



**Existential Psychology | Thursday, Feb. 7 | Location: D129/130 | 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM**

**PROGRAM OF EVENTS (at-a-glance\*)**

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8:00-8:30am	Breakfast	
8:30-8:45am	Welcome, orientation	
8:45-9:45am	<b>Keynote Address: Tom Pyszczynski</b>	<b>Title:</b> Experimental Existential Psychology: Putting the Pieces Together
9:45-10:45am	<b>Poster session</b>	20 posters
10:45-11:00am	Coffee break	
11:00-11:30am	<b>Rebecca Schlegel</b>	<b>Title:</b> Exploring the Role of the True Self in the Search for Meaning
11:30-12:00pm	<b>Sheena Iyengar</b>	<b>Title:</b> In Search of the Authentic Self
12:00-1:00pm	Lunch	
1:00-2:00pm	<b>Special Address: Richard M. Ryan</b>	<b>Title:</b> Authenticity & its Social Psychology: Self- Determination Theory & Dynamic Existentialism
2:00-2:30pm	<b>Data blitz session</b>	8 data blitz presentations
2:30-2:55pm	Coffee break	
2:55-3:25pm	<b>Mario Mikulincer</b>	<b>Title:</b> Love, Death, and Meaning
3:25-3:55pm	<b>Aaron Kay</b>	<b>Title:</b> Compensatory Control and Beliefs About (the Objectivity of) Social Reality
3:55-4:25pm	<b>Julie Exline</b>	<b>Title:</b> Religious and Spiritual Struggles: A Brief Overview
4:25-4:30pm	Closing remarks	

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\*Detailed programming (w/abstracts) for each presentation on the following pages.

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## **RESEARCH TALKS**

8:45-9:45am **Keynote Address:**  
**Tom Pyszczynski**

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**Title:** Experimental Existential Psychology: Putting the Pieces Together  
**Abstract:** Though existential issues were previously considered beyond the bounds of rigorous empirical inquiry, over the past 30 years a variety of productive research programs has emerged focused on how people cope with their awareness of the “givens” of the human condition. Though these approaches have sometimes been posed as rival perspectives, my presentation will focus on ways in which they complement each other and raise important issues for future work in this area.

11:00-11:30am **Rebecca Schlegel**

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**Title:** Exploring the Role of the True Self in the Search for Meaning  
**Abstract:** Two of the big existential questions people face are: “Who am I?” and “How should I live my life?” Our research shows that, for most people, the answers to these two questions are inextricably linked. In this talk, I will review our lab’s work on “true self as guide” lay theories and how they inform the search for meaning in people’s lives.

11:30-12:00pm **Sheena Iyengar**

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**Title:** In Search of the Authentic Self  
**Abstract:** What is the authentic self? Is this a question we know how to answer? If so, what are the aspects of the self that can be known and what are the aspects that remain obscure? This talk explores the questions above and offers data to refine scientific inquiry into the nebulous constructs of the consistency, identity, authenticity, and the true self.

1:00-2:00pm **Special Address:**  
**Richard M. Ryan**

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**Title:** Authenticity & its Social Psychology: Self-Determination Theory & Dynamic Existentialism  
**Abstract:** Being authentic is a high calling among existentialists, and entails acting with both autonomy and genuineness in social interactions. Yet, elements in many relationships can inhibit or suppress these elements. In this address, Professor Ryan will discuss the meaning of authenticity and review empirical evidence concerning its benefits for wellness and health.

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2:55-3:25pm

**Mario Mikulincer**

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**Title:** Love, Death, and Meaning

**Abstract:** According to attachment theory, the sense of attachment security provides a psychological foundation for easing existential anxieties and constructing an authentic sense of continuity and meaning. In the present lecture, I review new findings on the effects of attachment security on a person's reaction to the contextual salience of mortality and meaningless concerns.

3:25-3:55pm

**Aaron Kay**

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**Title:** Compensatory Control and Beliefs About (the Objectivity of) Social Reality

**Abstract:** Compensatory Control Theory proposes that people flexibly rely on sources of control that are internal and external to the self to satisfy the need to believe that their world is non-random. This has implications for a range of existential beliefs. I will outline the basics of the theory and offer a sampling of recent studies that link it to existential topics, including free will and morality.

3:55-4:25pm

**Julie Exline**

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**Title:** Religious and Spiritual Struggles: A Brief Overview

**Abstract:** Although many people view religion and spirituality as sources of comfort, strength, and hope, it is also common for people to experience struggles around religious/spiritual issues. This presentation will provide a brief overview of the topic of religious and spiritual struggle, including recent measurement attempts, caveats and controversies, and exploration of potential benefits from struggle.

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## POSTER PRESENTATIONS (9:45-10:45am)

### 1. Introducing the State Trait Existential Isolation Model (STEIM)

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**Authors:** Helm, P., Greenberg, J., Young, P., Pinel, E.

**Abstract:** We propose a conceptual model of existential isolation (EI) to help researchers understand and study the construct. The model proposes that the experience of EI can be situational, context dependent, or a trait-like pervasive sense that others do not validate one's subjective experience. The model posits acute and chronic causes of EI and distinct consequences of the state and trait forms of it.

**Notes:**

### 2. Perceptions of Authenticity in Self-control Conflicts

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**Authors:** Garrison, K., Rivera, G., Schlegel, R., Schmeichel, B.

**Abstract:** Do people feel more authentic acting on or controlling their impulses? After reading vignettes of self-control conflicts, participants rated how authentic they thought they would feel acting on impulses vs. exercising control. Participants generally thought self-control was more authentic, but some felt acting on impulses was more authentic. Individual differences predicted these divergent views.

**Notes:**

### 3. The Role of Intolerance of Uncertainty in the Relationship Between Daily Search for and Presence of Meaning in Life

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**Authors:** Morse, J., Prince, M., Steger, M.

**Abstract:** We examined daily fluctuations in search for meaning (SM) and presence of meaning (PM) in the context of intolerance of uncertainty (IU). Daily SM significantly predicted same-day and next-day PM, and IU was a significant moderator. Low IU people experienced more PM when they searched than those high in IU. Results suggest consideration of the consequences of IU in hindering the development of PM.

**Notes:**

### 4. The Experience of Freedom

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**Authors:** Blatz, L., Crusius, J., Mauss, I.

**Abstract:** To feel free is a major goal of individual and social development. Philosophy suggests a twofold concept of freedom: negative and positive freedom. However, it has rarely been investigated how freedom actually feels. We contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of freedom in a bottom up study of the concept of freedom complemented by experimental and experience sampling data.

**Notes:**

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### **5. Sanctification of Experienced Difficulty: When Difficulties Build One's Character and Enhance One's Spirit**

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**Authors:** Kiper, G., Atari, M., Yan, V., Oyserman, D.

**Abstract:** How people infer meaning out of their experiences of pain and difficulty matters. We investigate a "sanctification of experienced difficulty" mindset, i.e., the belief that pain and difficulty are character-building and purifying experiences. We develop a scale for measuring this mindset and show associations with important variables like character strengths, conscientiousness, and meaning in life.

**Notes:**

### **6. Anxious, Unsure, and Searching for Answers: Development of a State Subjective Meaninglessness (SSM) Scale**

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**Authors:** Benjamin, R., Heine, S.

**Abstract:** Many theories in existential psychology posit that threats to understanding produce anxious arousal. However, little has been done to describe this experience, or empirically test the role of anxious arousal in eliciting worldview defense. We developed a scale of State Subjective Meaninglessness (SSM), finding that an uncertain stimulus elicits more SSM than a control stimulus.

**Notes:**

### **7. Cultural Cognition: The Epistemic Function of Worldviews**

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**Authors:** Jimenez, T.

**Abstract:** If worldviews "think" for us, then the propensity to think should be differentially affected by affirmed or threatened worldviews. Two studies (N = 693) showed that mortality salience decreased, and worldview threat increased, need for cognition. Together, the studies deepen our understanding of the relation between existential and epistemic concerns.

**Notes:**

### **8. Existential Concern Orientations: Cluster Analysis Approach to Insecurity Typology**

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**Authors:** Young, I., Sullivan, D., Hart, J., Palitsky, R.

**Abstract:** Applies cluster analysis to explore theorized, intra-individual insecurity orientations. Support is found for the existence of three insecurity orientations: Secure, Meaning Concern, and Social Concern (N = 1343), each displaying a unique distribution of psychological resources. Differences on sociocultural variables, individual differences, and anxiety buffer profiles are explored.

**Notes:**





### **9. Existential Anxiety as an Explanatory Factor within the Fear-Avoidance Model of Chronic Pain**

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**Authors:** Reed, D., Cobos, B., McGeary, D., Nagpal, A., Eckmann, M.

**Abstract:** Chronic pain affects 25.3 million individuals in the US. The current fear-avoidance model explains the transition of chronic pain into disability. Gaps in the model point to untested mechanisms of change, and evidence suggests that existential motivations may play a role. The present research attempts to help fill these gaps by examining existential anxiety within a chronic pain population.

**Notes:**

### **10. Death, Self-Determination, and Worldview Defense**

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**Authors:** Conti, J.

**Abstract:** The present research built on prior work suggesting that mortality salience motivates cultural worldview defense and explored the hypothesis that this effect would be eliminated among those who feel self-determined and autonomous in their actions. Two studies found that death awareness motivates worldview defense and that self-determination can mitigate these effects.

**Notes:**

### **11. Of Love and Death: Death Anxiety, Attachment, and Suicide as Experienced by College Students**

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**Authors:** Harvell-Bowman, L., Kritchfield, K., Wilgus, K., Grove, M.

**Abstract:** This work uses terror management theory to investigate how individuals who have experienced suicidal thoughts handle death anxiety. It also utilizes interpersonal reconstructive therapy to explore specific attachment-based mechanisms that may allow for exceptions to the perceived meaning of death.

**Notes:**

### **12. Will to Truth: Mortality Salience Increases Desire for Truth**

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**Authors:** Elnakouri, A., McGregor, I.

**Abstract:** The search for ultimate truth and knowledge has been of perennial appeal for philosophers and conspiracy theorists alike. Might this seemingly unique human pursuit serve an existential function? We found that participants assigned to talk about mortality (vs. dental pain) desired and were willing to pay more for access to unique truth and knowledge, irrespective of its practical utility.

**Notes:**

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### 13. Self-Objectification and Existential Isolation

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**Authors:** Lockett, M., Pyszczynski, T.

**Abstract:** Self-objectification may be related to decreased feelings of connectedness with others. The relationship between self-objectification and existential isolation - that is, the feeling that no other person can truly understand one's personal experience - was investigated. Findings suggest self-objectification is related to existential isolation, but only among women.

**Notes:**

### 14. Purpose, Morality, and Personhood: Teleological and Normative Processes in Judgments about Identity

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**Authors:** Christy, A., Schlegel, R.

**Abstract:** Three studies found evidence that teleology (i.e., purpose- or function-based reasoning) affects reasoning about identity. In Study 1, traits seen as more relevant to the purpose of human life were also seen as more central to personal identity. In Studies 2 and 3, disruptions to targets' fulfillment of primary social-role functions affected their perceived authenticity and identity continuity.

**Notes:**

### 15. (Dis)Belief in the True Self and Morality

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**Authors:** Flanagan, P.

**Abstract:** Research shows that people perceive their true selves as morally good, and feeling they know their true selves influences morally relevant outcomes. The current research explores the question of whether believing true selves exist also relates to moral outcomes by examining whether measured or manipulated belief in the true self increases morally relevant traits, emotions, and prosocial intention.

**Notes:**

### 16. A Perspective-Dependent View on the True Self

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**Authors:** Zhang, Y., Alicke, M.

**Abstract:** The current research examined self-enhancing biases in judgement of the true self. Two studies found that positive traits and behaviors were perceived as more true-self-characteristic than negative ones, and this bias was stronger when judging oneself relative to others. Together, these results imply that the true self may be perspective dependent.

**Notes:**





### **17. Examining the Effect of External Structure on Responses to Thought-Control Difficulty**

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**Authors:** Rodriguez, J., Landau, M., Swanson, T.

**Abstract:** In prior work, people compensated for threats to personal control by affirming structure in their environment, even in unrelated domains. Going further, the current study tests whether external structure also assuages the threat of difficulty controlling one's own thoughts. We measured participants' ability to control thoughts while they viewed either visually structured or disordered stimuli.

**Notes:**

### **18. Death: The Trump Card**

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**Authors:** Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T.

**Abstract:** There are many economic, sociological, and psychological accounts of Donald Trump's political ascent. Such explanations are, however, incomplete without examining how death anxiety underlies the bond between charismatic/populist leaders and their followers. We will present research demonstrating that existential anxieties underlie Americans' support for President Trump.

**Notes:**

### **19. Awareness and Athanasia: Evidence for an Immortality Hypothesis**

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**Authors:** Scott, A., Schimel, J., Sharp, M.

**Abstract:** Terror management theory proposes that we resolve the problem of death by adhering to cultural worldviews that provide hope for literal or symbolic immortality. Two studies showed that people believe their nations will last more than two millennia longer after a death reminder but only if they do not believe in an alternate literal route to immortality.

**Notes:**

### **20. Shuffling Deck Chairs on the Titanic: Mortality Salience and Behavioral Busyness**

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**Authors:** Rogers, R., Vess, M.

**Abstract:** Results from two studies suggest behavioral busyness serves a terror management function. In Study 1, mortality salience (MS) increased the likelihood of choosing behavioral busyness over idleness. In Study 2, being behaviorally busy following MS reduced alternative defensive responding (identity striving).

**Notes:**

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**DATA BLITZ PRESENTATIONS (2:00-2:30pm... and beyond!)**

**1. When I Feel Devalued, I Don't Feel Like My 'True Self': Social Devaluation Predicts Inauthenticity Among Cultural Minority Students**

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**Authors:** Aday, A., Schmader, T., Sedikides, C.

**Abstract:** Two studies tested whether members of lower status groups feel less authentic to the degree they feel less fit to their environment. In line with predictions, feeling one's social identity as a cultural minority is devalued predicted lower authenticity at university, as mediated by self-concept and social fit. Fit and authenticity, in turn, predicted student motivation on campus.

**Notes:**

**2. Play My Gender Role: Women's Endorsement of Benevolent Sexism on a Social Stage**

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**Authors:** Mosley, A., Landau, M., Dovidio, J.

**Abstract:** Five experiments show how exposure to the dramaturgical perspective shapes women's endorsement and enactment of benevolent sexism. Women who were presented with information characterizing life as a stage (versus a control condition and a trivialization condition) reported greater endorsement of benevolent sexism. Motives to focus on external sources on self-value mediated this effect.

**Notes:**

**3. How do Self-Transcendent Adults Across the Lifespan Make Meaning of their Life Stories?**

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**Authors:** Reischer, H., McAdams, D.

**Abstract:** Self-transcendence (ST) is the experience of connectedness to something greater than oneself. How do adults with higher and lower ST scores make meaning of their lives? We collected life stories and self-report data from emerging, midlife, and oldest-old adults. We derived narrative theme codes and tested relationships between themes and ST, personality, and well-being for each group.

**Notes:**

**4. Ordinary People Think Free Will is a Lack of Constraint, Not the Presence of a Soul**

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**Authors:** Vonasch, A., Baumeister, R., Mele, A.

**Abstract:** How do ordinary people understand free will? Do they think you need to have a soul to have free will? Four experiments supported the hypothesis that free will is understood in terms of unconstrained choice by ordinary people. Most people don't think you need a soul to have free will—and those who do think that because they think only souls enable conscious choice.

**Notes:**

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### **5. Pushing Up Daisies: When Self-Determined, Death Awareness Increases Satisfaction with Life and Growth (Not Defense) Motivation**

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**Authors:** Horner, D.

**Abstract:** Intrinsic goal orientation can decrease defensiveness and support growth following death reminders. Mortality salience increased worldview defense and decreased both satisfaction with life and exploration motivation. But, when intrinsic goals were dominant or primed, mortality salience had no impact on worldview defense, and instead increased satisfaction with life and exploration motivation.

**Notes:**

### **6. On the Mutual Constitution of Person and Culture: Examining the Link between Perceived Control and Cultural Tightness-Looseness**

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**Authors:** Ma, A., Savani, K., Tai, K., Kay, A.

**Abstract:** Just as culture shapes people, people's psychological states can also shape societal-level traits. Across four studies, we explore perceived control as a psychological antecedent of tight-loose cultures. We found that regions in which people report lower perceived control have tighter cultures. People with lower control (both measured and manipulated) also prefer tighter cultures and institutions.

**Notes:**

### **7. In Pursuit of Existential Meaning: Motivation to Experience Meaning in Life Facilitates Preference for Experiential Purchases**

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**Authors:** Kim, J., Hicks, J.

**Abstract:** The present research tested the idea that experiential purchases are preferred over material purchases when people have motivation to experience meaning (MEM). Using methodologically diverse approaches (experimental, longitudinal, and intervention studies), four studies (N = 1358) provide converging evidence that MEM increases preference for experiential purchases over material purchases.

**Notes:**

### **8. Filling the Existential Vacuum: Exposure to Authoritarian Values and Meaning in Life**

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**Authors:** Womick, J., Eckelkamp, J., Ward, S., King, L.

**Abstract:** Four experiments tested the hypothesis that exposure to messages consistent with right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) would enhance meaning in life (MIL), compared to egalitarian and control messages. In all studies, the authoritarian condition led to worse mood and poorer evaluations of the message, and controlling for the effects on mood, led to higher MIL.

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**SPONSORED AWARDS**

**Ernest Becker Foundation Diversity Travel Awards (ten) – \$150**

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Abdo Elnakouri	University of Waterloo
Yiyue Zhang	Ohio University
Dylan Horner	Cleveland State University
McKenzie Lockett	Univ. Colorado at Co. Springs
Ariel Mosley	University of Kansas
Joseph Conti	Cleveland State University
Jinhyung Kim	Boston College
Anyi Ma	Duke University
Tyler Jimenez	University of Missouri
Gulnaz Kiper	University of Southern California

**Cleveland State University Diversity Travel Award – \$150**

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Jordan Rodriguez	University of Kansas
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**Routledge Publishers Student Travel Award – \$250**

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Audrey Aday	University of British Columbia
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**Worth Publishers/Macmillan Learning Student Travel Award – \$300**

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Lisa Blatz	University of Cologne
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