

**St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo**  
**Department of Psychology**  
**PSYCH/HLTH/GERON 218**  
**Psychology of Death and Dying**  
**Fall 2021 (online)**

**Instructor Information**

Instructor: Christopher T. Burris, Ph.D.

Online Office Hours: by appointment

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Updates: check “announcements” on LEARN frequently for course-related info and news

**Course Description**

Variations in the meaning and significance of death and dying will be considered from a psychological perspective, with particular attention to the contexts (e.g., cultural, familial, life-span developmental) in which these variations occur.

**Course Goals and Learning Outcomes**

I hope you'll walk away from this course with a psychologically informed understanding of:

- 1) the pervasive impact that death has on our experience of the world, and
- 2) how multiple, broader influences (e.g., biological, historical, political, media-related) affect an individual's experience of death.

**PLEASE NOTE:** In the “best” of times, talking or thinking about death can make people uneasy. Clearly the past 1 ½ years has been far from the “best” in much of the world. I suspect that far more of us (myself included) have been hit by close losses – as well as persistent, pervasive reminders of death – than is typical for an offering of this course.

With that as a backdrop, my goal is for us to confront dying and death with frankness and honesty. Doing so means venturing into ideas and experiences that can stir up all kinds of emotions. Thus, it's important for you to be clear whether taking this course is in your best interest right now.

I certainly hope that you take away something personally valuable from this course. Having said that, this is a high-enrollment, lecture-oriented course that *is neither intended nor designed to serve as group therapy*. **Thus, if you're feeling “stuck” in anxiety, anger, or grief linked to death-related issues, please seek out support from qualified mental health professionals.**

**Course Requirements and Assessment**

The course schedule, which includes topics, required readings, and test dates, appears on the next page.

**About “levels”.** Note the topical “levels”: The idea is to start at the broadest possible level of analysis (i.e., definitional and philosophical/psychological issues) and move to the most specific level (personality)... because every individual's experience is embedded in all of the broader contexts.

**About readings.** Assigned readings are *available as course e-reserves through the UW Library system*. I've retained some from previous years but have inserted lots of new ones, relying heavily on *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*. Given the vast breadth of death-related phenomena and variation within and across individuals and groups, it's impossible to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, I hope that the readings offer you at least a diverse sampling of what's out there. Example: There's one covid-related reading, but this course won't be “all covid, all the time.”

How should you approach the readings? I don't expect you to memorize dates or numbers or to understand complex statistical analyses. At the same time, skimming or looking at the summary (if there is one) won't be sufficient. Aim for somewhere in between: What are the author's main points, and on what basis are those points being made? Thinking about how reading content might intersect with lecture topic is especially worthwhile, as I won't necessarily do so explicitly in lecture... but it's a great way of testing your own understanding. I may offer some thought questions to help guide you periodically.

The schedule:

Week of	Topics	Reading(s)	Tests (topics/readings)
Sep 08	Introduction; Animate Level	Kastenbaum (2009)	
Sep 15	Species Level; Human Level	Masson & McCarthy (1995) Juhl & Routledge (2016)	
Sep 22	Historical/Cultural Level	McDuffie et al. (2021) McKinley et al. (2020)	
Sep 29	Medical Level	Gül et al. (2020) Hovland & Mallett (2020)	<b>Test #1 (Sep 08-22)</b> <b>Wed, Sep 29, 7pm EDT</b>
Oct 06	Legal Level	MacMurray & Futtrell (2021) Rumbold et al. (2020)	
Oct 13	<i>reading week – no class</i>		
Oct 20	Religious Level	Claxton-Oldfield & Richard (2020) Pevey et al. (2009)	
Oct 27	Arts/Media Level	Banerjee (2020) Khayambashi (2021)	
Nov 03	Political Level	Kelmendi et al. (2020) Leung & Chalupa (2015)* <small>*article text ends on p. 231!</small>	
Nov 10	Relational Level	Walsh & McGoldrick (1991)	<b>Test #2 (Sep 29-Nov 03)</b> <b>Wed, Nov 10, 7pm EST</b>
Nov 17	Individual Level 1 (Developmental)	Manoogian et al. (2018) Scheinfeld & Lake (2019)	
Nov 24	Individual Level 2 (Personality)	Mueller et al. (2017)	
Dec 01			<b>Test #3 (Nov 10 – Nov 24)</b> <b>Wed, Dec 01, 7pm EST</b>

**Tests.** The three online tests ([see schedule above](#)) are worth 35%, 40%, and 25%, respectively, based on the approximate amount of lecture and reading material covered by each. Given the high course enrollment, the format will be predominantly or exclusively multiple choice. **THE TESTS ARE NOT DESIGNED TO BE OPEN-NOTES/OPEN-READINGS:** Similar to in-class assessments, each will be timed so you will need to make sure that you “know your stuff” before writing it. The time allotted and the number of questions on each test will vary depending on the amount of material covered in the section being tested. Tests are not cumulative. There is no final exam.

**For students with a documented disability:** Please ensure that AccessAbility Services notifies me early in the term to verify any time accommodations that need to be made for the online test sessions.

**For students outside the Eastern Time Zone:** Please notify me early in the term if you are doing coursework outside the (North American) Eastern Time Zone for possible time accommodations related to online test sessions.

All assigned readings will be available to you from the beginning of the term. I intend to post a unit's lectures no later than Thursday of the week it is scheduled. Depending on interest, I may also hold online drop-in question-and-answer sessions. If it's a short question, email works just fine. If there are one or more longer questions, then I'm happy to set up an individual Zoom meeting with you.

Marks will be posted on LEARN as soon as possible. In order to be fair to everyone, *each test mark received stands "as is"* – that is, it will not be dropped or re-weighted.

**Extra Credit:** Up to 4% extra credit is available to all students via SONA research participation. I will post any information that the Research Experiences Group sends me to assist you. As an active researcher myself, I would ask that you ***PLEASE TAKE ANY RESEARCH PARTICIPATION SERIOUSLY***. Careless completion of a study's materials wastes everyone's time and undercuts the research process.

**UW Policy regarding Illness and Missed Tests:** UW Examination Regulations

([www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/exams/ExamRegs.pdf](http://www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/exams/ExamRegs.pdf)) state that: 1) A medical certificate presented in support of an official petition for relief from normal academic requirements must provide all of the information requested on the "University of Waterloo Verification of Illness" form or it will not be accepted. This form can be obtained from Health Services or at [www.healthservices.uwaterloo.ca/Health\\_Services/verification.html](http://www.healthservices.uwaterloo.ca/Health_Services/verification.html). 2) If a student has a test/examination deferred due to acceptable medical evidence, they normally will write the test/examination at a mutually convenient time, to be determined by the course instructor. 3) The University acknowledges that, due to the pluralistic nature of the University community, some students may on religious grounds require alternative times to write tests and examinations. 4) Elective arrangements (such as travel plans) are not considered acceptable grounds for granting an alternative examination time.

Thus, you are entitled to test rescheduling for legitimate medical, compassionate, or religious grounds.

With this in mind, I would ask that you please do your best to: ***(1) secure the appropriate documentation and (2) inform me PRIOR to the scheduled test to arrange an alternate writing time whenever possible.***

A make-up test should normally be scheduled on the first school day after your documentation expires, and it may differ in content and format from the original.

## Other Important Information

**Intellectual Property:** I very much want this class to be a good experience for you, and I am putting a lot of time, thought, and effort into that. You (or someone who cares about you a lot) paid so you could benefit from the firsthand experience that this class provides. To be clear, I'm sharing my work with YOU – so ***it's not fair to me to sell or give away my lectures, slides, etc. to other people***. That's "unauthorized distribution of intellectual property," and *it's not okay*. I hope that makes sense.

**Academic Integrity:** Please respect yourself, your fellow students, and your instructor. ***Don't cheat.***

"In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. [Check [www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/](http://www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/) for more information.]"

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. [Read the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances.](#) [www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/upload\\_file/PLCY\\_AOM\\_Student-Petitions-and-Grievances\\_20151211-SJUSCapproved.pdf](http://www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/upload_file/PLCY_AOM_Student-Petitions-and-Grievances_20151211-SJUSCapproved.pdf). When in doubt, please be certain to contact the St. Jerome's Advising Specialist, Student Affairs Office, who will provide further assistance.

**Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for their actions. [Check [www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/](http://www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/) for more information.] A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline](#), [www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY\\_AOM\\_Student-Discipline\\_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf](http://www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Discipline_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to University of Waterloo Policy 71, Student Discipline, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm). For typical penalties, check the Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm).

**Appeals:** A decision made or penalty imposed under the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances](#) (other than a petition) or the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline](#) may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Appeals](#), [www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY\\_AOM\\_Student-Appeals\\_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf](http://www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Appeals_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf).

**Note for students with disabilities:** [AccessAbility Services](#), located in Needles Hall (Room 1401) at the University of Waterloo, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term, [www.uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/](http://www.uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/).