

## PSYCHOLOGY OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE ~ SUMMER 2025

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to the *Psychology of a Meaningful Life*! We look forward to our time together.

This summer, the Psychology of a Meaningful Life will be taught in Kyoto, Japan. In addition to being one of the oldest civilizations in the world, Japanese culture is one of the most advanced on numerous metrics related to longevity, wellbeing, and social harmony. Among its many defining cultural practices and priorities, Japan places significant importance on social interconnectedness, social loyalty, and family much more than on the needs of the individual. Consequently, it offers an ideal contrast to the American value system, which emphasizes the rights and needs of the individual. These contrasting value systems directly translate into how cultures prioritize meaning and differentially shape how cultures pursue their citizens' well-being.

In this class, we will approach the science of a meaningful life with three major themes in mind: (1) the scientific bases of a meaningful life; (2) cultural variations in approaches to a meaningful life; and (3) implementing practices into one's own life to promote happiness, meaningfulness, and wellbeing.

#### (1) Course Theme One: Scientific Bases of a Meaningful Life

This course will explore the theoretical and empirical bases of the psychology of a "meaningful life." Within the field of psychology, indeed, in most social sciences, scientific attention has turned toward the exploration and understanding of what constitutes the building blocks of individual and community well-being — the behaviors that research suggests will support our health and happiness and foster positive connections with other people. In this course, we will read, consider, and discuss theoretical and empirical approaches to a wide range of human behaviors thought to underlie a meaningful existence.

The following are among the core topics to be studied during this course:

**Wellbeing:** An overall state of health, happiness, prosperity, and satisfaction.

**Happiness:** One of the basic emotions, happiness and what are the true sources of happiness (money, power, love, friendship) remain an important open question and driving source of research in many academic disciplines, in particular, psychology.

**Altruism:** Altruism is when we act to promote someone else's welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves. Though some believe that humans are fundamentally self-interested, recent research suggests otherwise.

**Compassion:** Compassion literally means "to suffer together." Emotion researchers defined compassion as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.

**Gratitude:** Gratitude has two key components: an affirmation of goodness and a recognition that goodness exists in us, others and in sources outside of ourselves that we may not fully understand. Research has shown that people able to recognize goodness in themselves and others often achieve greater goodness in their lives.

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens. Mindfulness is one of the most studied therapeutic approaches in clinical psychology and psychiatry today.

**Awe:** Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world. When people feel awe, they may use other words to describe the experience, such as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence.

**Forgiveness:** Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.

**Social connection:** The concept of social connection pertains to the feeling that we belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that this is a core psychological need, essential to feeling satisfied with your life.

With each of these topics we will read primary theories and research from the fields of neuroscience, development psychology, social psychology, and clinical psychology to better understand the science of a meaningful life. We will also read mainstream and popular press sources to see how these subjects are disseminated to the general public. **One major objective of this class is to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and our own personal ability to appreciate and apply the facets of a meaningful life to our own lives.**

(2) Course Theme Two: Cultural Variations in Approaches to a Meaningful Life

As we consider the scientific bases of a meaningful life, we will critically consider cultural differences in societies' approaches to many of the same questions. Specifically, we will compare and contrast the American approach to contemporary life with that of **Japanese culture**, primarily, as well as other cultures and countries where possible. The **American culture** has been described by a variety of social scientists as individualistically oriented, prioritizing independence and achievement over interpersonal connection and social harmony. Many have argued that this has contributed to the American success story, both as a country and at the level of individual citizens. Others, however, have argued that this orientation has led to a moral and spiritual decline that corresponds with a host of negative outcomes, including, decreased life expectancy, mental health disabilities and suicide, social isolation, and unequal levels of social inequity. Indeed, a counter argument to the idea that happiness is under our own personal control is that structural forces (economic inequality, oppression, racism, violence) made real happiness very difficult. What are the bases of a meaningful life in America in the 21 Century? In this class, we will consider this question, especially in light of the current challenges facing our society (racism and deep structural inequalities).

Other cultures, like **Japanese culture**, prioritize interconnectedness and social harmony as central cultural goals. This orientation has contributed these societies' emphasis on family, social harmony, and the forgoing of independent gain for the sake of the collective good. A guest speaker will help us to better understand different cultures approach the question of meaning.

- (3) *Course Theme Three: Adopting practices that promote meaningfulness and wellbeing.* Our hope is that a course like this is interesting to you not just because you want to learn about what science says about how to live a happier life, but because you personally want to live a happier life. The problem, as you will learn, is that psychological science shows that merely learning about the empirical findings and theories is not enough to achieve real behavioral change. Becoming happier and leading a more meaningful life involves actually putting in work to set up the right habits, behaviors and mindset. Accordingly, this class has a second set of requirements that extend beyond attending class, doing the readings and various “academic” assignments. The second set of requirements are what we call “Behavioral Activations”, which are a series of individual and group activities and exercises aimed at helping you to start to become happier, healthier, and more resilient. Although these activities and exercises will NOT be factored into your final course grade, we strongly hope that you will take the Behavioral Activation activities seriously – both enjoy them, learn from them, and practice them.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In addition to providing scientifically- and conventionally-based approaches to the subject-matter, this course will help you to think more carefully about core aspects of human well-being apply to your own life. The following are the course’s central learning objectives:

To examine human behavioral patterns that underlie “meaningful life.” In addition to the elements of a meaningful life (e.g., happiness, altruism, social connection), this will include consideration of personality, emotion and motivation with the goal of extracting a science-based understanding of these topics.

1. To explore competing theories and perspectives on the psychology of a meaningful life.
2. To explore contrasting cultural approaches, in particular, the American vs. Japanese approaches to a meaningful life.
3. To apply what you learn about the science of a meaningful life to your own life.
4. To communicate clearly and effectively about psychological topics based on understanding strengths and limitations of empirical evidence.

## ESTIMATED STUDENT WORKLOAD

Outside of in-class time, we estimate that you will need to devote an additional 60-90 minutes per day to completing assigned readings and engaging in our assigned experiential activities (e.g., self-reflection activities; Behavioral Activation activities).

## COURSE READINGS

There is no text for this course. Readings for this course will consist of a combination of original research articles, book chapters, and news/media stories. Occasionally, we will also take advantage of podcasts or videos that have been produced with the question of “what constitutes a meaningful life” in mind. **All readings and media will be posted as .pdfs on the course’s Teams site.**

Readings for the course will comprise a mix of published scientific briefs, often written for the general public, as well as a carefully selected set of theoretical and empirical papers (chapters or journal articles). It is felt that the former will facilitate an understanding of the latter, and lectures and class discussions will help to solidify student understanding of the readings.

Students are required to read the assigned readings in advance of/in time for the class they assigned (as indicated in the schedule). Pre-scheduled students will be assigned to give brief reading summaries at each class and all students will complete a reading check during each class session.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. **Participation (20%):** attendance is required, and active participation is highly encouraged! Both are critical to learning and to the overall richness of the class.
2. **Reading summaries (15%):** Careful reading of the assigned readings is expected before a given class meeting. During each class, several students will provide a brief (5-minute summary/overview of one of the day's assigned readings, including posing a discussion question for the class to consider). Given the size of the class, each student will sign-up for 2 separate days on which to provide a reading summary.
3. **Weekly self-reflection activities (10%):** Within the first day or two of the course, you will select a self-reflection approach(s) of their choosing (e.g., journaling, self-letter writing, photography, art, etc.) through which they will reflect on their daily experiences during the course (and hopefully beyond). Through self-reflection, you will consider how you typically experience happiness, meaning and well-being in your day-to-day life. For example, you might reflect on experiences of awe while strolling the beautiful city of Barcelona, describe feelings of social connection while sharing tapas with friends, or write down things for which you are grateful on a daily basis. Your self-reflection activities and what you produce will be private and for your-eyes-only. However, we simply ask that you complete these activities in a genuine, thoughtful, and worthwhile fashion on a daily/weekly basis.
4. **Behavioral Activations (BA) (35%):** You will be asked to participate in a variety of "behavioral activation" activities that we hope will help you to implement and practice (behaviorally, mentally, emotionally) techniques designed to support your appreciation of your happiness and wellbeing. You are required to at least try all of the following during the course and while you're in Barcelona. Our strong hope is that you will adopt many of these into your daily lives.

**BA#1: Measuring different aspects of your happiness and wellbeing:** Using validated assessment tools, you will complete a series of different surveys/questionnaire throughout the course that will help you to appreciate your own levels of happiness, meaning in life, gratitude, compassion, etc. As well, you will also complete several of these survey's twice (Week 1 and Week 5) to see how things might have changed for you during the class. Please see the "*Guide to Taking Course Surveys/Questionnaires*" on TEAMS for instructions on how to take various surveys and the dates that we would like you to take these different surveys.

**BA#2: Your Morning Zen:** Each morning, before you get too far into your day, take 5 minutes to practice a centering exercise. The goal of this very brief activity is to help you to be fully present and in the moment (for a moment). For example, be fully present and mindful as you take your first steps of the day, take your first sip of coffee, first bite of food, first step outside to greet the day. By taking an extra few minutes to fully experience a daily behavior or ritual has been shown to lower anxiety and to increase positive wellbeing.

**BA#3: Mindfulness Practices:** You will consider a variety of mindfulness techniques and practices, and then choose one or more that you would like to implement and practice regularly while in Japan. For example, breathing meditation is an exercise that is a central mindfulness technique, as are body-scanning practices. You will be able to choose from a number of different mindfulness practices with the sole requirement that you practice at least one every day and for 10 minutes per day.

**BA#4: Write a Gratitude Letter:** This is of someone in your life who is still living and who has made a big difference in your life but who you have never properly thanked. Find a quiet spot somewhere outside in the city of Kyoto, Japan where you can spend about 30-minutes to write a 300-word (+/-), heartfelt testimony to that person, explaining how they have touched your life and why they are meaningful to you. Send the letter to this person.

**BA#5: Complete a Fun Audit:** This is multi-part BA. It starts with you making a list of activities and/or experiences that you find "soooo much fun!" Then, try to analyze the activities on the list to identify the features of the activity that make it fun for you (e.g., social connection; thrill-seeking; contemplation; nature-walking; exercise; etc.). Next, consciously look for opportunities to engage in activities that you find fun (may or may not be on your list); try to add in more of the stuff that feels really good to you. Notice, also, what doesn't feel fun and either adjust how you think about that activity (if it can't be replaced) or replace it with something more fun.

**BA#6: Finding Your Signature Strengths:** The goal of this BA is for you to find and use your character strengths. Step one (1) is to work with 1 or 2 classmates where you each identify your character strengths using the VIA Strengths Test (you can complete the VIA Strengths Test at the Authentic Happiness website (see BA#1) or at <https://www.viacharacter.org/>). This test is approximately 240 questions and will take approximately 20 minutes. There are no right/wrong answers, just be authentic so that you can derive the most from the activity. After taking the test, you will get the ranking of your 24 strengths. Print/save the results and then study your top 10 strengths. Step two (2) is to select several strengths and then to practice them each day for 1 week (more is better!) so that you can more regularly experience your signature strengths. Step three (3) is to share your observations and experiences of your signature strengths with your assignment partners.

**BA#7: You choose and share:** Some or many of you may already practice a form of behavioral activation that brings you comfort, joy, meaning. Our hope is that you will both continue to engage in this behavioral practice or to re-engage with it. We also hope that you will share what you do with others in the class so that they too might gain from your experience.

5. **Final Project (20%):** TBD!!!! We will devote some early class time to brainstorming the scope and objective of a final project, though our hope as instructors is that your final project will be highly personalized in its execution. Details and timelines for this project will be provided asap. However, all students will present their final projects during our last 2 class meetings of the term, **Wednesday and Thursday of our last week.**

### Summary of Course Requirements and Point Distribution

- Participation (20%): 20 points
- Reading Summaries (15%): 15 points
- Weekly Self-Reflections (10%): 10 points
- Behavioral Activations (35%): 35 points
- Final project (20%): 20 points
- TOTAL (100%) 100 Points**

### SCHEDULE OF CLASS TOPICS AND READINGS:

**Note:** Topics and readings are presented by days and weeks. Readings are to be read in advance for that class day as they will inform our discussions, student reading summaries, and reading checks that day.

**Note:** Readings may change as the course proceeds; you will be notified and pdfs provided via Teams.

### **Schedule at a glance (Developed as a 5 week program)**

\*\*\*Class meets Monday-Thursday; there is no class meeting on Friday

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
<b>WEEK 1</b>	<b>27</b> Course Introduction	<b>28</b> Introduction to the psychology of a meaningful life	<b>29</b> The field of Positive Psychology	<b>30</b> Introduction to mindfulness
<b>WEEK 2</b>	<b>4</b> Happiness Formal mindfulness Breathing meditation	<b>5</b> Informal mindfulness Sensorial stimulation and daily activities	<b>6</b> Compassion & self-compassion	<b>7</b> Japan and other cultural approaches to meaning & happiness  (Guest speaker)
<b>WEEK 3</b>	<b>11</b> Scientific basis of a meaningful life: neurobiology, personality, context	<b>12</b> Breaking bad habits & building good habits	<b>13</b> The American way of life & other structural barriers to happiness	<b>14</b> Awe, environment and walking meditation. A midterm outdoor activity

<b>WEEK 4</b>	<b>18</b> Altruism	<b>19</b> Empathy	<b>20</b> Social connection	<b>21</b> Gratitude
<b>WEEK 5</b>	<b>25</b> The importance of the body in wellbeing and corporal resources practices	<b>26</b> Clinical applications	<b>27</b> Students' final presentations	<b>28</b> Students' final presentations

**Schedule of lecture topics, associated readings, and practical activities:**

**Important note about assigned readings:** Readings appear on the day they are due. So, for example, if a reading (e.g., King, L. A., Heintzelman, S. J., & Ward, S. J. (2016)) is assigned for a specific day (i.e., Tuesday, 28 June), you should plan to come to class on that day having already read the assigned reading before class.

**WEEK 1:**

**Monday Course: Introduction**

**\*\*\*\* No readings assigned**

**Tuesday: Introduction to the Psychology of a Meaningful Life.**

**Readings:**

1. King, L. A., Heintzelman, S. J., & Ward, S. J. (2016). Beyond the search for meaning: A contemporary science of the experience of meaning in life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(4), 211-216.
2. Lane, D. J., & Mathes, E. W. (2018). The pros and cons of having a meaningful life. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 120, 13-16.

**Wednesday: The Field of Positive Psychology.**

**Readings:**

3. Seligman, M. (2010). Flourish: Positive psychology and positive interventions. *The Tanner lectures on human values*, 31, 1-56

## **Thursday: Introduction to Mindfulness**

### **Readings:**

4. Keng, S. L., Smoski, M. J., & Robins, C. J. (2011). Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies. *Clinical psychology review*, 31(6), 1041-1056.
5. Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E., Astin, J. A., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 62(3), 373-386.

## **WEEK 2**

## **Monday: Happiness and Formal Mindfulness**

### **Readings:**

6. Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of happiness studies*, 6(1), 25-41.
7. Dunn, E. W., Aknin, L. B., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Spending money on others promotes happiness. *Science*, 319, 1687--1688.

## **Tuesday: Informal Mindfulness, Sensorial Stimulation and Daily Activities**

### **Readings:**

8. Birtwell, K., Williams, K., Van Marwijk, H., Armitage, C. J., & Sheffield, D. (2019). An exploration of formal and informal mindfulness practice and associations with wellbeing. *Mindfulness*, 10(1), 89-99.
9. Blanke, E. S., & Brose, A. (2017). Mindfulness in daily life: A multidimensional approach. *Mindfulness*, 8(3), 737-750.

## **Wednesday: Compassion & Self-Compassion**

### **Readings**

10. Strauss, C., Taylor, B. L., Gu, J., Kuyken, W., Baer, R., Jones, F., & Cavanagh, K. (2016). What is compassion and how can we measure it? A review of definitions and measures. *Clinical psychology review*, 47, 15-27.
11. Neff, K. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and identity*, 2(2), 85-101.
12. García-Alandete, J., Martínez, E. R., Sellés Nohales, P., & Soucase Lozano,



B. (2018). Meaning in life and psychological well-being in Spanish emerging adults. *Acta colombiana de Psicología*, 21(1), 196-216.

#### **Thursday: Japan and related cultural approaches to meaning & happiness**

**guest speaker (TBD)**

**\*\*\*\* No readings assigned \*\*\***

### **WEEK 3**

#### **Monday: Scientific basis for a meaningful life**

##### **Readings:**

13. Yaden, D.B., Claydon, J., Bathgate, M., Platt, B., & Santos, L.R. (2021). Teaching wellbeing at scale: An intervention study. *PLOS ONE* 16(4): e0249193.
14. Dolcos, S., Moore, M., & Katsumi, Y. (2018). Neuroscience and well-being. *Handbook of Well-being*. Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers.

#### **Tuesday: Breaking bad habits & building good habits**

##### **Readings:**

15. Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2005). Affective forecasting: Knowing what to want. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(3), 131-134.
16. Whillans, A. V., Dunn, E. W., Smeets, P., Bekkers, R., & Norton, M. I. (2017). Buying time promotes happiness. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(32), 8523-8527.
17. Wegner, D. (2009). How to think, say, or do precisely the worst thing for any occasion. *Science*, 325, 48-50.
18. Neal, D. T., Wood, W., & Quinn, J. M. (2006). Habits—A repeat performance. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(4), 198-202.

#### **Wednesday: The American way of life & other structural barriers to happiness**

##### **Readings:**

19. Sterling, P., & Platt, M. L. (2022). Why deaths of despair are increasing in the US and not other industrial nations—insights from neuroscience and anthropology. *JAMA psychiatry*, 79(4), 368-374.

20. De Freitas, J., Sarkissian, H., Newman, G. E., Grossmann, I., De Brigard, F., Luco, A., & Knobe, J. (2018). Consistent belief in a good true self in misanthropes and three interdependent cultures. *Cognitive science*, 42, 134-160.

#### **Thursday: Awe, Environment and walking meditation**

##### **Readings:**

1. Shiota, M. N., Keltner, D., & Mossman, A. (2007). The nature of awe: Elicitors, appraisals, and effects on self-concept. *Cognition and emotion*, 21(5), 944-963.
2. Stellar, J. E., Gordon, A., Anderson, C. L., Piff, P. K., McNeil, G. D., & Keltner, D. (2018). Awe and humility. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 114(2), 258.
3. Bai, Y., Maruskin, L. A., Chen, S., Gordon, A. M., Stellar, J. E., McNeil, G. D., ... & Keltner, D. (2017). Awe, the diminished self, and collective engagement: Universals and cultural variations in the small self. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 113(2), 185

### **WEEK 4**

#### **Monday: Altruism**

##### **Readings:**

4. Feigin, S., Owens, G., & Goodyear-Smith, F. (2018). Theories of human altruism: Asystematic review. *Journal of Psychiatry and Brain Functions*, 1(1), 5.
5. Kennedy, P., Higginson, A. D., Radford, A. N., & Sumner, S. (2018). Altruism in a volatile world. *Nature*, 555(7696), 359.

#### **Tuesday: Empathy**

##### **Readings:**

6. Cuff, B. M., Brown, S. J., Taylor, L., & Howat, D. J. (2016). Empathy: a review of the concept. *Emotion Review*, 8(2), 144-153.
7. Bloom, P. (2017). Empathy and its discontents. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 21(1), 24-31.

#### **Wednesday Social connection**

##### **Readings:**

8. Lamblin, M., Murawski, C., Whittle, S., & Fornito, A. (2017). Social connectedness, mental health and the adolescent brain. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 80, 57-68.
9. Steptoe, A., & Fancourt, D. (2019). Leading a meaningful life at older ages and its relationship with social engagement, prosperity, health, biology, and time use. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(4), 1207-1212.

## Thursday: Gratitude

### Readings:

10. Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *The journal of positive psychology*, 1(2), 73-82.
11. Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Gratitude, like other positive emotions, broadens and builds. *The psychology of gratitude*, 145, 166-180.

## WEEK 5

## Monday: The importance of the body in wellbeing and corporal resources practices

Guest speaker: TBD \*\*\*No readings assigned\*\*\*

## Tuesday: Clinical applications

### Readings:

12. Harris, R. (2006). Embracing your demons: An overview of acceptance and commitment therapy. *Psychotherapy in Australia*, 12(4).
13. Bishop, S. R. (2002). What do we really know about mindfulness-based stress reduction?. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 64(1), 71-83.
14. Sipe, W. E., & Eisendrath, S. J. (2012). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy: theory and practice. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(2), 63-69.

## Wednesday & Thursday: Student final presentations.

\*\*\*No readings assigned\*\*\*