

Psychology 453 – Spring 2026 Syllabus

Psychology of Death and Dying (3 units)

Professor: David Gard, Ph.D.

Pronouns: (he/him)

Email: davidegard@gmail.com

Class Location: BH 251

Office hours: Tuesdays 8-10am

Office: Email for Zoom link

Small Group Facilitators:

Lauren Riley - laursriley@gmail.com

Amber McKernan - amber.mckernan1@gmail.com

Sabrena Jefri - sabrena.jefri@gmail.com

Marcela Aguirre - mhagenaguirre@gmail.com

Frankie Sanchez - frankiersanchez15@gmail.com

Tyler Macalino - emacalino1@sfsu.edu

Angelina Leopardo - aleopardo@sfsu.edu

Riley Quinn - rquinn@sfsu.edu

“Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. But [with the diagnosis] I knew it acutely ... The fact of death is unsettling. *Yet there is no other way to live.*”

Paul Kalanithi - [When Breath Becomes Air](#)

Welcome!

I am so glad that you have chosen to take this course. At the outset I would like to acknowledge that this course may be different from any other psychology course that you have taken. In addition to required readings, attendance, small group discussions, and writing, this course requires *your whole presence and engagement*. By engagement I mean this course requires that you bring your full self to the process. While the structure of the class will be similar to a graduate school-style seminar with a little bit of lecture, it is important to me that you immerse yourself in the activities and you spend time reflecting on the meaning of the class topics. Unlike maybe every other class, the Psychology of Death and Dying is something that impacts us all, in big and small ways, every day. I also ask that you take this class with an open mind – **that you treat each person in this class as a potential instructor**. As your assigned instructor, I promise to work to do the same. To this end, please be sure to read and take in the [Course Engagement Agreement](#) Section below.

“If a man has learned to think, no matter what he may be thinking about he is always also thinking of his own death.”

- Leo Tolstoy

Course Description

This three-unit course presents the central concepts in the Psychology of Death and Dying. I want to acknowledge that, along with much of psychology, there is a Western bias in the content of this course, although I have worked to bring non-Western perspectives and I hope we can all focus on not prioritizing one specific perspective on Death and Dying. Death and Dying is something that every human will experience, and no one person (or approach) can have a

definitive view on what death and dying means, or what happens after death. Thus, I hope that you will hold the content lightly and consider the depth that each approach takes. In other words, try to approach the content with a non-judgmental and open mind, whenever possible.

Course Structure: We will meet as a large group *once per week* - on **Tuesdays from 11-12:15**. During those meetings there will be some lecture material, and we will discuss the readings in a graduate-style seminar. You need to complete the readings and the reading responses by the day before. You will also be assigned to a small group for **once per week discussion sections (Thursdays 11-12:15pm) that are required**. The time and location of these sections will be arranged at the start of the class. In these sections you will work on experiential exercises that are completed before the sections. There will be an assigned task for you each week starting week 3, and you will need to come prepared for each of these sections.

Course Prerequisite: None

Course Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Identify and describe psychological theories and research on the impact of mortality
2. Identify and describe psychological theories and research on the impact of grief and loss
3. Identify and describe psychological theories and research on the process of meaning making

"The fact is, those who apply themselves correctly to philosophy are simply and solely practicing dying and preparing for death..."

-Socrates

Readings

Required books (please consider purchasing from an independent bookseller):

Briefly Perfectly Human - Alua Arthur (2024)

When Breath Becomes Air - Paul Kalanithi (2016)

Being Mortal - Atul Gawande (2014)

No Death, No Fear - Thich Nhat Hahn (2002)

Required but provided on Canvas:

Denial of Death - Ernest Becker (1973)

Death Across Cultures: Death and Dying in Non-Western Cultures - (2019) Selin & Rakoff (Eds. this book provided by SFSU library & online on Canvas)

A Consideration of Three Critical Hypotheses Jeff Schimmel et al. (2019) from *Handbook of Terror Management Theory*

Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death - (Selections) - Irvin D. Yalom (2008)

Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience - George Bonnano (2004)

Dual Process Model of Grief - Stroebe & Schut (2010)

The Wild Edge of Sorrow - Francis Weller (2015)

The Year of Magical Thinking (Selections) - Joan Didion (2005)

What Losing My Two Children Taught Me About Grief - Campbell (2023)
Rituals Alleviate Grieving for Loved Ones, Lovers, and Lotteries Norton & Gino (2014)
The Healing Wisdom of Africa (Selections) - Malidoma Patrice Somé (1999)
Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression ... Griffiths et al (2016)
Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of Near Death Experiences (Selections) - Pim van Lommel (2010)
The Power of Now (Selections) - Eckhart Tolle (1999)

Recommended books:

The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life - Sheldon Solomon et al. (2015)
The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying - Sogyal Rinpoche (2002)
On Death and Dying - Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969)
How we Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter - Sherman Nuland (1995)
How We Live Is How We Die - Pema Chödrön (2022)
tuesdays with Morrie - Mitch Albom (1997)

For a more comprehensive reading list see 'Extended Reading List' at the end of the syllabus

"You have 2 lives. The second one begins when you realize you only have one."

-Confucius

Grade Evaluation

Reading reflections & attendance	30%
Discussion section activities & attendance	36%
Final Project	34%

Reading Reflections: You will be assigned reading each week, and you must 1) respond to the reading prompts in Canvas each week by 11:59pm the Monday before class. 2) come to class on Tuesday ready to discuss the readings. There are 12 reading weeks, and you can miss any two readings or classes without it affecting your grade. Each reading response & attendance is worth 3% of your grade (1.5% each). If you complete more than 10 (responses and class attendance) you will receive extra credit for the 11th & 12th. Your responses will not be graded, but will only get credit/no credit for the responses you submit. Because your reading responses are the basis for our weekly discussions there will be **NO make up time for the reading reflections**, so be sure to enter your response each week.

Discussion section activities: Each week you will meet with a smaller group to discuss experiential exercises and to reflect together on the experience of mortality, grief, and meaning. We have assigned activities for you to complete, and your task is to come to the class section ready to discuss. This requires that you plan and schedule your activity *in advance*. Some of the activities are fairly involved, so make sure to plan ahead for them. There are **6 activities spread out over the semester** and they each have a due date starting on week 3 of the course. Starting with week 3, each week your activity, attendance, and

participation in the discussion section is worth 3% of your grade. There are 13 weeks (starting at week 3 to week 15) of graded discussion sections. In order to get credit for the activity you will have to post reflections on your activity or a reaction to it by 11:59pm on the due date and you need to discuss your activity with your group. While all assignments are required, you can miss one small group (class attendance) without it affecting your grade. **After one miss each additional missed meeting results in a 3% decrease in your discussion section grade.** As with the reading responses, the activities are the basis for the small group discussions and so there are **NO make ups for the discussion activities.** Be sure to enter your response on Canvas each week.

Final Project: DUE May 14th. Each student in this class will complete a final project of their choosing. It will consist of one of three areas: 1) **Intellectual** - a literature review of a given psychological understanding of death and dying (e.g., a review of the data supporting (or contradicting) terror management theory, a review of the existential psychological literature on death and dying, a review of research on grieving, etc.) 2) **Experiential** - complete a <https://lifeoverdinner.com/> event, visit a cemetery/funeral home - get a quote on what services would cost if you are planning ahead for your own (or a family member's) burial or cremation, or write your will where you describe what you want in terms of a service, burial/cremation, etc in detail 3) **Creative** - honor the life of someone who has passed, acknowledge the signs of death all around us, every day in some artistic/literary way e.g., photo montage, painting, poem, writing. Note that all options require some form of a write up. Details to follow. **Note that your plan for a final project is due to me by Feb 24.**

Course Engagement Agreement:

This course covers complicated and emotional material. To that end, for this class I require that we all agree to certain ground rules for the larger group meetings and for the discussion section meetings as well.

Being present and on time: This is not a typical course, where you need to memorize material, concepts, dates, etc. Instead it requires you to be present in the moment to engage with the material and your peers. To that end, I'm asking that **we do not use any screens for this class**. You can take notes on paper, but not on screens, both for the larger group meetings and the small group discussions. I will bring my laptop for lecture slides, but I will make all slides available to you on Canvas (and I will not use the laptop for our discussions). It is also important that you arrive on time for each class. This is not just for you, but also to be respectful of your classmates who will often be *presenting sensitive material, especially in the small groups*.

Do the work: In a lot of classes you can fall behind and catch up as needed. In this class, because we will be having class discussions twice a week on the material, it is required that you do the reading and the exercises on time. If that is not possible with your schedule, please consider taking this class in a semester when your schedule allows.

Compassion & Self-Compassion: Death and dying are hard topics. A reminder to take the material slowly, and intentionally. Work to have compassion for others and for yourself. And related to this...

Take care of yourself. In this class, since the content will get heavy (a lot!), it is important that you take care of yourself. If you need to step out during class or discussions at any time, that is OK. It's also OK to have feelings and express feelings in class. Finally, reach out to your people and connect over this semester - through your personal connections and through mental health resources (see the list on Canvas).

No fixing, saving, advising, correcting: Sometimes it can be compelling to want to offer advice, or suggestions, for other people. Instead, work to allow other people the ability to figure out what they need in a given moment.

Consider the space you take up: We would like to hear from everyone in this class. Ask yourself - am I taking up enough space? *Am I taking up too much?* Ideally everyone has space to talk in this class and feels comfortable doing so. It is especially important to consider if you are taking up more than your share of time (or not offering enough of your experience).

Many truths, no final answer: While there may be some important points of knowledge about a specific author's idea or some research findings on mortality salience or grief (for example), for much of the class, please understand that many things are not easily knowable, or may not be knowable, and that often more than one truth is possible.

Curiosity as a guide: When you find yourself feeling complicated or painful emotions, look inward with a non-judgemental curiosity as a means of navigating painful feelings. Feelings are not typically harmful (usually rigid ideas around feelings are where problems arise).

Confidential space: Our goal here is to have you explore the meaning of death and dying and to make sense of this incredibly complicated issue for yourself. In order to do that you will need to feel that this class is an environment where you can explore complex feelings and ideas. That means we will all have to be thoughtful about *keeping information that is said in this class in this class*. Please do not share outside of this class what other people have shared here in both the larger or smaller groups.

Additional Syllabus Required Details

Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact me. I will work hard to make sure this course meets everyone's learning needs as much as possible. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email dprc@sfsu.edu.

Disclosures of sexual violence: SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose confidentially, contact:

[The SAFE Place](#) - (415) 338-2208 or

[Counseling and Psychological Services Center](#) - (415) 338-2208

For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>

Statement of Religious Holidays Observance: The faculty of San Francisco State University shall accommodate students wishing to observe religious holidays when such observances require students to be absent from class activities. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor, in writing, about such holidays during the first two weeks of the class each semester. If such holidays occur during the first two weeks of the class, the student must notify the instructor, in writing, at least three days before the date that he/she will be absent. It is my responsibility to make every reasonable effort to honor your request without penalty, and it is your responsibility as the student to make up for the work missed.

Canvas: All needed materials, excluding the required books, will be available on Canvas. Canvas is free for all enrolled students.

Cheating and Plagiarism, including AI: Just as I will attempt to provide a fair environment for everyone to succeed in this course, I also expect each student to act in a fair and honest manner. **Plagiarism** is a form of cheating; it occurs when someone misrepresents the work of another as their own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment. It also includes employing or allowing another person to write or alter work that a student then submits as their own. **This includes the use of artificial intelligence (AI) such as ChatGPT and Claude, Gemini, etc.** While I understand that there may be use cases for AI in some classes, this class is not designed for use with AI. The point of this class is for you to experience the activities and readings personally, not through technology. **Do not use AI for any written work in this class.** Plagiarism (including AI use) won't be tolerated in this class. As with all classes, students are responsible for knowing the SFSU regulations concerning plagiarism, found in the University Bulletin and online at <https://conduct.sfsu.edu/standards>.

Acknowledgements: I have been planning this class in the back (and sometime front) of my mind since 2005 when I started as an Assistant Professor at SFSU. The idea for this course and many of the activities and readings come from [Dr. Bernard McGrane](#), who taught my undergraduate Sociology of Death Course at UC Irvine, many (!) years ago. I am greatly indebted to his wisdom and thoughtfulness with this topic, and how he structured the learning environment for students. I'd also like to thank [Dr. Sherri Taylor](#) for her insights and suggestions for this class - I have really appreciated discussing this class with her, and many of the ideas for readings and activities also come from her. Finally, I would not be teaching this class this semester if it were not for my family and my friends who could see the value in this topic, and have been so generous listening to my perseverations about this idea for so long. In addition to my wife and my two kids, I especially want to thank [Dr. Hagan](#) and [Dr. Holley](#) for their encouragement, suggestions, and for actually making it possible for me to make this class fit in the department's busy schedule.

PLEASE NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change. I will make every effort to stick to this syllabus and the course schedule. However, things come up over the course that may require moving some things around. If you are absent from class or late to class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements made while you were absent/late.

**Spring 2026 Course Schedule for
Psy 453 - Psychology of Death and Dying**

Week	Class Topic	Tuesday Required Reading (response due day before)	Discussion Section Activity
Jan 27	Overview	None	Introductions to small group
Feb 3	Psychological impact of mortality	<i>Becker</i> (xvii-pg 24, chp 1-2); Intro to <i>Saline and Rakoff</i>	Icebreakers, getting to know each other
Feb 10	Psychological impact of mortality	<i>Hahn</i> foreword to Chp 2; Chp from <i>Saline and Rakoff</i>	<i>Writing your memorial letter (DUE)</i>
Feb 17	First person accounts of mortality	<i>Kalanithi</i> foreword to first 70 pages; and pages 196-225	<i>Writing your memorial letter (cont)</i>
Feb 24	Terror Management Theory Plan for final project DUE	<i>Schimmel</i> et al. (2019)	<i>Interviewing an elder (DUE)</i>
Mar 3	Suicide; Assisted suicide	<i>Burlock; Yalom</i> (chp 2, 4)	<i>Interviewing an elder (cont)</i>
Mar 10	Grief, mourning, loss, complex grief	<i>Bonanno</i> (2004)	<i>What is a good death? (DUE)</i>
Mar 17	Dual process model of grief	<i>Stroebe & Schut</i> (2010)	<i>What is a good death? (cont)</i>
Mar 24	SPRING BREAK - NO CLASSES		
Mar 31	Therapy / First person accounts of grief	<i>Weller</i> (2015); <i>Campbell</i> (2023); <i>Didion</i> (2005, Chp 1-2)	<i>Writing another's eulogy (DUE)</i>
Apr 7	Guest Lecture: <i>Lauren Riley, LMFT</i>	<i>TBD</i>	<i>Writing another's eulogy (cont)</i>
Apr 14	Meaning: Practical aspects of death & dying	<i>Gawande</i> (Chp 1-3) <i>Arthur</i> (Chp 1; 7-9)	<i>Unacknowledged forms of grief (DUE)</i>
Apr 21	Meaning: Rituals	<i>Norton & Gino</i> (2014); <i>Somé</i> (Chp 16)	<i>Unacknowledged forms of grief (cont)</i>
April 28	Meaning: Near death experience; psychedelics	<i>van Lommel</i> (Chp 1-2); <i>Griffiths et al.</i> (2016)	<i>What do we mean to others? (DUE)</i>
May 5	Meaning: Being present, mindfulness	<i>Tolle</i> (pg 3-45)	<i>What do we mean to others? (cont)</i>
May 12	Final Project Due - NO READING THIS WEEK		<i>Wrap-ups and goodbyes</i>

Extended Reading List:

- The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy, Peter Koestenbaum, (1971)
- A Matter of Death and Life, Yalom & Yalom (2021) (a famous psychologist on losing a life partner to terminal illness, and a written discussion with his famous wife as she succumbs to cancer)
- Life After Life - Raymond Moody (2005) (psychiatrist - classic text on near-death experiences)
- Mourning and Melancholia - Sigmund Freud
- Beyond the Pleasure Principle - Sigmund Freud (where Freud develops the 'death instinct')
- Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States - Melanie Klein (object relations theorist on mourning and loss)

Meaning

- Escape from Evil - Ernest Becker (1975) (Becker expands on how fear and terror of death can lead to evil in human behavior)
- Man's Search for Meaning - Victor Frankl (1946) (from being a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp to world renowned psychotherapist, Frankl helps underscore life's meaning)
- Full Catastrophe Living - Jon Kabat-Zinn(1990) (classic book on mindfulness and its daily life impact)
- How to Change Your Mind - Michael Pollan (2019) (understanding what psychedelics can teach us about mental health, life, and death and dying)

Practical

- Stiff - Mary Roach (2004)
- Smoke Gets in Your Eyes - Caitlin Doughty (2014) [also Youtube channel "Ask a Mortician"]
- Gone from My Sight: The Dying Experience - Barbara Karnes

Literature

- The Death of Ivan Illych - Leo Tolstoy (1886)
- Warrior Spirit Rising - Dianna Good Sky (2020).
- A Grief Observed - C.S. Lewis

Online Resources:

<https://climategriefgroup.org/>

<https://www.radicaldeathstudies.com/>

<https://letsreimagine.org/resources/>

<https://lifeoverdinner.com/>

<https://endwellproject.org/>

Mental Health Resources are listed in a document on Canvas.