

**PSYC 496**  
**Positive Psychology**

Fall, 2024: Tues, Thurs 11:00-12:20  
Psychology Building, Room 11



**Instructor:** Mikhail Lyubansky, Ph.D.  
**Office:** 723 Psychology (office hours or by appointment)  
**email:** [Lyubansk@illinois.edu](mailto:Lyubansk@illinois.edu)  
**Zoom:** Link available, by appointment  
**Office hours:** Tues, Thurs: 10:00-10:50 am (723)  
Wed. 10:00-10:30 am (Zoom, by appointment)

Now in my 20<sup>th</sup> year at UIUC, my scholarship is broadly focused on conflict and restorative responses to conflict, including racialized conflict, in a variety of different contexts, including schools, organizations, workplaces, and intentional communities. I developed this course after being invited to give a keynote talk in Hong Kong focusing on the intersection of restorative justice and positive psychology.

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“Folks are usually about as happy as they make their minds up to be.” ~ *Abraham Lincoln*

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances” ~ *Viktor Frankl*

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.”  
~ *Mahatma Gandhi*

“Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”  
~ *Martin Luther King Jr.*

“The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.”  
~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

“I believe compassion to be one of the few things we can practice that will bring immediate and long-term happiness to our lives....the kind that sticks” ~ *Dalai Lama XIV*

“The good life is a process, not a state of being.” ~ *Carl Rogers*

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## Course Description

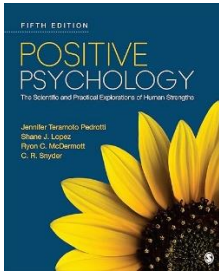
Positive psychology is the scientific study of cognitions, interpersonal strategies, and environmental conditions associated with well-being. We will discuss common misconceptions about happiness, examine the cognitive biases that often get in the way, and look closely at the cognitions and behaviors that are actually associated with resilience and life satisfaction. Students will also have the opportunity to think critically about how to apply this knowledge to both improve their communities and live a happier life.

## Place in the Curriculum

This is a mixed undergraduate and graduate level course offered in the Department of Psychology. Though space is limited and psychology majors are given priority to enroll, the course is open to any student on campus.

## Required Materials

### Readings



Pedrotti, J. T., Lopez, S. J., McDermott, R. C., & Snyder, C. R. (2024). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths*. SAGE Publications.

Assigned articles are available on Canvas

### Films

Films will be used to support learning, as needed. When possible, links will be made available to students but some films may only be accessible during class.

## Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. understand the core concepts of positive psychology
2. recognize the role of culture in shaping our views of the good life
3. identify and appreciate the character strengths in themselves and others.
4. identify different behavioral practices that are associated with happiness and well-being

## General Information

### *Availability and contact preferences*

I encourage you to take advantage of office hours to either discuss the course material or share your reactions to something related to the class (a movie, for example). Office hours will typically be in-person in my office (723 Psychology). If you have a conflict during my office hours, email me to set up an appointment for a Zoom call, but please use office hours if possible.

### *Electronic devices*

This course is designed to be a *mostly* device-free space in which laptops and other devices are kept out of sight, unless we are collectively engaged in an activity that requires those devices. By putting the technology to the side, we create conditions for the classroom space to support your relationships with me and with each other. In addition, it has been my experience that students who have access to their laptops spend a significant part of the class period focusing on activities not related to the class, which impacts not only their own learning and retention but also that of their classmates. Since you are presumably invested in learning the course content, I hope you will commit to giving the class the entirety of your attention during class meeting times.

*Note: We'll discuss this policy in class and may amend it based on the discussion.*

### *Academic integrity*

As a course offered through the University of Illinois system, this course adheres to the University's guidelines on academic integrity. Although there are no exams, academic integrity is still relevant in relation to assignments. *If you are having problems in class, please talk with me so that we can develop a plan for you to improve your performance in the course without cheating.* Cheating and plagiarism will be responded to in accord with the procedures indicated in the University Student Code (found at: <http://studentcode.illinois.edu/>). You are responsible for familiarizing yourselves with how the Student Code defines an infraction of academic integrity. For example, "every direct quotation must be identified by quotation marks or by appropriate indentation and must be promptly cited," and "prompt acknowledgment is required when material from another source is paraphrased or summarized in whole or in part." This is true even if your words differ substantially from those of the source. In addition to the University Student Code, the Department of Psychology also has guidelines regarding academic integrity. Academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, is considered by the Department of Psychology as grounds for expulsion.

### ***ChatGPT and other generative AI***

Generative AI is here. For better or worse, it is likely to impact all of our lives in ways we cannot possibly predict. At least for the present moment, it is also a deeply flawed technology that is frequently wrong about objectively verifiable facts and often “hallucinates” (i.e., makes up) both information and citations. We’ll discuss AI and how we want to use it in class and I will edit this section of the syllabus accordingly, following that discussion. For now, please know that I have been experimenting with this technology from the first days it became publicly available and that my focus continues to be on how to optimize conditions for us all to learn together.

### ***Accommodations***

If you have a diagnosed condition/disability that causes difficulty with learning or completing course work, please see me as soon as possible and provide documentation as soon as it is available. I will do what I can to accommodate your legitimate needs, which should be documented by the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES, <http://www.disability.illinois.edu/>). According to campus policy, it is the student’s responsibility to notify the instructor of any special needs. All information and documentation of disability will be kept strictly confidential.

If you require assistance in the event of an emergency, please let me know in advance so that I can make arrangements to assist you in moving to a Safe Area during an emergency. Safe Areas are located on each floor of the Psychology Building next to the freight elevator in the southwest corner, and they are marked on the emergency wayfinding maps found throughout the building.

### ***Mental Health Concerns***

Mental health issues can manifest in anyone at any time. The university counseling center has free services for students. See <http://counselingcenter.illinois.edu/counseling>

### ***Sexual Misconduct Policy and Reporting***

I am committed to combating sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct to the university’s Title IX and Disability Office. In turn, an individual with the Title IX and Disability Office will provide information about rights and options, including accommodations, support services, the campus disciplinary process, and law enforcement options. A list of the designated university employees who, as counselors, confidential advisors, and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found in the Confidential Resources section. Other information about resources and reporting is available at <http://wecare.illinois.edu>

### ***University’s COVID-19 Policies***

The University’s COVID policies are available at <https://covid19.illinois.edu/> Note that students do not need to disclose they have tested positive for COVID-19. As always, students who miss class should communicate with me about making up missed work as soon as possible.

## Course Requirements

### *Class attendance/participation (10% of total grade)*

Students are expected to attend and actively participate in class. Some days will be interactive and discussion-oriented. Other days there will be more “lecture” but will still have opportunities for participation. My recommendation is that you prioritize being in class and, if that’s not possible due to illness or other reasons, use your small groups (see below) to get caught up.

Please note that active participation is possible no matter what is happening at any given moment. When we are building knowledge together, participation just means a willingness to contribute and share your point of view. But even during the lectures, active participation is expected in the form of asking or answering questions and/or writing questions/comments down to bring up (or just think about) at a later time. Similarly, active participation during films (we will have several) also involves jotting down questions, responses, or even just something someone in the film said or did that seems important.

In addition to being an academic sub-discipline, positive psychology is also an applied practice that is best learned as a craft, as one might learn pottery or baking artisan bread. This class is designed to provide students with developmentally appropriate in-class opportunities to try out and practice the applied craft. Just as an art class requires picking up a brush, I will invite you participate in a variety of activities that require some degree of self-connection and self-exploration followed by discussion or other form of peer engagement. In enrolling and remaining in this class, you are acknowledging that this kind of participation is considered to be an essential part of the course.

At the same time, the choice to “pass”, to listen quietly, or to sit out a particular activity, is also a gift to the rest of us in that it demonstrates that the person making that choice has clarity about what would best support their well-being and trusts that the choice to temporarily opt out is, indeed, a real option that students can choose without concern of being penalized. Moreover, although our class space often feels safe for students to talk about vulnerable topics, there is never any expectation that students disclose anything they consider to be personal or vulnerable and such disclosure (or lack thereof) will never be part of the formal evaluative process.

I will talk with students privately about their participation if I have concerns, but my hope/expectation is that all students who are in class on a given day are earning full participation points. There are a total of 28 class periods (not including the final week). Each day is worth 2 points for a total of 56 possible points. Forty-four (44) points will be considered full credit. Thus, if a student shows up for 19 of the possible class periods, they would have 38 (out of 44) points which is 86%. Since this category is 10% of their total grade, they would then have the equivalent of 8.6/10 on a 100-point scale.

### ***Brief Reflection Papers (40% of total grade)***

During the course of the semester, you will complete 10 positive psychology activities and then write a 1-page, single-spaced reflection paper (maximum of 500 words) on the experience. All reflection papers are due (via Canvas) by 11:59 pm Sunday. You will have 12 weeks (every full week during the semester except for the two test weeks) to submit 10 such reflections (no extra credit will be given for additional submissions), so you get two “skips” if you either forget, have a crisis, or just choose to focus on other work.

Please note that Canvas will not accept late submissions, and I will not accept submissions that are not posted on Canvas (unless there is a system-wide problem), even if they are emailed to me prior to the deadline. Write something you are proud (and comfortable) to share with others, and bring a copy of your reflection to class, because occasionally papers will be read aloud in lecture. Each brief reflection will be graded on a 10-point scale: (10) excellent reflection, thoughtful and insightful, (8) engages with the prompt but lacking sufficient depth for full credit, (6), incomplete or not relevant to the topic, and (0) not submitted.

### ***Meta-Reflection Paper (10% of total grade)***

In addition to the brief reflection papers, you will be required to submit a more extensive reflection paper (maximum 2000 words) on your overall engagement with the positive psychology activities, how the activities influenced (or didn't influence) your well-being throughout the semester, and what you've learned about yourself and others by taking this course.

### ***Exams (40% of total grade)***

Rather than demonstrating that you have the ability and motivation to memorize some specific set of facts, the exams are designed to provide you with the opportunity to think deeply and critically about the course materials, integrate ideas, concepts, and theories from readings and lectures, and weigh the research evidence supporting different theories. To that end, all exams will be “open note”. That is, you will be able to use your own *hand-written* notes from class during the exam (you may not use printed or photo-copied notes). The exams are cumulative in the sense that material from an earlier exam may be incorporated into a question on a later exam, but the emphasis on each exam will be on course content covered since the previous exam.

There are two essay exams in the course. Each exam will have three (3) questions from which you will choose two (2) to answer. Each exam will be worth 100 points. Each exam is worth 20% of the total grade.

If you cannot be in class on the scheduled exam day, you must obtain permission to take a make-up exam PRIOR to the regularly scheduled exam date. Make-up exams without prior approval will only be given without penalty under extenuating circumstances, such as a death or illness, and will require documentation from the student dean's office (a note simply stating that you were at McKinley is not sufficient). If you miss an exam for other reasons (e.g., your alarm clock broke, you scheduled a job interview), you will be able to take the make-up exam within 5 days of the original exam date. However, 15% will be automatically deducted from your score.

## Course Evaluation

The semester grade for this course will be determined using the following weighted categories. Grades for assignments within the same category (e.g., thought papers, discussion posts), are averaged in determining your score in that category.

Attendance/participation	10 %
Brief reflection papers	40 %
Meta-reflection paper	10 %
Exam one	20 %
Exam two	20%

Semester grades will be assigned according to the following scale. I realize that the cutoffs between the grades are somewhat arbitrary, even if they are consistent with traditional practices and university guidelines. However, the lines have to be drawn somewhere, and this is where I have determined they will be. While many other aspects of the course are negotiable, in our current university system, grades are not. In the interest of fairness, exceptions will not be made, even if a student is literally just a point short of the higher grade. If this appears petty, please keep in mind that to make an exception for one student and not another would be absurdly unfair, and to make an exception for “everyone” would be the equivalent of moving the cutoff, which would only create a situation in which there is a different group of students who are just a point away. So, these are the cutoffs. Use them to plan the effort you put into your work.

<u>Weighted % of points</u>	<u>Semester grade</u>
93-100	A
90-92.99	A-
87-89.99	B+
83-86.99	B
80-82.99	B-
77-79.99	C+
73-76.99	C
70-72.99	C-
67-69.99	D+
63-66.99	D
60-62.99	D-
< 60	F

## A Restorative Classroom

This is not a restorative justice class and I don't expect you to be familiar with restorative justice principles. However, I think this page provides useful suggestions for creating the kind of class climate I think we all want. Here are 10 ways to be restorative in a classroom, based on [an article by Howard Zehr](#). Please know that I am committed to these principles, both in the classroom and in my personal life. That said, these are not rules that I expect you to follow but an invitation that I hope you will accept. Voluntariness is one of the core principles of restorative justice and, in that spirit, I am much more interested in supporting our mutual exploration of these ways of being together than in using power to obtain your compliance.

1. Take relationships with your classmates (and instructor) seriously, envisioning yourself in an interconnected web of people, institutions and the environment.
2. Try to be aware of the impact - potential as well as actual - of your actions on others.
3. View the conflicts and harms in class (and in your life) as opportunities. When we are able to engage such matters with support from others, much learning and connection can emerge.
4. When you become aware that your actions negatively impacted others, take responsibility by acknowledging and seeking to repair the harm - even when you could probably get away with avoiding or denying it.
5. Involve those affected by a decision, as much as possible, in the decision-making process.
6. Seek to understand, even if you don't agree.
7. Sensitively respond to injustice, including sexism, racism and classism. We'll discuss how in class.
8. Don't silence yourself. Look for opportunities to engage in dialogue, even when what is being discussed is challenging and emotionally stimulating, remaining open to learning from them and the encounter. It is my intention to create conditions where there is enough safety for everyone to speak their "truth" if they want to. For my part, I pledge to you to speak honestly (hopefully, with sensitivity) about whatever we're discussing.
9. Be cautious about imposing your "truths" and views on other people and situations. Every person has a right to (and is responsible for) their own feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. *We are not always going to agree or see everything.* Try to approach disagreement by focusing on your own understanding and growth rather than on trying to change someone else.
10. Be aware of your internal state. Give yourself and each other permission to be sad and afraid, and even confused and angry (I'll make sure the anger is safely contained). If you do find yourself feeling unusually emotional, you might want to think or even talk it through with me, a classmate, or someone else you trust in order to make sense of your experience. If you want to do so, you may also express what you're feeling in class. Emotions are a form of feedback that something important is happening. If they are ignored, they'll keep coming back, sometimes when they are least welcome.



## Tentative Semester Schedule

**Note:** Both the semester schedule and assigned readings are intended as a starting point and are intentionally incomplete. In the spirit of collaboration and power-sharing – students will have the opportunity to shape the curriculum of the course and the readings and films may change to reflect the particular interests of the class. All readings (except for the assigned books) will be posted weekly on Canvas, Sunday prior to the start of each week. Readings posted on Canvas are the official readings in this course.

### PART 1. A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE

Week 1: **Introducing Positive Psychology**

Aug. 27, 29

Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Positive psychology: An introduction American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.

Wong, P. T. P., & Tweed, R. (2022). Positive psychology in North America. In E. C. Chang, C. A. Downey, H. Yang, I. Zettler, & M. Muan (Eds.), *The international handbook of positive psychology: A global perspective on the science of positive human existence*. Springer.

Martin Seligman's [TED Talk - The new era of positive psychology](https://www.viacharacter.org/)

<https://www.viacharacter.org/>

Week 2: **Cultural Perspectives**

Sept. 3, 5

Textbook Chapter 2

Oishi, S., Graham, J., Kesebir, S., & Galinha, I. C. (2013). Concepts of happiness across time and cultures. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(5), 559-577.

Week 3: **Classification and Measurement**

Sept. 10, 12

Textbook Chapters 3 and 4

### PART 2. POSITIVE EMOTIONAL STATES

Week 4: **The Principles of Pleasure**

Sept. 17, 19

Textbook Chapter 6

Gruber, J., Mauss, I. B., & Tamir, M. (2011). A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 6(3), 222-233.

Week 5: **Emotional Experiences**

Sept. 24, 26

Textbook chapter 7

Week 6: **Self-Efficacy, Optimism, and Hope**

Oct. 1, 3

Textbook chapter 8

Shane Lopez video: [Making Hope Happen](#)

Week 7: **Wisdom and Courage**

Oct. 8, 10

Textbook chapter 9

Week 8: **Mindfulness, Flow, and Spirituality**

Oct 15, 17

Textbook chapter 10

\*\* 1<sup>st</sup> Exam Oct. 17 \*\*

**PART 3. PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

Week 9:

Oct. 22, 24

**Helping and Altruism**

Textbook chapter 11 pp. 265-278

Week 10:

Oct. 29, 31

**Savoring and Gratitude**

Textbook chapter 11 pp. 279-294

Robert Emmons: The Power of Gratitude [video]

Week 11:

Nov. 5, 7

**Flourishing Relationships**

Textbook chapter 12

Week 12:

Nov. 12, 14

**Understanding and Changing Behavior: Making Life Better**

Textbook Chapter 13

Jachimowicz & McNerney (2015). [Should Governments Nudge Us to Make Good Choices?](#) Scientific American.

N.A. (2014). Nudge nudge, think think. The Economist.

Thaler (2014). [The Power of Nudges, for Good and Bad.](#) New York Times.

## **PART 4: POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS**

Week 13:  
Nov 19, 21      **Positive Schooling**  
Chapter 14: 351-365  
2<sup>nd</sup> Exam: Nov. 21

Nov. 26 28      **FALL BREAK**

Week 14:  
Dec. 3, 5      **Happiness in the Workplace**  
Chapter 14: 366-386

Week 15:  
Dec. 10      **Last Day of Classes**  
Closing Circle (no assigned reading)

### ***On Change and Growth***

Change and growth take courage. Our current ways of thinking, whatever they may be, are in many ways comfortable, in part because they are familiar. The familiarity allows us to predict how our friends and relations (and even our classmates and instructors) will respond to us. New ways of thinking are, by definition, unfamiliar and, therefore, scary because we don't know how others will respond. As the semester begins, I have no way of knowing how any of you might change and grow, but I know that many of you will. This kind of personal growth is not a course requirement and will not ever be formally evaluated, but observing it is, for me, one of the great pleasures of teaching, and I wish you an exciting and fulfilling journey of discovery.