

Senior Capstone: Existential Psychology of Death Awareness
Psychology 497: Mondays 12:20pm – 2:50pm
1109 Miller Hall
Spring Semester

Instructor: Dr. Lindsey A. Harvell-Bowman

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Office Hours: Monday	2:50pm – 3:45pm	1220 Miller Hall
Wednesday	Noon – 3:30 pm	Harrison Hall Office

Required Text

Harvell, L.A., & Nisbett, G.S. (2016). *Denying Death: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Terror Management Theory*. London, U.K.: Routledge.

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). *The worm at the core: The role of death in life*. New York: Random House.

APA 7th Edition Guide

Various articles posted on Canvas.

Course Overview

Many topics once thought to be in the domain of existential philosophy – such as fear of death, the search for meaning and authenticity in life – are now widely studied using experimental methods. This course introduces students to an emerging discipline within the field of social psychology known as existential psychology. Through discussion, readings, and the capstone project, students will bring in knowledge from *all* areas of psychology, specifically their psychology courses they have taken thus far. This provides a rich bed of content to draw from in class discussions. This course focuses on various theories and empirical research investigating how concerns about basic issues of the human condition, such as death, meaning, isolation, identity, control, and freedom influence a wide array of human behaviors. Furthermore, this course provides an in-depth understanding of existential issues within the field of social psychology along with the experimental techniques used to study their effect on the human experience. This course will help you develop your oral presentation and writing skills, as well as sharpen your ability to think critically about existential psychological theory and research.

Policies

This course is subject to university policies on honor code violations. See the undergraduate handbook for the explanations of these policies. Violating the honor code is a serious offense; I would just steer clear of that life choice.

- Any individual observed copying answers from another individual on exams will meet the criteria for violating the honor code.
- If you have questions regarding what comprises academic misconduct, plagiarism, and/or a violation of the honor code please contact me. Ignorance of the definition of plagiarism, academic misconduct, and/or violating the honor code is not a valid excuse and will not keep you from being charged.

Add/Drop Policy

Please visit the following website for information on adding and dropping courses:
<http://www.jmu.edu/syllabus/>

Attendance and Classroom Decorum

Attendance is taken via pop quizzes. **These are unable to be made up under any circumstance.**

In order to have healthy, vibrant classroom discussion, ALL views must be heard and respected. It is imperative that everybody feels welcome to express his/her thoughts in class. Any signs or blatant examples of hostility and disrespect toward differing viewpoints will result in dismissal from that day's class. The second time this happens will result in dismissal from the course.

Religious Observance

All faculty are required to give reasonable and appropriate accommodations to students requesting them on grounds of religious observation. The faculty member determines what accommodations are appropriate for his/her course. Students should notify the faculty by no later than the end of the first week of the semester of potential scheduled absences and determine with the instructor if mutually acceptable alternative methods exist for completing the missed classroom time, lab, or activity. Contact the Office of Equal Opportunity at 540-568-6991 if you have additional questions.

Inclement Weather Policy

This course follows JMU's inclement weather policy (see: <http://www.jmu.edu/JMUpolicy/1309.shtml>). James Madison University is primarily a self-contained campus with a large number of residential students requiring a variety of support services, regardless of inclement weather conditions or emergency situations. For the safety and well-being of its students and employees, the university may close or limit its services based on inclement weather or other emergencies. Refer to the following sources for information on closings or delays:

- JMU Weather Line: 540-433-5300
- JMU radio station: 1610 AM
- JMU's home page: www.jmu.edu

- Area radio and television stations
- JMU Office of Public Safety, who in turn is responsible for announcements on the Emergency Notification System

Department of Psychology Librarian Information

If you need help completing your research assignments, you can contact our Liaison Librarian, schedule a one-on-one appointment at <http://events.lib.jmu.edu/appointments/liz>, or drop by her Research Hours on Mondays in Miller 1162 from 2:30-4:30, Wednesdays in Carrier Library 125F from 3-5, or Thursdays in HBS 2073 from 2-4.

Course Requirements

Weekly Readings and Discussion:

Each week, we will read a chapter from the *Worm at the Core*, and two or three additional articles focused on issues related to that chapter and the topic of the day. It is *essential* that you read the articles and chapter(s) *before* class and think about them and the issues they raise. The format for the class is an open discussion that I will lead. Participation is an *essential* part of your grade. Therefore, attendance is necessary for a good grade.

Weekly Discussion Questions:

Each week you will develop one question for discussion in class based on the assigned readings for that day. These should be questions that would be interesting for us to discuss as a class. Think of issues that are provocative and important for us to think about and discuss. These should *not* be yes/no questions, questions with answers easily identified in the readings, or questions about personal experiences. These questions should focus on interesting and important issues that are inspired by the readings for that week. They could potentially focus on alternatives to the ideas proposed in the readings, questions for research, application of the ideas or findings to real world social issues or personal problems. *Turn in your questions at the beginning of class* – this is my way of taking attendance.

Thought Papers:

Thought papers are short (2-4 pages, double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman Font, 1” margins) papers that outline your thoughts about assigned reading(s). These papers can include your criticisms of the readings, deeper thoughts about the topic in question, ideas that you have for further research, etc. *They should not be summaries of the readings.* Go beyond the readings. Think critically, be skeptical, and be creative. This assignment is meant to help you organize your thoughts on a topic, integrate across topics, consider important implications of a concept in different real world settings, or propose a novel approach to approaching the subject. These papers *must be submitted at the beginning of the class in which the reading(s) is (are) discussed as a group.* You are required to have *two thought papers* for any two topics of your choosing.

Research Guide Assignment:

Each student will lead the class in our discussion of *one* research paper over the course of the semester. Signups for research articles are on the first day of class. To help you prepare for leading the discussion of your article on your designated day, you will write a brief summary of the paper for the article you are presenting.

Pop Quizzes:

We will have five pop quizzes during the semester (with the lowest score being dropped, so only four counting towards your grade). These will consist of one or two short answer essay questions focused on the main ideas from that day's readings.

Research Proposal:

Develop an idea for original research inspired by one or more of the theories or studies covered in this class. As your topics arise in the class, we will discuss these ideas in class and help each other develop them into interesting studies that have the potential to add to what we currently know about human behavior. Ultimately, the goal of these proposals is to develop studies that would actually be worth doing and that could potentially be published if they yielded interesting results. It is important to note that for this class, you are only *proposing* a study, rather than actually collecting data and *doing* the study. The study you propose must be an experiment and have at least 2 but no more than 3 independent variables.

This assignment will be done in three steps.

First, you will write a very concise 1-2 page mini-proposal that will get you started thinking about this project. This document will state the general issue your research will address, explain why it is interesting and important, explain in a general way what previous theory and research you will be building on, and state the hypothesis your study will be testing.

Second, you will do an annotated outline of your proposal that includes an introductory paragraph (not in outline format) that lays out the issues or questions your study will address, briefly explains why it is of interest, and clearly states the question your study will attempt to answer. Then, in outline format, lay out the organization of your paper, including the main ideas, theories, and studies you will build on. Your outline should conclude with a paragraph that clearly states the hypothesis you will be testing and the research design you will use to test it. You will get feedback on this paper that will critique what you have produced to this point. This feedback will tell you what you need to improve on the next and final step. Your outline should consist of 2-3 pages.

Third, your final proposal will be a complete introduction for the study you are proposing, that will build on the previous two steps and address the suggestions made for your annotated outline. *This paper is a major focus for this class.* The goal should be to produce a paper that you can be proud of and perhaps use as a sample of your writing and thinking – something that you are likely to need at some point in the future. This proposal is also intended to give you experience

with creative and critical thinking, working with ideas and the research literature, writing for a professional audience, and presenting your ideas to a group.

At the end of the semester, we will present your research proposals. Presentations will be 10-12 minutes each and include power-point slides to help communicate your ideas. You should also have a table or figure that shows your design and hypothesized results.

Grading and Evaluation

Assignments:

Final Research Proposal	10%
Annotated Outline of Research Proposal	5%
Mini-Proposal	5%
Thought Papers	20%
Discussion Questions/Participation	20%
Research Guide Presentation	10%
Pop Quizzes	20%
Final Research Proposal Presentation	10%
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	100%

Grade Scale:

A	= 94% - 100%
A-	= 90% - 93.9%
B+	= 87% - 89.9%
B	= 84% - 86.9%
B-	= 80% - 83.9%
C+	= 77% - 79.9%
C	= 74% - 76.9%
C-	= 70% - 73.9%
D+	= 67% - 69.9%
D	= 64% - 66.9%
D-	= 60% - 63.9%
F	= 0% - 59.9%

Note: Life does not round up. Consequently, I don't round up. Work on perfecting your knowledge, not on your persuasion of the professor.

Honor Code Violations: All work is subject to the University honor code, which describes the following undertakings as violations: cheating, fabrication, falsification of information, plagiarism, abuse of academic materials. We also expect students to show respect one to another as well as to the instructors of the class. Violators of these guidelines will receive an "F" for the class and will be reported accordingly. Please refer to the JMU honor Code website for a fuller discussion of what constitutes an honor code infraction, as found at:

<http://www.jmu.edu/honor/code.shtml#TheHonorCode>.

Course Schedule

Week 1 – What is Experimental Existential Psychology?

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Koole, S. (2004). Experimental Existential Psychology: Exploring the human confrontation with reality. In Greenberg, J., Koole, S., & Pyszczynski, T. (Eds.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, Chapter 1. New York: Guilford Press.

Denying Death: Chapter 1 and Chapter 5

Week 2 – No Class – MLK Day

Week 3 – Introduction to Terror Management Theory

Worm: Introduction, Chapter 1 & 4

Rosenblatt, A., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Lyon, D. (1989). Evidence for terror management theory I: The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who violate and uphold cultural values. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *57*, 681-690.

Schimmel, J., Hayes, J., Williams, T.J., & Jahrig, J. (2007). Is death really the worm at the core? Converging evidence that worldview threat increases death-thought accessibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*, 789-803.

Week 4 – Attachment & Interpersonal Connections

Worm: Chapter 2

Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P. (2016). Attachment security, compassion, and altruism. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *14*, 34-38.

Florian, V., Mikulincer, M., & Hirschberger, F. (2002). The anxiety-buffering function of close relationships: Evidence that relationship commitment acts as a terror management mechanism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 527-542.

Cox, C., Arndt, J., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Abdollahi, A., & Solomon, S. (2008). Terror management and adults' attachment to their parents: The safe haven remains. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*, 696-717.

Week 5 – Self-Esteem: What it is, Why we need it, and How it works

Worm: Chapter 4

Steele, C.M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797-811.

Schimmel, J., Arndt, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2001). Being accepted for who we are: Evidence that social validation of the intrinsic self reduces general defensiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 35-52.

Week 6 – Interdisciplinary Nature of Terror Management Theory

Denying Death: Chapter 2, Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 9

Week 7 – Self-Determination Theory: Growth, Self-Expansion, and Freedom

Ryan, R.M. & Deci, E. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

Weinstein, N. & Hodgins, H.S. (2009). The moderating role of motivation for written emotion expression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35, 351-364.

Radel, R., Sarrazin, P., Legrain, P., & Gobancé, L. (2009). Subliminal priming of motivational orientation in educational settings: Effect on academic performance moderated by mindfulness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43, 695-698.

Week 8 – Why is Sex Such a Problem? Sex, the Human Body, Disgust, and Animals

Worm: Chapter 8

Goldenberg, J.L. (2005). The body stripped down. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 224-228.

Goldenberg, J.L., Cox, C.R., Arndt, J., & Goplen, J. (2007). “Viewing” pregnancy as existential threat: The effects of creatureliness on reactions to media depictions of the pregnant body. *Media Psychology*, 10, 211-230.

Fredrickson, B.L., Roberts, T., Noll, S., Quinn, D.M., & Twenge, J.M. (1998). That swimsuit becomes you: Sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating and math

performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 269-284.

Week 9 – No Class – Spring Break

Pandemic Revised Syllabus

Week 11 – Distinct Defenses for Conscious and Unconscious Threats: Death Can be Hazardous to Your Health

Worm: Chapter 9

Denying Death: Chapter 4

Routledge, C., Arndt, J., & Goldenberg, J.L. (2004). A time to tan: Proximal and distal effects of mortality salience on sun exposure intentions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1347-1358.

McCabe, S., Vail, K.E.III, Arndt, J., & Goldenberg, J.L. (2014). Hails from the crypt: A terror management health model investigation of health and celebrity endorsements. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, 289-300.

Week 12 – Literal Immortality, Religious Belief, and Morality

Worm: Chapter 5

Haidt, J. (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science*, 316, 998-1002.

Horberg, E.J., Oveis, C., Keltner, D., & Cohen, A.B. (2009). Disgust and the moralization of purity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(6), 963-976.

Shariff, A.F. & Norenzayan, A. (2007). God is watching you: Priming God concepts increases prosocial behavior in an anonymous economic game. *Psychological Science*, 18, 803-809.

Week 13 – Symbolic Immortality: Family, Fame, and Fortune

Worm: Chapter 6

Denying Death: Chapter 6

Greenberg, J., Kosloff, S., Solomon, S., Cohen, F., & Landau, M. (2009). Toward understanding the fame game: The effect of mortality salience on the appeal of fame. *Self and Identity*, 9, 1-4.

Week 14 – War, Terrorism, Prejudice, Hate, & Politics

Worm: Chapter 7

Denying Death: Chapter 3

Rothschild, Z.K., Abdollahi, A., & Pyszczynski, T. (2009). Does peace have a prayer? The effect of mortality salience, compassionate values, and religious fundamentalism on hostility toward outgroups. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*, 816-827.

Pyszczynski, T., Motyl, M.S., Vail, K.E.III., Hirschberger, G., Arndt, J., & Kesebir, P. (2012). A collateral advantage of drawing attention to the problem of global warming: Increased support for peacemaking and decreased support for war. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 18*, 354-368.

Burke, B.L., Kosloff, S., & Landau, M.J. (2013). Death Goes to the Polls: A meta-analysis of mortality salience effects on political attitudes. *Political Psychology, 34*(2), 183-200.

Cohen, F., Solomon, S., & Kaplin, D. (2017). You're Hired! Mortality salience increases Americans' support for Donald Trump: You're Hired. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 17*(1), 339-357.

Pyszczynski, T. (2013). Terror management of fear, hate, political conflict, and political violence: A review. *TPM, 20*(4), 1-14.

Week 15 – Cracks in the Shield: Psychological Dysfunction and Disorder

Denying Death: Chapter 12

Harvell-Bowman, L.A., Critchfield, K.L., Stucker, E., & Ndzana, F. (2020, February). Of Love and Death: Death anxiety, attachment, and suicide as experienced by college students. Presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in New Orleans, LA.

Abdollahi, A., Pyszczynski, T., Maxfield, M., & Luszczynska, A. (2011). Posttraumatic stress reactions as a disruption in anxiety-buffer functioning: Dissociation and responses to mortality salience as predictors of severity of post-traumatic symptoms. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, & Policy, 3*, 329-341.

Strachan, E., Schimel, J., Arndt, J., Williams, T., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2007). Terror mismanagement: Evidence that mortality salience exacerbates phobic and compulsive behaviors. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*, 1137-1151.

Week 16 – Research Presentations

Final Paper Grading Rubric

Introduction

Includes a strong “why” argument	A	B	C	D	F
Includes brief theory introduction	A	B	C	D	F
Includes purpose statement	A	B	C	D	F

Literature Review

Theory section is well-written with original sources	A	B	C	D	F
Includes relevant literature and sections	A	B	C	D	F
Includes appropriate subheadings	A	B	C	D	F
Arguments for hypotheses are clearly made	A	B	C	D	F
Hypotheses are stated correctly and separately from text	A	B	C	D	F

Method

Includes all relevant info for participants	A	B	C	D	F
Includes all relevant info for measures	A	B	C	D	F
Includes all relevant info for procedure	A	B	C	D	F
Survey is in appendix and referenced in paper	A	B	C	D	F
IRB Procedures are discussed.	A	B	C	D	F
Includes a table or figure that shows your design & hypothesized results	A	B	C	D	F

Miscellaneous Items

Entire paper (including references) are in APA 7 th Edition	A	B	C	D	F
Title is creative and indicates what the paper is about	A	B	C	D	F
Page limit is met (15-20 pages)	A	B	C	D	F
Proof of Comm Center Appointment	Yes			No	
If IRB visit was necessary, proof of communication with them	Yes			No	
Overall, paper flowed well and was organized using the funnel method	A	B	C	D	F