



**The Psychology of Happiness and Meaning
PSYC34H3S**

Winter 2025
Fridays 1-3pm
IA 2040

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 7th): 25%
Written Assignment (March 11th): 15%
Midterm Exam II (March 14th): 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 11th** 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 over an 8 day period (for at least 20 minutes each day). 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. You will submit a case report about your experience with the intervention, consisting of an introduction/literature review, methods, findings, 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 3 *Interaction Points* by actively engaging with the course material. This may be done by writing brief reflection pieces about

supplementary course material. 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* 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 3%)
Lower-scoring Midterm Exam: 25% - X%
Written Assignment: 15%
Final Exam: 35%

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 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.

Office Hours

I will also be available for virtual office hours meetings **Mondays 7 – 9pm**. You can use this link to log in at that time:

<https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/89903064105>

More generally, if you have questions about course content, performance in the class, or psychology broadly, feel free to schedule a meeting outside of office hours. To do so, please email me at: Thiruchselvam.PSYC34@gmail.com

COURSE OUTLINE		
LECTURE	TOPIC	READING
Week 1 January 10 th	Happiness and meaning: An Overview	None
Week 2 January 17 th	Is happiness possible? The hedonic treadmill	Buss (2000); Riis et al. (2005)
Week 3 January 24 th	The pursuit of happiness: Paradoxes and puzzles	Roets et al. (2022); Smith et al. (2009)
Week 4 January 31 st	Feeling good: The foundations of pleasure	Nguyen, Naffziger, & Berridge (2021); Rozin et al. (2013)
Week 5 February 7 th	<i>Midterm Exam I</i> <i>Covers Weeks 1-4</i>	None
Week 6 February 14 th	So what <i>is</i> happiness exactly? Conceptual and methodological issues	Fredrickson & Kahneman (1993); Kahneman et al. (2006)
Week 7 February 21 st	READING WEEK – NO CLASS	None
Week 8 February 28 th	The who, where, and when of happiness	Killingsworth & Glibert (2010); Myers & Diener (2018)
Week 9 March 7 th	Can we increase happiness? Examining psychological interventions	Dunn, Aknin, & Norton (2008); Schnayder et al. (2023)
Week 10 March 14 th	<i>Midterm Exam II</i> <i>Covers Weeks 6-9</i>	None
Week 11 March 21 st	What good is suffering? Adversity, meaning, and compassion	Lim & DeSteno (2016); Seery et al. (2013)

Week 12 March 28 th	Eudaimonia: Theoretical and empirical bases	Baumeister et al. (2013); Inzlicht & Campbell (2022)
Week 13 April 4 th	Endgame: What really matters?	Lawler-Row & Piferi (2006); McLain, Rosenfeld, & Breitbart (2003)
Date TBA	<p><i>Final Exam</i></p> <p><i>The Final Exam will be 80% non-cumulative and 20% cumulative. The non-cumulative portion will cover Weeks 11-13.</i></p> <p><i>Held during the Final Examination Period (date to be determined).</i></p>	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), 15-23.

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), 3-9.

Week 3: The pursuit of happiness: Paradoxes and puzzles

Roets, A., Schwartz, B., & Guan, Y. (2012). The tyranny of choice: A cross-cultural investigation of maximizing-satisficing effects on well-being. *Judgment and Decision making*, 7(6), 689-704.

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), 787-791.

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), 439-447.

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), 45-55.

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.

Shnayder, S., Ameli, R., Sinaii, N., Berger, A., & Agrawal, M. (2023). Psilocybin-assisted therapy improves psycho-social-spiritual well-being in cancer patients. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 323, 592-597.

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.

Inzlicht, M., & Campbell, A. V. (2022). Effort feels meaningful. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 26 (12), 1035-1037.

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 Policy on Assessments

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.

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 web site (<https://uoft.me/pdt-faq>).

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools

Unless otherwise stated by the instructor in this course, students may not use artificial intelligence tools for taking tests, writing research papers, creating computer code, or completing course assignments. The *unauthorized* use of generative artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT and other AI writing and coding assistants, for the completion of, or to support the completion of, an examination, term test, assignment, or any other form of academic assessment, may be considered an academic offense in this course.

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 below.

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 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 416-287-7560 or email ability.uts@utoronto.ca. The sooner you let us know your needs the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

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.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

The University of Toronto is a richly diverse community and as such is committed to providing an environment free of any form of harassment, misconduct, or discrimination. In this course, I seek to foster a civil, respectful, and open-minded climate in which we can all work together to develop a better understanding of key questions and debates through meaningful dialogue. As such, I expect all involved with this course to refrain from actions or behaviours that intimidate, humiliate, or demean persons or groups or that undermine their security or self-esteem based on traits related to race, religion, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status, disability, receipt of public assistance or record of offences.

Recording of Classroom Material by Students

Recording or photographing any aspect of a university course - lecture, tutorial, seminar, lab, studio, practice session, field trip etc. – without prior approval of all involved and with written approval from the instructor is not permitted.

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.

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 procedure outlined below.

Procedure:

1. Complete the [Request for Missed Term Work Accommodations Form](#) ("MTW Form").
2. Email **BOTH** your MTW Form and Supporting Documentation to thiruchselvam.psyc34@gmail.com according to the instructions specified below.

Supporting Documentation Requirements and Deadlines:

Reason for Missed Work	Documentation required for a first absence in the term	Documentation required for subsequent absences in the term	Deadline for submitting MTW form and supporting documentation
Illness or Injury	ACORN Absence Declaration	UofT Verification of Illness Form	<u>WITHIN 2 BUSINESS DAYS</u> of the missed work
Bereavement	ACORN Absence Declaration	A death certificate or funeral announcement	<u>WITHIN 2 BUSINESS DAYS</u> of the missed work
University-sponsored athletic or artistic obligation at the varsity/provincial/national level	ACORN Absence Declaration	A note from a university staff member (advisor, coach, residence staff, etc.) who can substantiate the obligation, sent directly to the course email	<u>10 BUSINESS DAYS IN ADVANCE</u> of the missed deadline
Disability-related reasons for students registered with AccessAbility Services	For missed TERM TESTS , - Contact your AccessAbility consultant and have them write to the course email detailing the accommodations needed. For missed ASSIGNMENTS ,		<u>PREFERABLY IN ADVANCE OF THE MISSED WORK, OR AS SOON AS POSSIBLE</u>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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), send your Accommodation Letter to the course email and specify 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), contact your AccessAbility consultant and have them write to the course email detailing the accommodations needed. 	
Academic Conflict (e.g. two midterms at the same time)	Screenshot from Quercus demonstrating the conflict.	<u>10 BUSINESS DAYS IN ADVANCE</u> of the missed work
Religious Conflict	None required	

Notes:

- The following reasons are not considered sufficient for missed term work: social activities, recreational travel, technological issues, avoidance of assessments or deadlines, work commitments
- [Missed Final Exams](#) are handled by the Registrar’s Office and should be declared on eService.
- For ACORN absence declarations, the date you declare the absence is required to fall within the seven-day declaration period (i.e.) the absence cannot be submitted proactively or retroactively.
- 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](#).
- If you are unable to submit your request within the specified number of business days, you must still email your instructor within that window to explain the nature of the delay. Exceptions to the deadlines are made only under exceptional circumstances.
- Multiple assignments due on the same day are not considered academic conflicts. Students are expected to manage their time effectively to meet assignment deadlines.
- Back-to-back tests/quizzes are not considered academic 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.

Next Steps:

After submitting your documentation, you will receive a response from your instructor or TA. The course instructor reserves the right to decide what accommodations 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.

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**. Examples: If you were granted an extension for a paper but are still unable to meet the new deadline, or if you miss a make-up term test, you must submit *another* MTW form and supply documentation according to the "subsequent absences" column in the chart above.

*Note: In the case of a missed make-up test, an opportunity to write a second make-up test may not necessarily be provided.