2009). The dying human: A perspective from palliative medicine. In A. Kellehear (Ed.), *The study of dying: From autonomy to transformation* (pp. 76-98). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

12 Oct - Legal Level

- Dresser, R. (2006-2007). *Schiavo* and contemporary myths about dying. *University of Miami Law Review*, 61, 821-846.
- 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.

19 Oct - Religious Level

- Hayes, J. C., & Hendrix, C. C. (2008). The role of religion in bereavement. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, and W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 327-348). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

26 Oct - Arts/Media Level

- Hanusch, F. (2008). Graphic death in the news media: present or absent? *Mortality*, 13, 301-317.
- Lennon, J. J., & Mitchell, M. (2007). Dark tourism: The role of sites of death in tourism. In M. Mitchell (Ed.), *Remember me: Constructing immortality* (pp. 167-178). New York: Routledge.

02 Nov - Political Level

- Unger, R. (2006). Untangling the web: Threat, ideology, and political behavior. In P. R. Kimmel and C. E. Stout (Eds.), *Collateral damage: The psychological consequences of America's war on terrorism* (pp. 79-108). Westport, CT: Praeger.

09 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.

16 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.
- Crenshaw, D. A., & Hill, L. C. (2009). Therapy for adolescents experiencing prolonged grief. In D. E. Balk and C. A. Corr (Eds.), *Adolescent encounters with death, bereavement, and coping*. New York: Springer.

23 Nov - Individual Level 2 (Personality Considerations)

Kastenbaum, R. (2000). Dying: Toward a psychological perspective. In R. Kastenbaum, *The Psychology of Death* (pp. 207-251). London, UK: Free Association Books.

30 Nov - 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. There is no final exam. Any material covered in class or in the assigned readings is testable, including material covered in class immediately after a test. Class will resume after a break following Test 1 and Test 2.

Test marks will be posted on the course's ACE page as soon as they are available. In order to be fair to everyone, ***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. **Please understand and respect this policy, and adjust your expectations accordingly.**

UW Policy regarding Illness and Missed Tests: UW Examination Regulations (www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/exams/ExamRegs.pdf) state that: 1) A medical certificate presented in support of an official petition for relief from normal academic requirements must provide all of the information requested on the "University of Waterloo Verification of Illness" form or it will not be accepted. This form can be obtained from Health Services or at www.healthservices.uwaterloo.ca/Health_Services/verification.html. 2) If a student has a test/examination deferred due to acceptable medical evidence, he/she normally will write the test/examination at a mutually convenient time, to be determined by the course instructor. 3) The University acknowledges that, due to the pluralistic nature of the University community, some students may on religious grounds require alternative times to write tests and examinations. 4) Elective arrangements (such as travel plans) are not considered acceptable grounds for granting an alternative examination time.

Thus, 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 me 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. Make-up exams may differ in format from the original.

Class Attendance: *This is not a web-based or distance education course.* Thus, although whether or not you choose to attend class is entirely up to you, 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: "The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term." If you require an adapted learning or testing environment, please provide me with OPD documentation *at the beginning of the term.*

For the Ethically Challenged: *I think cheating is lazy, disrespectful, and immoral, and I find it very sad that some people may try to get a course mark without having earned it honestly. I hope you're not one of them.*

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo and its Federated University and Affiliated Colleges are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Discipline: All students registered in courses at St. Jerome's University are expected to know what constitutes

academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under St. Jerome’s University Academic Discipline Policy and UW Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. In such a case, contact the St. Jerome’s University Grievance Officer. Read St. Jerome’s University Handbook, Section 4, item 8, www.sju.ca/faculty/SJU_handbook/grievance_policy.html.

Appeals: A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under St. Jerome’s University Academic Discipline Policy or Grievance Policy if a ground for an appeal can be established. In such a case, contact the St. Jerome’s University Appeals Officer. Read St. Jerome’s University Handbook, Section 6.4, www.sju.ca/faculty/SJU_handbook/examinations_grades_standings_and_appeals.html.

Academic Integrity website (Arts): http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html

Academic Integrity Office (UW): <http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/>

On Doing Your Best: There are some things you can do to put in the best performance possible in this class:

0) Make the decision to do your best! I have often wondered how much the class average would improve *if every student decided to work to his/her full potential*. Are you willing to make this commitment to yourself?

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 deal with a lot of specific phenomena, but there some big themes 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. Texting, chatting, surfing, facebooking, tweeting, squawking, etc. annoy me and distract other students, so please do them elsewhere. 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.