



**The Psychology of Happiness and Meaning
PSYC34H3F**

Winter 2023
Fridays 11am-1pm
MW 170

Instructor

Dr. Ravi Thiruchselvam

Teaching Assistants

Danielle Downie
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Course Description

What is happiness, and why does it often seem elusive? How does happiness relate to a sense of purpose and meaning in life? What are the determinants of happiness and meaning, and what ultimately makes life worth living? Although these questions have a long and rich history in philosophy, they have only become the focus of psychological science relatively recently. This course will examine the conceptual, methodological, and philosophical issues surrounding the scientific study of happiness and meaning as foundations of psychological wellbeing.

Learning Outcomes

It is my hope that, by the end of this course, students will be able to:

- 1) Understand foundational as well as emerging theories and research findings in the domain of psychological wellbeing.
- 2) Learn how to read and carefully decipher primary scientific articles relating to psychological wellbeing.
- 3) Develop critical thinking skills by identifying important strengths and weaknesses in research (e.g., in conceptual frameworks, methodology, and data analysis or interpretation) and reflect on potential ways to improve the state of the field.

- 4) Write more effectively by completing a report on a psychological wellbeing intervention or a critical analysis of a book in the popular press.
- 5) Identify the broader relevance of the content covered in the class to other academic disciplines (e.g., philosophy).
- 6) Reflect on how the ideas and findings from the field may help improve their own lives.

Course Email

All course-related emails must be sent to the following address:

Thiruchselvam.PSYC34@gmail.com

Messages sent to other addresses (e.g., to Quercus or the instructor's and TAs' individual email accounts) may not be answered. Please ensure that the correct email address is used in all your course-related communications.

Course Evaluation/Marking Scheme

Grade Components

Midterm Exam I (February 10th): 25%
Written Assignment (March 8th): 15%
Midterm Exam II (March 17th): 25%
Final Exam (Date to be determined): 35%

**Note that, as described below, the weight assigned to the Midterm Exam with the lower score is adjustable based on Interaction Points the student earns throughout the term.*

Midterm and Final Exams

The midterms and final exam will consist of multiple choice and written-response short-answer questions. Midterm exams will be non-cumulative, whereas the final exam will be mostly non-cumulative (80%) with a cumulative written-response component (worth 20%) that will ask you to reflect on and integrate key ideas we have learned throughout the course. All exams will be based on both lecture content and assigned readings.

Written Assignment

You are asked to engage in a self-selected psychological well-being intervention and write a case report summarizing your experience. If you do not wish to complete a self-selected intervention, you have the option of writing a critical analysis and review of a popular book on happiness. The written assignment will be due on **March 8th at 11:59pm** and will count towards 15% of the course grade.

Psychological Well-being Intervention

You will select an empirically-supported intervention designed to improve psychological wellbeing and practice it regularly for at least eighteen days. You may choose one of the following practices: compassion meditation, mindfulness meditation, or gratitude expressions. You are responsible for learning the method independently, but relevant online resources will be shared in the course.

Your task is to practice the technique daily for ten days for 20 minutes daily and track key indicators of your psychological well-being throughout this period. On March 8th, you will submit a case report about your experience with the intervention, consisting of a brief introduction/literature review, methods, findings (e.g., absolute-level values in your well-being measures), and discussion. A more detailed description of the case report will be provided in class.

The goals of this assignment are threefold:

- (1) To develop experiential knowledge of a psychological intervention designed to enhance well-being. The challenges inherent to engaging in a specific psychological technique, and the potential benefits that accrue from it, are often better revealed through direct practice rather than reflecting on them in a purely abstract manner.
- (2) People often find it difficult to sustain practice on a chosen intervention over an extended period of time, even when they see clear benefits from it. They commonly attribute this to a waning of self-discipline. One aim of this assignment is to put the general dynamics of your own self-discipline and goal pursuit under critical scrutiny. That is, you are encouraged to pay close attention to the forces that undermine your dedication to your selected practice, and if appropriate, reflect on creative ways to counteract these forces.
- (3) You will have the opportunity to be both researcher and subject, and to therefore apply (to the extent that it is possible) a dispassionate scientific lens on the operations of your own mind. The attempt to treat one's own mind as a laboratory raises several intriguing methodological opportunities and challenges: How do expectations shape your response to the practice, and is it possible to minimize their influence? Does merely observing a mental phenomenon (e.g., an anger reaction) alter the way that this phenomenon unfolds? In your case report, you are asked to consider the unique methodological opportunities and challenges inherent in treating yourself as a psychological subject.

Book Review

If you do not wish to engage in a psychological wellbeing intervention, you have the option to write a critical analysis and review of a popular book on happiness. You may choose either *The Happiness Project* (by Gretchen Rubin) or *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (by Rick Hanson). In the book review, you are asked to analyze and evaluate the book's assumptions and claims in light of the theories and findings we are learning in the course. More details about this assignment will be provided in class.

Interaction Points

Throughout the term, you will have the option to earn up to 6 *Interaction Points* by actively engaging with the course material. This may be done by writing brief reflection pieces about either our optional live Zoom discussion sessions (described below) or about supplementary research articles that I post on Quercus. Any *Interaction Points* that you earn can be used towards reducing the weight of your lower-scoring Midterm Exam. This means that the weight of the lower-scoring Midterm Exam can be reduced by the total number of *Interaction Points* you have collected, and your *Interaction Points* will in turn be added to the overall course grade. More specifically, for a student who collects *Interaction Points* and wishes to use these points to offset the weight of their lower-scoring Midterm Exam, the student's final course grade will be calculated as follows:

Higher-scoring Midterm Exam: 25%
Interaction Points: X% (up to 6%)
Lower-scoring Midterm Exam: 25% - X%
Written Assignment: 15%
Final Exam: 35%

To make this concrete, we can consider an example. Suppose that a student scored 65% on Midterm Exam 1, 75% on Midterm Exam 2, 74% on the Written Assignment, and 72% on the Final Exam. Without any adjustment, this student's final course grade would be 71.3% $[(65 \cdot .25) + (75 \cdot .25) + (74 \cdot .15) + (72 \cdot .35)]$. But if this student earned 5 *Interaction Points* throughout the term, the student will have the option to reduce the weight of their lower-scoring Midterm Exam by 5% such that it will now be worth 20%, and the student's 5% *Interaction Points* will be added to their overall course grade. Thus, the student's *adjusted final course grade* will become 73.05% $[(65 \cdot .20) + (75 \cdot .25) + (74 \cdot .15) + (72 \cdot .35) + 5]$.

I invite and encourage you to actively engage with the optional Zoom discussion sessions and reflect on the research articles I post on Quercus. However, *Interaction Points* are an optional part of this course. This means that you are not required to complete them but earning these points can help you improve your final course grade by reducing the weight that is assigned to your lower-scoring Midterm Exam. More details on *Interaction Points* will be provided on Quercus.

Course Webpage/Quercus

The website associated with this course is accessible on Quercus via <http://q.utoronto.ca>. The syllabus, lecture slides, and all relevant course documents will be posted there. I strongly recommend you check Quercus regularly.

Lecture Delivery

Lectures will be delivered in-person. A PDF outline of the lecture slides will also be posted on Quercus to facilitate note-taking during the lecture.

Please note that lectures will only partly overlap with assigned readings. That is, lectures will have content that is not contained in chapter readings, and vice versa. Both lecture and textbook material are testable on exams. I encourage you to make use of office hours to clarify any questions that may arise from both assigned readings and lectures.

Live Discussion Meetings on Zoom (Optional)

Over the semester, we will have an opportunity to meet as a class on Zoom for live discussion sessions. These meetings are optional and are offered for those students who wish to engage directly with me and their classmates about course content. A few days before each meeting, I will post 2-3 discussion questions on Quercus to give you a chance to reflect on them. We can then discuss these questions together during the live meeting that week. Although these are not mandatory for you to attend, I encourage you to make use of at least some of these meetings throughout the course. They will be held throughout the term on specific **Thursdays from 10-11:30am**. The dates and Zoom link will be announced on Quercus.

Office Hours

I will also be available for virtual office hours meetings **Fridays 2 – 3:30pm** or by appointment. If you have questions about course content, performance in the class, or psychology more broadly, feel free to schedule a meeting. To do so, please email me at:

Thiruchselvam.PSYC34@gmail.com

COURSE OUTLINE		
LECTURE	TOPIC	READING
Week 1 January 13 th	Happiness and meaning: An Overview	None
Week 2 January 20 th	Is happiness possible? The hedonic treadmill	Buss (2000); Riis et al. (2005)
Week 3 January 27 th	The pursuit of happiness: Paradoxes and puzzles	Mauss et al. (2011); Smith et al. (2009)
Week 4 February 3 rd	Feeling good: The foundations of pleasure	Nguyen, Naffziger, & Berridge (2021); Rozin et al. (2013)
Week 5 February 10 th	<i>Midterm Exam I</i> <i>Covers Weeks 1-4</i>	None
Week 6 February 17 th	So what <i>is</i> happiness exactly? Conceptual and methodological issues	Fredrickson & Kahneman (1993); Kahneman et al. (2006)
Week 7 February 24 th	No class - Reading week February 18 - 24	None
Week 8 March 3 rd	The who, where, and when of happiness	Killingsworth & Glibert (2010); Myers & Diener (2018)
Week 9 March 10 th	Can we increase happiness? Examining psychological interventions	Dunn, Aknin, & Norton (2008); Neff & Germer (2013)
Week 10 March 17 th	<i>Midterm Exam II</i> <i>Covers Weeks 6-9</i>	None
Week 11 March 24 th	What good is suffering? Adversity, meaning, and compassion	Lim & DeSteno (2016); Seery et al. (2013)

Week 12 March 31 st	Eudaimonia: Theoretical and empirical bases	Baumeister et al. (2013); Wood, Joseph, & Maltby (2009)
Week 13 April 10 th <i>Note the date change due to a missed class on April 7th (Good Friday)</i>	Endgame: What really matters?	Lawler-Row & Piferi (2006); McLain, Rosenfeld, & Breitbart (2003)
Date TBA	<i>Final Exam</i> <i>The Final Exam will be 80% non-cumulative and 20% cumulative. The non-cumulative portion will cover Weeks 11-13.</i> <i>Held during the Final Examination Period (Date to be determined)</i>	None

Assigned Readings

A core aim in the course is to delve deeply into the theoretical and empirical literature on the psychology of happiness and meaning. I have done my best to select articles that are of reasonable length and complexity for a C-level course. However, some of these articles are dense (as they are written with current researchers in mind) and it may be helpful to read them more than once prior to class. To facilitate a deeper understanding of the assigned readings and to prepare for a thoughtful seminar discussion, please read the articles with at least the following four **general** questions in mind:

- 1) What claims are being made exactly? Are the claims supported by strong reasoning and evidence? Do you see any problems or concerns?
- 2) What assumptions are the author(s) making? Are these assumptions reasonable or can they be challenged? In this case, *assumptions* refer to ideas or beliefs that the authors seem to be relying on that are not explicitly stated.
- 3) For empirical papers: What are the specific methods (e.g., experimental design, independent & dependent variables) being used to investigate the research questions? Do these methods have weaknesses, and if so, how might you have conducted the study differently?
- 4) How do the articles' claims fit into broader themes in the course? How do they relate to other ideas and findings you have encountered in this course or elsewhere?

All readings are available through UofT Libraries or Google Scholar and students are responsible for accessing and downloading them.

Week 1: Happiness and Meaning – An overview

No readings

Week 2: Is happiness possible? The hedonic treadmill

Buss, D. M. (2000). The evolution of happiness. *American psychologist*, 55(1), 15.

Riis, J., Loewenstein, G., Baron, J., Jepson, C., Fagerlin, A., & Ubel, P. A. (2005). Ignorance of hedonic adaptation to hemodialysis: a study using ecological momentary assessment. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 134(1), 3.

Week 3: The pursuit of happiness: Paradoxes and puzzles

Mauss, I. B., Tamir, M., Anderson, C. L., & Savino, N. S. (2011). Can seeking happiness make people unhappy? Paradoxical effects of valuing happiness. *Emotion*, 11(4), 807.

Smith, D. M., Loewenstein, G., Jankovic, A., & Ubel, P. A. (2009). Happily hopeless: adaptation to a permanent, but not to a temporary, disability. *Health Psychology*, 28(6), 787.

Week 4: Feeling good: The foundations of pleasure

Nguyen, D., Naffziger, E. E., & Berridge, K. C. (2021). Positive affect: Nature and brain bases of liking and wanting. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 39, 72-78.

Rozin, P., Guillot, L., Fincher, K., Rozin, A., & Tsukayama, E. (2013). Glad to be sad, and other examples of benign masochism. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(4), 439.

Week 5: Midterm I

No readings

Week 6: So what is happiness exactly? Conceptual and methodological issues

Fredrickson, B. L., & Kahneman, D. (1993). Duration neglect in retrospective evaluations of affective episodes. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 65(1), 45.

Kahneman, D., Krueger, A. B., Schkade, D., Schwarz, N., & Stone, A. A. (2006). Would you be happier if you were richer? A focusing illusion. *Science*, 312(5782), 1908-1910.

Week 7: Reading Week

No readings

Week 8: The who, where, and when of happiness

Killingsworth, M. A., & Gilbert, D. T. (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*, 330(6006), 932-932

Myers, D. G., & Diener, E. (2018). The scientific pursuit of happiness. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2), 218-225.

Week 9: Can we increase happiness? Examining psychological interventions

Dunn, E. W., Aknin, L. B., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Spending money on others promotes happiness. *Science*, 319(5870), 1687-1688.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 69(1), 28-44.

Week 10: Midterm II

No readings

Week 11: What good is suffering? Adversity, meaning, and compassion

Lim, D., & DeSteno, D. (2016). Suffering and compassion: The links among adverse life experiences, empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior. *Emotion*, 16(2), 175.

Seery, M. D., Leo, R. J., Lupien, S. P., Kondrak, C. L., & Almonte, J. L. (2013). An upside to adversity? Moderate cumulative lifetime adversity is associated with resilient responses in the face of controlled stressors. *Psychological science*, 24(7), 1181-1189.

Week 12: Eudaimonia: Theoretical and empirical bases

Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *The journal of positive psychology*, 8(6), 505-516.

Wood, A. M., Joseph, S., & Maltby, J. (2009). Gratitude predicts psychological well-being above the Big Five facets. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 46(4), 443-447.

Week 13: Endgame: What really matters?

Lawler-Row, K. A., & Piferi, R. L. (2006). The forgiving personality: Describing a life well lived? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41(6), 1009-1020.

McClain, C. S., Rosenfeld, B., & Breitbart, W. (2003). Effect of spiritual well-being on end-of-life despair in terminally-ill cancer patients. *The lancet*, 361(9369), 1603-1607.

Course Policies on Assessments

Disability-Related Accommodations

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the AccessAbility Services Office (<http://www.uts.utoronto.ca/ability/>) as soon as possible.

AccessAbility Services staff (located in Rm AA142, Arts and Administration Building) are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. Please contact 416-287-7560 (tel/TTY) or email ability.uts@utoronto.ca for more information.

The sooner you let us know your needs the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

University's Plagiarism Detection Tool

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation website (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

Late Assignment Submission

To maintain fairness and consistency across the class, assignments submitted late that are not supported with legitimate documentation are subject to a penalty of 10% per day. If there are valid reasons warranting an accommodation (e.g., a medical illness), please follow the Missed Term Work policy outlined above.

Department of Psychology Missed Term Work Policy

For missed term work (assignments and term tests) due to illness, emergency, or other mitigating circumstances, please follow the procedures outlined below.

Note:

- The following reasons are not considered sufficient for missed term work: travel for leisure, weddings, personal commitments, work commitments, human error.
- [Missed Final Exams](#) are handled by the Registrar's Office and should be declared on eService.
- Instructors cannot accept term work any later than five business days after the last day of class. Beyond this date, accommodations are only possible via the Registrar's Office [petition process](#).

The email address to submit missed term work accommodation requests in PSYC34 is:
Thiruchselvam.PSYC34@gmail.com

ILLNESS OR EMERGENCY accommodations:

For missed work due to ILLNESS OR EMERGENCY, complete the following process:

1. Complete the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#).
2. Declare your absence on [ACORN](#) (Profile & Settings > Absence Declaration)
3. Email **both** of the following items to the course email **WITHIN 2 BUSINESS DAYS** of the missed work:

- a. the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#)
AND
- b. a screenshot of your Self-Declared Absence on ACORN

Note:

- *If you are unable to submit your request within 2 business days, you must still email your instructor within the 2 business day window to explain the nature of the delay. Exceptions to the 2 business day deadline will only be made under exceptional circumstances.*
- *If your absence is declared on ACORN, we do not require any additional supporting documentation (e.g. medical notes) to support your missed term work accommodation request.*

ACADEMIC CONFLICT accommodations:

For missed term work due to an ACADEMIC CONFLICT (e.g. two midterms at the same time):

1. Complete the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#).
2. Take screenshots of your course Quercus pages that demonstrate the conflict.
3. Email the form and screenshots to the course email **at least two weeks (10 business days) before the date of the activity**, or as soon as possible if it was not possible to identify the conflict earlier. Requests sent after the activity deadline may not be accommodated.

Note:

- *Multiple assignments due on the same day are not considered conflicts. Students are expected to manage their time effectively to meet assignment deadlines.*
- *Back-to-back tests/quizzes are not considered conflicts. Only overlapping activities are conflicts.*
- *Students are responsible for keeping their course timetables conflict-free. Students who register in two courses with overlapping lecture/tutorial/lab schedules will not be accommodated.*

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT accommodations:

For missed term work due to a RELIGIOUS CONFLICT:

1. Complete the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#).
2. Email the form to the course **email at least two weeks (10 business days) before the date of the activity**, or as soon as possible if it was not possible to identify the conflict earlier. Requests sent after the activity deadline may not be accommodated.

ACCESSABILITY SERVICES accommodations:

For missed **TERM TESTS** due to ACCESSABILITY REASONS:

- **Contact your AccessAbility consultant** and have them email the course email detailing accommodations required.

For missed **ASSIGNMENTS** due to ACCESSABILITY REASONS:

- If your desired accommodation is **within the scope** of your Accommodation Letter (e.g. your letter includes “extensions of up to 7 days” and you need 3 days):
 1. Complete the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#).
 2. Email the form ***AND*** your **Accommodation Letter** to the course email specifying how many days extension you are requesting.
- If your desired accommodation is **outside the scope** of your Accommodation Letter (e.g. your letter includes “extensions of up to 7 days” but you need more time than that):
 1. **Contact your AccessAbility consultant** and have them email the course email detailing the accommodations required.

Accommodation Procedure:

After submitting your documentation, you will receive a response from your instructor or TA. This form does not guarantee that you will be accommodated. The course instructor reserves the right to decide what accommodations (if any) will be made. Failure to adhere to any aspect of this policy may

result in a denial of your request. **You are responsible for checking your official U of T email and Quercus course announcements daily**, as accommodations may be time-critical.

For missed assignments, **do not wait for the instructor's response to resume work on your assignment**. Extensions may be as short as one business day, depending on the nature of the illness/emergency. Complete your assignment as soon as you're able, and email it to your instructor.

For an **anticipated absence** (e.g. a scheduled surgery or an illness with a prolonged recovery period), if you would like to request accommodations in advance, submit a [Verification of Illness Form](#) completed by your doctor AND the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#) to the course email. Absences can be declared up to 14 days into the future on ACORN.

Missed Accommodations

If an accommodation is granted but a continued illness/emergency prevents you from meeting its requirements, you must repeat the missed term work procedure to request additional accommodations. **Please make it clear in your subject line that you are requesting a second accommodation.** E.g. If you are given an extension but are still sick and need more time, or if you miss a make-up term test, you must submit *another* [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#) and declare your extended absence on ACORN. *Note: In the case of a missed make-up test, an opportunity to write a second make-up test may not necessarily be provided.

Academic Integrity

The University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences.

Potential offences in papers and assignments include using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement, submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor, making up sources or facts, obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment.

On tests and exams cheating includes using or possessing unauthorized aids, looking at someone else's answers during an exam or test, misrepresenting your identity, or falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes.

Religious Accommodations

The University has a commitment concerning accommodation for religious observances. I will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations, or other compulsory activities on religious holy days not captured by statutory holidays. According to University Policy, if you anticipate being absent from class or missing a major course activity (like a test, or in-class assignment) due to a religious observance, please let me know as early in the course as possible, and with sufficient notice (at least two to three weeks), so that we can work together to make alternate arrangements.

Masks in the Classroom

While the mask mandate has been paused as of 1 July 2022, the use of medical masks continues to be strongly encouraged at U of T Scarborough in indoor settings where physical distancing is not possible. We ask everyone to respect each other's decisions, comfort levels, and health needs. Masks are available at all building entrances at U of T Scarborough and in all classrooms.