

The Science of Happiness

*Course Number: V05.0110

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*This course is offered every spring semester and carries 4 points.

*There are no prerequisites to this class.

Course Description:

For many young adults, the transition from high school to college is one of the most exciting periods of their lives. Normative developmental tasks, such as moving away from home, learning new academic material, forming adult relationships, and managing time and money, can create feelings of independence and generate a sense of mastery and competence unparalleled in earlier adolescence.

As educators are well aware, however, these critical tasks can become a source of chronic stress, especially during the freshman year (D’Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). Without parents, siblings, friends, and the resources of their high school and community, many students who were previously able to cope with the stresses of early adolescence and high school face considerably greater challenges away from home. If left unchecked, such stress can uncover or lead to more serious psychological disorders, which can, in turn, cause social isolation, school failure, and self-destructive behaviors.

The College Student and Depression Initiative (2004) of the National Mental Health Association notes:

- According to a recent national college health survey, 10% of college students have been diagnosed with depression, including 13% of college women.
- In 2000, almost seven percent of college students reported experiencing anxiety disorders within the previous year. Women are five times more likely than men to suffer anxiety disorders.
- Eating disorders affect 5-10 million women and one million men nationwide, with the highest rates occurring among college-aged women.
- Suicide was the eighth leading cause of death for all Americans, the third leading cause for those aged 15-24 years, and the second leading cause in the college population in 1998.

NYU students are vulnerable to all of the above problems, as well as the challenges of being on their own in a large city. While most students handle this transition well, a significant number need additional knowledge and strategies to facilitate their growth and development. Universities have made strides in providing greater resources to help

students in need and prevent the onset of more significant problems later on (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), but still more needs to be done.

This course begins with a review of adolescent and young adult developmental theory to provide students with a framework of the psychosocial conflicts present during the college years. Rather than looking at these issues from a psychopathological perspective, however, this course turns traditional psychology on its head and examines the theories and tenants of positive psychology. As we survey the contributions that positive psychology has made in helping individuals to create change in their lives, we find elevated self-esteem, improved physical well-being, and an increase in the overall sense of success to be achievable outcomes for college students. At the conclusion of the course, students are charged with synthesizing this material and creating their own project designed to improve mental health awareness within the NYU community.

Course Aims:

Knowledge

Students will learn key aspects of:

- a. Theories of development, particularly the social and emotional changes (both normative and pathological) which are relevant to young adulthood as outlined by Erikson, Kegan, Seligman, and Ben-Shahar; and
- b. Current mental health treatments for college students; and
- c. Theoretical models targeted at increasing success and happiness in college

Skills

Students will be able to:

- a. Utilize theories of positive psychology to better understand human behavior and mechanisms of change; and
- b. Apply basic developmental concepts to design projects that promote mental health on the university campus; and
- c. Identify stressors that students face as they enter college and learn strategies to cope with such stressors

Attitudes:

Students will develop:

- a. An understanding of the primary motivating forces facing college students; and
- b. An appreciation of their potential for personal change; and
- c. A consideration of ways to affect change in themselves and others through projects that promote mental health awareness on the college campus

Course Syllabus:

Week 1 Introduction to Positive Psychology

This class provides an overview of positive psychology and introduces the theoretical models of adolescence and early adulthood as described by Erikson, Kegan, Seligman, and Ben-Shahar in order to provide a framework for the course. The emphasis here is on understanding where college-age students are situated in their development and how much physical and emotional growth still remains. Recent developments demonstrating the dynamic qualities of neurofunctional brain pathways are illustrated. In addition, the role of positive psychology and its influence on mental health is examined. The course reviews the growing evidence-based science of how to create meaningful personal change and contrasts this approach with the “self-help” movement. Finally, we begin discussion of the final class assignment which requires students to develop a mental health awareness promotion project on the NYU campus.

Week 2 Moving Beyond the Stigma

This class reviews the history of stigma within illness and why mental illness, particularly in adolescence and young adulthood, creates such discomfort. We examine how an illness becomes integrated within a society and how it must be redefined so as to be acceptable for common consumption and conversation. Additionally, we examine why it is readily acceptable to take a medication for high blood pressure or asthma, while mental illness and its treatments remain stigmatized. We discuss the availability of wellness services, specifically on college campuses, and we consider how the tenants of positive psychology can help us move beyond the stigma of mental illness.

Week 3 Cognitive Distortions and Goal Pitfalls

This class begins to examine goal-setting and focuses on the negative thoughts and behaviors that interfere with the achievement of goals and the attainment of success, especially as it applies to young adulthood. There is a common belief that in order to be successful one must accomplish goals without fault and without falling off task. Numerous studies suggest, however, that so-called perfectionists set themselves up for inevitable failure and that these individuals are at increased risk for lower self-esteem, difficulties with intimacy, and other undesirable outcomes, such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. We review the scientific literature supporting this theory and discuss how optimism and pessimism, traits most people consider static, can be developed.

Week 4 Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, the most evidence-based psychotherapy, is reviewed in detail. The class examines the theories of Aaron Beck and looks at his understanding of major maladaptive thought patterns. The behavioral techniques that can address negative thoughts and promote positive change are also reviewed. Cultural premises and schemas are considered, followed by an extensive discussion of the Pygmalion effect on students and the observations of social psychology. We begin to discuss how, with the aid of cognitive behavioral techniques, adolescents and young adults can create change on a personal level and how this can be reflected in greater systems.

FILM (for home viewing):

“Pygmalion” (d. Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938, UK) - The snobbish & intellectual Professor of languages, Henry Higgins makes a bet with his friend that he can take a London flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, from the gutters and pass her off as a society lady.

Week 5 The Science of Change

The relationship between change, memory, and emotion is reviewed. In this class, we examine situations when change occurs suddenly, such as in a traumatic event, and review the alterations that occur on a neurofunctional level as a result. We compare these alterations to neurofunctional changes associated with risk-taking behavior. Additionally, we look at the growing field of resilience as it applies to young adulthood, and we examine how studies of personal and collective success can illustrate the capacity for change. Empirical ways of creating personal change by accessing a variety of psychological therapies are also considered, followed by an introduction to mindfulness and other personal interventions such as goal setting, exercise, and improved sleep hygiene and diet. Finally, we teach students how to prepare a proper academic poster, a format they will utilize in the presentation of their final projects.

Week 6 Meaningful Goals

This class examines the purpose of having meaningful goals and the integral role this plays in the lives of college students. We see how setting goals can contribute to self-esteem and success, and we look at the meaning of success – what does it mean to be successful? How does this differ for individuals? How do college students in general measure success? Differentiating between long-term and short-term goals and exploring the steps involved in creating realistic goals for oneself are reviewed. We conclude with a discussion of possible goals that the students may wish to establish for their final projects (e.g., interventions designed to increase mental health awareness and wellness on campus).

Week 7 Stress Management & Stress Reduction

Stress, a necessary component of all human endeavors and an inescapable part of University life, is defined as any situation or stimulus that challenges the brain. In this class we discuss the differences in the ability to tolerate and/or thrive under varying degrees of stress, with our levels of resilience reflecting a combination of genetic endowment, life experiences, and social support systems. This session explores how science has measured the optimal stress response curve. We look at how people can be trained to identify signals of diminishing returns and how to restore personal stress resources before they are depleted. We review the evidence behind various methods that help to reduce stress during young adulthood, including music, exercise, and yoga.

***1st Response Paper Due**

Week 8 Pleasure and Thrill-seeking

This class begins with a review of the brain's neurofunctional reward pathways, particularly focusing on the dopamine circuit. We examine pleasure-seeking behaviors and why college students are prone to seek stress reduction through maladaptive activities, including alcohol and drug use, rather than through those methods described in our stress reduction class. We explore the relationship between pleasure and happiness and why adolescents and young adults often favor short-term rewards instead of pursuing a course of action with long-term benefits. Finally, the class engages in an examination of pleasurable behaviors with lasting rewards.

Week 9 Mindfulness Meditation

People develop mindfulness and insight through meditation. The potential relationship and benefits of meditation and psychodynamic therapy are illustrated by Dr. Barry Magid. Recent developments in neuroscience using magnetic resonance imaging highlight the neuroanatomical changes that can be observed in people who meditate. These findings include increased frontal cortical thickening which is speculated to inhibit the development of Alzheimer's disease. Cognitive schemas are addressed, including a review of the scientific literature on the role of mindfulness in improving mental health.

2nd Response Paper Due*Week 10 Physical Wellness: Sleep & Exercise**

This class reviews the neurophysiologic stages of sleep as well as common sleep disorders, their symptoms, and treatments. Proper sleep hygiene and maintenance is emphasized. The class continues with a discussion of exercise, which has been shown to exert numerous positive effects on mood and anxiety. The role of exercise in improving wellbeing and the difficulty college students have in fitting exercise into their daily routine is reviewed. The class ends with a discussion of the overlap between physical and mental wellness during later adolescence and young adulthood, focusing on the scientific literature supporting this connection.

Week 11 Eating and Nutrition

Maintaining a healthy nutritional status has become increasingly difficult for college students. All manner of eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (the most severe forms), are rampant on college campuses throughout the United States. We begin with a review of the specific eating disorders and then talk about body image and risk factors for the development of eating disorders, including the role of societal and media pressures. The "Freshman 15," its physical and psychological impact on college students, and the prevention of eating-disorders in the college population is reviewed.

Week 12 Relationships

Any time we choose to care for others – whether in friendship or romance – we run the risk of being hurt. This class looks at the role that friendships, familial relationships, and romantic love play in the lives and mental well-being of college-age students. We examine what makes relationships necessary and successful for an individual and how this contributes to a person's development and growth. Additionally, this session provides information about sexual health and sexual harassment and offers strategies for effective relationships.

Week 13 Barriers to Treatment

During this session, we review the internal and external barriers to treatment. We discuss obstacles to changing behavior and consider why education and insight do not necessarily lead to behavioral transformation. Using case examples of how other health policies have succeeded and failed, including anti-smoking and AIDS awareness campaigns, we discuss how mental health and wellness campaigns can succeed in the future.

Week 14 Poster Session

In our final class, students present a poster describing their mental health awareness projects. This is an opportunity for the students to learn about the development of an academic poster and practice presentation skills.

Required Reading:

1. Basco, MR. (1999). The Perfect Trap. *Psychology Today*
2. Beck, AT. (2005). The Current State of Cognitive Therapy: A 40-Year Retrospective. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. Vol 62(9), 953-959.
3. Beck, AT. (1979). Cognitive Therapy of Depression. The Guilford Press, NY, NY, pages 1-44, 386-420.
4. Bouchey, HA. (2007). Perceived romantic competence, importance of romantic domains, and psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*. 36(4):503-14.
5. Brown FC, Buboltz WC Jr. Soper B. (2002). Relationship of sleep hygiene awareness, sleep hygiene practices, and sleep quality in university students. *Behavioral Medicine*. 28(1):33-8.
6. Brown, KW. & Ryan, RM. (2003). The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84 (4), 822-848.
7. Callaghan, P. (2004). Exercise: a neglected intervention in mental health care? *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 11, 476 – 483.
8. Carney CE, Edinger JD, Meyer B, Lindman L, Istre T. (2006). Daily activities and sleep quality in college students. *Chronobiology International*. 23(3):623-37.
9. Darling, CA, McWey, LM, Howard, SN, Olmstead, SB. (2007). College student stress: The influence of interpersonal relationships on sense of coherence. *Stress and*

- Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress. Vol 23(4), 215-229.
10. Davidson JR., Kabat-Zinn, J, Schumacher, J, Rosenkranz, M, Muller, D, Santorelli, SF, Urbanowski, F, Harrington, A, Bonus, K & Sheridan, JF. (2003). Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 65, 564-570.
 11. De Brabander, B, Hellemans, J, Boone, C, Gerits, P. (1996). Locus of control, sensation seeking, and stress. *Psychological Reports*. Vol 79, 1307-1312.
 12. DiRamio, D, Payne, R. (2007) Assessing the relationship between campus programs, student self-efficacy, stress, and substance abuse. *College Student Journal*. Vol 41(3), 676-695.
 13. Dopp, A, Parish, TS. (2007) Ways to beat the stresses of going to college. *College Student Journal*. Vol 41(4, Pt A), 928-929.
 14. Doskoch, P. (2005). The Winning Edge. *Psychology Today*.
 15. D’Zurrilla, TJ, & Sheedy, CF. (1991). Relation between social problem solving ability and subsequent level of psychological stress in college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(15), 836-841.
 16. Ey, S, Henning, KR, Shaw, DL. (2000). Attitudes and factors related to seeking mental health treatment among medical and dental students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*. Vol 14(3), 23-39.
 17. Fredrickson BL. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*. 56(3):218-26.
 18. Gullette DL, Lyons MA. (2006) Sensation seeking, self-esteem, and unprotected sex in college students. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*. 17(5):23-31.
 19. Hinshaw, SP. (2007). The Mark of Shame. *Stigma of Mental Illness and an Agenda for Change*. Oxford University Press, pages 3-52, 176 – 231.
 20. Hudd, S, et al. (2000). Stress at college: Effects on health habits, health status and self-esteem. *College Student Journal*. Vol 34(2), 217-227.
 21. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future. *Clinical Psychology*, 10 (2), 144-156.
 22. Kelley, TM. (2004). Positive psychology and adolescent mental health: false promise or true breakthrough? *Adolescence*. 39(154):257-78.
 23. Kim, Y. (2006). Cognitive Concepts of the Self and Romantic Relationships. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*. Vol 28(2), 169-175.
 24. Kirkland, K, & Hollandsworth, JG. (1980). Effective test taking: Skills-acquisition versus anxiety-reduction techniques. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. Vol 48(4) 431-439.
 25. Kisch J, Leino EV, Silverman MM. (2005). Aspects of Suicidal Behavior, Depression, and Treatment in College Students: Results from the Spring 2000 National College Health Assessment Survey. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. 35(1):3 – 13.
 26. Kolodinsky J, et al. (2007). Knowledge of current dietary guidelines and food choice by college students: better eaters have higher knowledge of dietary guidance. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 107(8):1409-13.
 27. Kuyken, W, et al. (2005). Cognitive-behavior therapy for mood disorders. Gabbard, Glen O (Ed); Beck, Judith S (Ed); Holmes, Jeremy (Ed). *Oxford textbook of*

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 31. Marano, HE. (2003) Ending Procrastination. *Psychology Today*.
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 35. Norem JK, Chang EC. (2005). The positive psychology of negative thinking. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. Pratt HD. Eating disorders in college. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*. 52(1):85-96, viii.
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 37. Psychology Today Staff (1995). The Impossible Dream. *Psychology Today*
 38. Reifler, CB. (2006). Epidemiologic Aspects of College Mental Health. *Journal of American College Health*. Vol 54(6), 372-376.
 39. Richards, A, Kattelman KK, & Ren C. (2006). Motivating 18- to 24-year-olds to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 106(9):1405-11.
 40. Rye, MS, Pargament, KI. (2002). Forgiveness and romantic relationships in college: Can it heal the wounded heart? *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. Vol 58(4), 419-441.
 41. Sateia MJ, Reed VA, & Christian JG. (2005). The Dartmouth sleep knowledge and attitude survey: development and validation. *Sleep Medicine*. 6(1):47-54.
 42. Schneider SL. (2001). In search of realistic optimism. Meaning, knowledge, and warm fuzziness. *American Psychologist*. 56(3):250-63.
 43. Schwitzer AM, et al. (1998). Eating disorders among college women: prevention, education, and treatment responses. *Journal of American College Health*. 46(5):199-207.
 44. Sheldon, KM. & Kasser, T. (2001). Goals, Congruence, and Positive Well-Being: New Empirical Support for Humanistic Theories. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41 (1), 30-50.
 45. Siegel, DJ. (2007) *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*. Mind Your Brain, Inc, pages 3 – 52, 164 – 188.

46. Smart DH, et al. (2007). Mental health and wellbeing of Australian adolescents: pathways to vulnerability and resilience. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine & Health*. 19(3):263-8.
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48. Sumi K. (2006). Correlations between optimism and social relationships. *Psychological Reports*. 99(3):938-40.
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51. Wiseman, R. (2003). The Luck Factor. *The Skeptical Inquirer*, 27 (3), 1-5.
52. Voelker, R. (2004). Stress, sleep loss, and substance abuse create potent recipe for college depression. *JAMA*. 291(8): 2177 – 2179.

Examinations and Grades

30% - final project & poster presentation – The final project is to be completed in small groups of 2-3 students who will be encouraged to think as a mental health team. Our hope is that by means of their projects the students will disseminate information about positive psychology and student wellness on campus in venues such as the Student Union, the Welcome Center, campus eateries, and the dormitories. The projects will focus on ways to improve self-esteem, happiness, physical health and other wellness domains covered during the class. Drs. Wasser and Schlechter will meet individually with students to approve of all projects and to supervise the projects as they are carried out. During the final class, the students will present their projects and results in a poster format and discuss the challenges in carrying out such an initiative. In designing their projects, students will be encouraged to delve further into one of the subject areas that most resonates with them and to expand upon this theme. Possible examples of the projects include:

- Optimism – one project may seek to create awareness that optimism is not a static concept and that people can actually become more optimistic by identifying their cognitive distortions and consciously shifting their thoughts and behaviors. The project group might conduct a survey on campus of how students perceive themselves and their world, looking specifically at factors which may predispose one to an optimistic or pessimistic vantage point. The group will then prepare their results in the required poster format, which will be presented at the final session and posted in various spots on campus in abbreviated format. Finally, the group could then host an event within their dorm or at the Student Union where they disseminate information about the science of optimism and its relationship to change.
- Nutrition – students interested in nutrition and the mind might hold a cooking session on 20 ways to eat healthy with a microwave. The group might also choose to clarify the relationship between caffeine, sleep, and attention. It is well known that many students use caffeine as a study aid, yet the effects on attention and concentration are often negated by sleep deprivation, lack of exercise, and generally poor eating habits.

The students could include healthy sleep and nutrition tips directed at improving performance in the materials they present on campus and in their poster.

20% - final written examination – comprised of short answer questions and an in-class essay, encompassing the principles of positive psychology as discussed in class and in the required readings.

20% - response paper #1 – (to be written after Week 6) - Students will reflect on their own cognitive distortions and be challenged to set short-term goals that are meaningful and achievable

20% - response paper #2 – (to be written after Week 8) - Students will consider areas in their lives where they feel overwhelmed and reflect on positive ways to reduce stress

10% - class participation & attendance