

PSY395: The Psychology of Meaning

Instructor: Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Ph.D.

Office: Schaap Science Center 1169

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays from 11:00-12:00, or by appointment

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Class Meeting Time: 2:00-2:50pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

Class Location: SCI 1008

Class Purpose: This course is designed to introduce students to the psychological study of meaning through the reading and discussion of primary research articles and academic chapters, as well as topical interdisciplinary books. Students will read and prepare for discussion outside of class, and class time will be dedicated to the discussion of the assigned readings, as well as the connection between the content and other areas of psychology. Finally, this course is intended to prepare students to begin cultivating a sense of meaning in their own lives through reflecting on what meaning is, the various sources of meaning in life, and how to find meaning in adversity.

Course Objectives: Upon successful completion of the course, students who have invested the appropriate effort should be able to:

1. Understand the various psychological approaches to meaning
2. Understand various sources of meaning
3. Understand how to empirically investigate meaning using principles of psychological science
4. Critically analyze, evaluate, and reflect upon primary readings
5. Think critically about a meaningful life and how to pursue meaning
6. Cultivate a personal interest in developing a meaningful life in a global society

Texts:

- Eagleton, T. (2007). *The meaning of life: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frankl, V. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Publishers.
- Kalanithi, P. (2016). *When breath becomes air*. New York: Random House.
- Markman, K. D., Proulx, T., & Lindberg, M. J. (2013). *The psychology of meaning*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Additional primary readings provided by the instructor and posted to Moodle

University Policies: The last day to add or drop this class is September 7. The last day to withdraw from this class with the grade of "W" is November 4. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require Hope College provide academic adjustments or accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students seeking academic adjustments or accommodations must self-identify with Jeanne Lindell, Coordinator of Coordinator of Academic Success at lindell@hope.edu (or via phone at extension 7830). After meeting with the coordinator, students must notify me as soon as possible, so that adjustments or accommodations can be arranged. The only accommodations for tests (e.g., time, location) that I provide must come through the Academic Success Center.

Honor Code and Academic Integrity: This course adheres to the Hope College Honor Code:

It is a violation to:

1. Give, offer, or receive aid on examinations other than that specifically allowed by the professor.
2. Do course work in a manner that is inconsistent with the standards of conduct set forth by the professor.
3. Falsify or fabricate data. This has particular applications to laboratory work and research.
4. Engage in conduct that destroys another person's work or hinders another in his or her academic endeavors. This has particular application to computer files, library resources, and laboratory or studio work.
5. Knowingly represent the work of others as his or her own. This includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism.

Any form of cheating or plagiarism will be dealt with severely. When you write papers, you should (a) use your own words to express your own ideas; (b) use your own words to express someone else's ideas and cite the source (in APA format); and/or (c) put quotes around someone else's words and cite the source (in APA format). When conducting research, fabrication or falsification of data is plagiarism and will be dealt with severely. If you violate any of these rules, you will receive a zero on the assignment or fail the class, depending on the severity of the infraction. If you violate these rules on more than one assignment, you will fail the class. Students who are unsure about their use of citations, or are in need of general writing assistance, are encouraged to visit the Center for Writing and Research. You are responsible for understanding all forms of plagiarism; unintentional plagiarism is no excuse. Regarding all papers, the ideas and the writing must be your own.

Course Expectations: This is an intensive, discussion-based seminar. This requires you to be an active participant in all aspects of the class, be proactive to ask questions when you do not understand, and work efficiently to keep up with the demands of this course. You are expected to read all assigned material prior to its discussion in class, attend every class meeting, and participate in class discussions. The amount and range of reading is extensive, the required level of critical thinking is very high, and the nature of discussion is vigorous. The success of this course, and your own personal learning, is highly dependent on each student fully committing to the tasks of the course, completing and critically reflecting on the readings of the course, and taking serious the opportunity to articulate one's life-view in a way that is humble, open, and respectful to others.

Technology: You must have a Hope College email account and check your email daily. Given that this is a discussion-based course, students are not permitted to use laptops or other electronic devices during class.

Classroom and Email Etiquette: Comments and questions are welcome in class! Classroom discussion is an important part of this course. I already know what I think about these issues; I want to know what YOU think. Please share your ideas and opinions. Your feedback on the course is also welcome. Out of consideration for the other students, you are asked not to record lectures, to refrain from conversation during lecture, and to set cell phones (and other personal electronic devices) to silent. If you are persistently using your cell phone/texting in class, I may ask you to leave (and you will be counted absent that day). Recordings that accommodate individual needs must be approved by me in advance and may be used for personal use during the semester only; redistribution is prohibited.

You are encouraged to contact me via e-mail, if you have a question that can be answered in one paragraph or less. Individual tutoring will not be provided over email. Be sure to include a meaningful subject line (including the course number and section number) and include your full name. Use standard spelling and grammar; text message language and abbreviations are not acceptable. If your question cannot be answered in one paragraph or less, please come see me during my office hours. Please do not assume your e-mail has been received unless/until you receive a response.

Critical Reaction Papers (50 points; 12.5%): Students are expected to read the weekly readings and prepare for class in advance. In order to facilitate a thoughtful discussion in class, students must complete a 1-page, single-spaced, typewritten reaction paper discussing the upcoming week's assigned readings and upload it to Moodle by 8am on Monday each week. The reaction paper must: (a) briefly summarize each of the readings, (b) critically reflect on the readings by assessing the logic of the arguments/findings, (c) connect the readings to other concepts discussed in this class and other courses, and (d) must include at least one discussion question to be brought up during that week's class session. You must go beyond simply whether you "liked" or "disliked" the reading; you should not be shallow in your analysis. Rather, your reaction to these readings needs to be thoughtful, engaged, and well-written, demonstrating a high level of understanding and critical thinking—moreover, you must write *concisely*. You must critically engage the material in ways that demonstrate connections to other themes in class or current culture. Late reaction papers are not accepted. Each paper will be graded using the following scale:

- 4 = thoughtful, extensive analysis, cogently argued, connected to several concepts, excellently written
- 3 = solid analysis, well-argued, connected to another concept, well-written
- 2 = good analysis, minor errors in arguments, tenuous connections, a few minor writing errors
- 1 = average analysis, some flaws in arguments, lacking solid connections, writing errors
- 0 = late or missing

There will be 14 reaction papers due, and students are allowed to drop their lowest grade. Thus, 13 reaction papers, each worth 4 points.

Participation and Discussion (100 points; 25%): I expect that students will be actively engaged and participate in every class session, and I expect that they will demonstrate sufficient mastery over the concepts and material through discussion in class, and communicate their ideas with respect and humility. One of the primary goals of this course is to help you develop a sense about what makes life meaningful, reason about this view cogently, and express it humbly. Accordingly, you are expected to treat other students and their views with respect and open-mindedness. Because of the interactive nature of this class, your grade will suffer if you do not attend each class, and students are responsible for all material covered and assignments due during the class they miss. Attendance is worth 50% and participation is worth 50% of this category. Merely showing up without contributing, simply for the sake of attendance, will earn you a 50% (F) in this category.

Book Analyses (50 points each, 100 points total; 25%): In addition to the weekly readings, students will read a classic psychology book (Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*) and a current book with relevant content (*When Breath Becomes Air*) and provide a written book analysis of each. For each book analysis, students should (a) provide a broad summary of the book, (b) explain the main themes of the book, (c) make detailed connections to specific concepts covered in the course, and (d) discuss how the book is relevant to current culture and topics in our society. The quality of the writing is more important than the quantity of the pages; I am more interested that you did a thorough and thoughtful job engaging with the material and making connections to the course material. However, it is likely that this book review will likely be an average of 7-10 pages. These papers should be uploaded to Moodle before 11AM on their due date.

- **Book Analysis #1: *Man's Search for Meaning*, due via Moodle before 11AM on October 12.**
- **Book Analysis #2: *When Breath Becomes Air*, due via Moodle before 11AM on November 7.**

The Meaning in Life Paper (150 points; 37.5%): A culminating paper is the centerpiece assignment for this course. The paper should explore your particular resolution (tentative though it may be) of the issues raised in the course and the intellectual rationale for adopting that stance. Put differently, you should clearly and cogently explicate an answer to these questions:

1. What is (are) the meaning(s) of life?
2. What is (are) the meaning(s) of your life?
3. What are the obstacles to finding meaning?
4. How do you live meaningfully?

Your paper should include at least 10-15 references to material that we have covered in class, thoughtfully integrating a review of the scholarship that is relevant to this issue, as well as a discussion of how you personally envision living out these aspects of a meaningful life and the obstacles that preclude you from doing so. As with all assigned writing in this class, quality of thought and writing is more important than quantity of words. You will turn in a draft of this paper, including a full outline and roughly 3-4 pages of writing, on **November 14** to receive feedback from the instructor. You must incorporate the feedback and address the issues provided by the instructor for your final paper. The final paper is due as a hardcopy to Dr. Van Tongeren's office by **2pm on Wednesday, December 14.**

Grading Criteria: The standard grading criteria will be used for this course:

A = 94-100%; A- = 90-93%; B+ = 87-89%; B = 83-86%; B- = 80-82%; C+ = 77-79%;
C = 73-76%; C- = 70-72%; D+ = 67-69%; D = 63-66%; D- = 60-62%; F = below 60%

Critical Reaction Papers	(13 x 4 points each)	50
Participation/discussion		100
Book Review	(2 x 50 points each)	100
Meaning in Life Paper	(Rough Draft = 25 points; Final Draft = 125 points)	150
Total		400

Tentative Course Schedule			
Week	Date	Class Topic	Readings/Activity Due
Unit I: What is meaning?			
1	Aug 31 – W	Introduction, syllabus review	--
	Sep 2 – F	The science of meaning	Koole, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Introducing science to the psychology of the soul: Experimental existential psychology. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 15, 212-216. Ch 1 from Markman et al. (2013)
2	Sep 5 – M*	Understanding meaning	Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. <i>Psychological Bulletin</i> , 136, 257-301.
	Sep 7 – W	Understanding meaning	Hientzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2014). (The feeling of) meaning-as-information. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> , 18, 153-167.
	Sep 9 – F	Meaning and lay theories	Ch 6 from Markman et al. (2013)
3	Sep 12 – M*	Understanding meaning	Eagleton Ch 1
	Sep 14 – W	Understanding meaning	Eagleton Ch 2
	Sep 16 – F	Meaning and narratives and identity	Ch 9 from Markman et al. (2013) Ch 11 from Markman et al. (2013)
Unit II: The motivation for meaning			
4	Sep 19 – M*	The motivation for meaning	Heine, S., J., Proulx, T., & Voh, K. D. (2006). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> , 10, 88-110.
	Sep 21 – W	The motivation for meaning	Van Tongeren, D. R., & Green, J. D. (2010). Combating meaninglessness: On the automatic defense of meaning. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i> , 36, 1372-1384.
	Sep 23 – F	The motivation for meaning	Proulx, T., & Inzlicht, M. (2012). The five "A"s of meaning maintenance: Finding meaning in the theories of sense-making. <i>Psychological Inquiry</i> , 23, 317-335. Steger, M. F. (2012). Making meaning in life. <i>Psychological Inquiry</i> , 23, 381-385.
5	Sep 26 – M*	Meaning and death	Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. <i>Psychological Inquiry</i> , 8, 1-21.
	Sep 28 – W	Meaning and death	Rosenblatt, A., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Lyon, D. (1989). Evidence for a terror management theory: I. The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who violate or uphold cultural values. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> , 57, 681-690. Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S., Rosenblatt, A., Veeder, M., & Kirkland, S. et al. (1990). Evidence for a terror management theory II: The effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who threaten or bolster the cultural worldview. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> , 57, 308-318.
	Sep 30 – F	Meaning and death	Ch 3 from Markman et al. (2013)
Unit III: Sources of meaning			
6	Oct 3 – M*	Meaning and religion	Batson, C. D., & Stocks, E. L. (2004). Religion: Its core psychological functions. In <i>Handbook of experimental existential psychology</i> , edited by J. Greenberg, S. Koole, and T. Pyszczynski (pp. 141–55). New York: Guilford Press.
	Oct 5 – W	Meaning and religion	Beck, R. (2004). The function of religious belief: Defensive versus existential religion. <i>Journal of Psychology and Christianity</i> , 23, 208-218. Beck, R. (2006). Defensive versus existential religion: Is religious defensiveness predictive of worldview defense? <i>Journal of Psychology and Theology</i> , 34, 143-153.
	Oct 7 – F	Meaning and religion	Van Tongeren, D. R., Hook, J. N., & Davis, D. E. (2013). Defensive religion as a source of meaning in life: A dual mediational model. <i>Psychology of Religion and Spirituality</i> , 5, 227-232.
7	Oct 10 – M	No Class	Fall Break
	Oct 12 – W*	Discuss <i>Man's Search for Meaning</i>	<i>Man's Search for Meaning</i> Book Review Due (via Moodle by 11AM) and bring a hardcopy to class
	Oct 14 – F	Meaning and self-esteem	Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., & Schimel, J. (2004). Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review. <i>Psychological Bulletin</i> , 130, 435-468.

8	Oct 17 – M*	Meaning and relationships	Mikulincer, M., Florian, V., & Hirschberger, G. (2003). The existential function of close relationships: Introducing death into the science of love. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> , 7, 20-40
	Oct 19 – W	Meaning and relationships	Van Tongeren, D. R., Green, J. D., Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Davis, J. L., & Ramos, M. (2015). Forgiveness increases meaning in life. <i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i> , 6, 47-55
	Oct 21 – F	Meaning and relationships	Ch 7 from Markman et al. (2013)
9	Oct 24 – M*	Meaning and control	Ch 14 from Markman et al. (2013)
	Oct 26 – W	Meaning and control	Kay, A. C., Gaucher, D., Napier, J. L., Callan, M. J., & Laurin, K. (2008). God and the government: Testing a compensatory control mechanism for the support of external systems. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> , 95, 18-35. Kay, A. C., Whitson, J. A., Gaucher, D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Compensatory control: Achieving order through the mind, our institutions, and the heavens. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 18, 264-268.
	Oct 28 – F	Meaning and control	Whitson, J. A., & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). Lacking control increases illusory pattern perception. <i>Science</i> , 322, 115-117. Kay, A. C., Gaucher, D., McGregor, I., & Nash, K. Religious belief as compensatory control. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> , 14, 37-48.
10	Oct 31 – M*	Meaning and morality	Emmons, R. A. (2005). Striving for the sacred: Personal goals, life meaning, and religion. <i>Journal of Social Issues</i> , 61, 731-745
	Nov 2 – W	Meaning and morality	Van Tongeren, D. R., Green, J. D., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., & Hulseley, T. L. (in press). Prosociality enhances meaning in life. <i>Journal of Positive Psychology</i> .
	Nov 4 – F	Meaning and morality	Ch 10 from Markman et al. (2013)
Unit IV: Creating meaning			
11	Nov 7 – M*	Discuss <i>When Breath Becomes Air</i>	When Breath Becomes Air Book Review Due (via Moodle by 11AM) and bring a hardcopy to class
	Nov 9 – W	Final Paper Outline work day	Work on Final Paper Outline
	Nov 11 – F	Why is there a challenge?	Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkernauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. <i>Review of General Psychology</i> , 5, 323-370.
12	Nov 14 – M*	Meaning and coping	Ch 12 from Markman et al. (2013) Meaning in Life Paper Outline Due (hardcopy in class)
	Nov 16 – W	Meaning and coping	Ch 13 from Markman et al. (2013) Park, C. L. (2005). Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress. <i>Journal of Social Issues</i> , 61, 707-729.
	Nov 18 – F	Meaning and coping	Taylor, S. E. (1983). Adjustment to threatening events: A theory of cognitive adaptations. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 38, 1161-1173.
Unit V: The meaningful life			
13	Nov 21 – M*	Prevalence of meaning	Heintzelman, S.J., & King, L.A. (2014). Life is pretty meaningful. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 69, 561-574.
	Nov 23 – W	Meaning vs. happiness	Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J., & Gabriinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. <i>Journal of Positive Psychology</i> , 8, 505-516.
	Nov 25 – F	No Class	Thanksgiving Break
14	Nov 28 – M*	Security vs. growth	Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Goldenberg, J. (2003). Freedom versus fear: On the defense, growth, and expansion of the self. In M. Leary & J. Tangney (Eds.), <i>Handbook of self and identity</i> (pp. 314-343). New York: Guilford Press.
	Nov 30 – W	Security vs. growth	Van Tongeren, D. R., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., & Johnson, K. A. (in press). Security versus growth: Existential tradeoffs of various religious perspectives. <i>Psychology of Religion and Spirituality</i> .
	Dec 2 – F	Authentic living	Martin, L. L., Campbell, W. K., & Henry, C. D. (2004). The roar of awakening: Mortality acknowledgment as a call to authentic living. In J. Greenberg, S. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), <i>Handbook of experimental existential psychology</i> (pp. 431-448). New York: Guilford Press.
15	Dec 5 – M*	Resolving meaning	Eagleton Ch 3
	Dec 7 – W	Resolving meaning	Eagleton Ch 4
	Dec 9 – F	Big picture	Wrap-up and reflections
16	Dec 14 – W	Final paper (hardcopy) due to Dr. Van Tongeren's office by 2PM on Wednesday	

Note: This is an intended guide for the semester. We may get ahead or behind, depending on class discussion, but paper due dates are firm and will not change. * indicates a Reaction Paper is due by 8AM via Moodle.