

Vancouver Summer Program 2026

Philosophy: Happiness

Course Overview

Happiness seems to be a universal goal. But what is happiness? Is happiness something you can reliably obtain through some plan of action? And is happiness truly a worthwhile goal?

Happiness is a bit like the Sun: it is vital, but hard to look at directly. In this course, we will study contemporary and classical philosophical writings, drawing from different traditions and perspectives, as well as some contemporary videos (including some critiques of happiness). The course will also look at the nature of happiness and ways to cultivate it with help from related fields such as psychology, economics, neuroscience, political theory, and sociology. Students will be encouraged to experiment on themselves through activities that try out different ways of thinking about happiness, to analyze both the philosophical literature and their own perceptions, and then to put some of these ideas into practice.

Different philosophers have proposed different theories of what happiness is, how to cultivate it, and why being adds so much value and meaning to our lives. The activities we engage in throughout this course will give you the opportunity to put those ideas into practice in your own life. You will be invited to reflect on your experiences at numerous times throughout the course and will have plenty of opportunities to share your reflections with others. This course will engage your emotional depth and encourage you to develop greater clarity with your own feelings - and maybe, just maybe, could even help you become happier.

Learning Aims and Outcomes

During this course you will learn:

- Philosophical theories of happiness and its value
- How to apply these theories to answer questions about living a meaningful life
- Philosophical critiques of the value of happiness
- Philosophical theories of unhappiness
- How to engage in a number of activities and exercises to promote happiness
- How to defend and critique philosophical theses

Topics

In this course we will cover five different topics related to happiness.

Topic 1: Theories of Happiness and the Value of Happiness

- We will look at theories of happiness from Hedonism, Stoicism, and the Buddhist tradition, and learn about the concepts of flourishing, Eudaimonia, and Authenticity

Topic 2: Critiques of the Value of Happiness

- We will consider whether happiness is a worthwhile goal to pursue in our lives, and whether happiness can and should guide public policy. We will also explore how happiness has become commodified under capitalism and tied to consumerism.

Topic 3: How to Be Happy

- We will explore different ideas about how to cultivate happiness. We will cover happiness and physical exercise, happiness and being in nature, and happiness and love. We will also consider the relationships between happiness, beauty and art, happiness, friendship and connection, happiness, pleasure and desire, and the idea that life is a game.

Topic 4: The Value of Unhappiness and Other Difficult Emotions

- Unhappiness and suffering also seem to be facts of life. We will explore the question of whether difficult emotions like suffering, misery, grief, and shame also bring value to our lives in some form. We will also consider the question of whether it is better to have never existed at all.

Topic 5: The Ethical and Political Significance of Happiness

- Happiness isn't just personally significant, it is also politically powerful, and we will look at the importance of happiness from a political perspective. We will explore the power of love, the importance of being confident, and the idea that being joyful can be an act of political resistance.

Assessments

Engagement in the course will be assessed in the following ways:

Practicing Happiness

- Performed during class, activities that test different ideas about happiness

Activity Reflections

- Written reflections on your experiences of doing the activities

Mood Journal

- Written in your own time outside of class. You will be asked to write brief, daily entries that answer these questions: what was something that made me happy today? What about it made me happy? What was something that made me unhappy today? Is there something I did I wish I had done differently? Is there something I did that I am proud of? What do I feel right *now*?

Debate

- Your team will defend a view of happiness against an opposing team's view of happiness

Final Group Project

- Create a how-to guide for being happy and present that guide to the class

Activities

You will have the opportunity to engage in a number of activities that put into practices different ideas about happiness. These will include the following:

Setting a Habit

- Pick a new habit that you want to set. This should be something small, but meaningful, and that you can make time to practice every day of your visit. You will then reflect on your progress at the end of your visit. Did you succeed in setting your habit? What did you learn about yourself in your attempt to do so?

UBC Walking Tour

- UBC Vancouver campus is incredibly beautiful. We will take a tour of the campus and visit some of its most beautiful places. You will be invited to reflect on your experiences during and after this walk.

36 Questions

- Researchers have created a list of 36 questions designed to create closeness between people. You will answer some set of these questions with another person and record how you feel. You will be invited to reflect on what (if anything) this tells us about intimacy.

Mood and Physical Exercise

- Write a brief journal entry about some event in your life, then spend five minutes physically exercising, then write another brief journal entry about the same event. Compare the two entries and record any differences you note between them.

Meditation

- Follow a guided meditation that leads you to pay attention to your thoughts and your body. Notice what your attention is drawn to during your meditation, and reflect on your experience afterwards.

Making Art

- Create a piece of art in whatever medium you like (i.e. painting, drawing, sculpture, collage etc.). You can bring your own art supplies or use those provided in class. Reflect on your feelings during and after the process and record your reflections.

Playing a Game

- Play a game with another person or group of people. This can be a board game, chess, a table-top role playing game, or some other kind of game. You will be invited to pay close attention to the moves you make in the game - why do you make those moves? What are you trying to achieve? What evidence are you drawing from to decide on your moves?

Show and Tell

- Bring something to class that makes you happy and that you feel comfortable showing others and explaining why it makes you happy.

Animals and the Art of Noticing

- UBC campus is full of wild animals, from crows and squirrels to smaller and larger creatures too. Find an animal to observe without disturbing them, and think about the following: How do they behave? What do they seem to want? How could the environment be made better for them? Are there any lessons you can take from their behaviour for your own life?

Readings

During this course you will engage with a number of readings, art pieces, and videos about happiness, including the following:

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

The Service Berry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Underworld Crawl: Notes From Nowhere, by Unknown

Shame, by Natalie Wynn

Walden, by Henry David Thoreau

The Experience Machine, by Robert Nozick

Utilitarianism, by John Stuart Mill

On the Happy Life, by Seneca

Nichomachean Ethics, by Aristotle

Can and Should Happiness Be a Policy Goal?, by Shigehero Oishi and Ed Deiner

The Happiness Agenda, by William Davies

A Killjoy Manifesto, by Sara Ahmed

The Happiness Ruse, by Cody Delistraty

The Value of Unhappiness, by Christine Vitrano

Why It Is Better Never to Come Into Existence, by David Benetar

Suffering as a Virtue, by Michael Brady

Sad Love, by Carrie Jenkins

Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience, by Kimberley Brownlee

Letter From a Birmingham Jail, by Martin Luther King

Is Life a Game We Are Playing?, by Bernard Suits

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running, by Haruki Murakami

The Art of Noticing, by Rob Walker

The Science of Awkwardness, by Micheal Stevens

Acknowledgement

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