

PSYC 252: Distress, Dysfunction, and Disorder: Perspectives on the DSM
Spring 2026, Monday/Wednesday/Friday 2:20-3:20pm, Theater 205

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Office/Drop-In Hours: Monday 11am-12pm; Tuesday 3-4pm; Thursday 11am-12pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course seeks to enhance our knowledge about psychological disorders identified by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR). We will explore each disorder with three questions in mind: (1) What does it feel like to experience the symptoms of this disorder? (2) What causes or exacerbates this disorder? (3) What alleviates this disorder? Answering these questions will illustrate the complex interactions among biology, psychology, social relations, and culture that produce, perpetuate, and hopefully remedy distress. We will focus on a wide array of diagnoses, and you will have an opportunity to delve more deeply into disorders that interest you the most.

COURSE GOALS: By the end of the course, students will demonstrate increased knowledge and critical perspective in the following areas: the experiences, causes, and treatments of psychological distress; the historical and sociocultural systems associated with diagnosing and treating psychological distress; and ways to decrease stigma and enhance empathy towards people living with mental illness.

GRADED COURSE ACTIVITIES:

Specific instructions, guidelines, and grading rubrics will be posted on Moodle in advance of due dates.

- Reflections (20%)
 - Although I would like to have everyone participate during every class meeting, I realize this is impossible with a class of 30+ students, and especially during “non-applied” class meetings. Therefore, to facilitate your active engagement in the course and to give me a chance to get to know you, you will write a reflection at the end of most class sessions; I’ll reserve the last few minutes of class for this purpose. The goal of the reflection is to encourage you to grapple with the day’s topic while the material is fresh. I will sometimes suggest a prompt about which I’d like you to write a response, but more often, you’ll write about whatever you found most salient (interesting, frustrating, confusing, personally moving, ethically worrisome, etc.). I will also ask you to include at least one question for me and/or your peers. *Reflections are meant to be brief.* They are usually no more than one paragraph in length.
 - I will read your reflections after each class so that I can integrate your responses and questions into our next class meeting. I will not be able to comment on your reflections individually, but I welcome you to stop by during office/drop-in hours to discuss topics raised in your reflection—or any other topics inspired by the class. My preference is for students to submit their reflection immediately after class, but students who need a bit more time can submit their reflection within 24 hours after class. This will allow me the time to read the reflection and incorporate your responses/questions for our next class meeting.
- Application Activities (30%)
 - PSYC 252 is a survey course in which we will introduce and review many psychological disorders. Historically, and given the amount of content to cover in one semester, this course has been lecture- and exam-heavy; however, I have changed the format to provide more opportunities for class and small group discussion. To that end, we will have designated classes in which there will be no formal lectures (beyond a few supporting slides) and, instead, we apply and critically examine the content through application activities. As you review the schedule, note the “lecture and questions” classes vs. the “applied” classes—and please come prepared to engage accordingly.
 - Our application class meetings will consist of small group activities, questions, and discussion prompts. Students are expected to engage fully with their respective group, and, for the latter half of the class meeting, each group will “report out” on their activity. We will then discuss as a larger class.
- Stigma and Empathy Project (30%)
 - This course is *not* designed to teach you to diagnose mental health disorders. It is also *not* designed to test you on your ability to memorize and regurgitate the DSM. Instead, the course is designed to teach you about the different ways that mental health problems arise and how these operate in the world around you (and perhaps in and through your own personal experiences). To that end, it is imperative that students develop a drive to better understand and de-stigmatize mental illness. Statistically, *every single person* will experience a significant mental health problem at some point in their life...
 - Students will, therefore, engage in the Stigma and Empathy Project during the first half of the semester. In short, students will “interview” five people in their lives—these could include friends, partners, family members, co-workers, Macalester staff and/or faculty. As part of each interview, students will ask about (1) whether the individual has experienced any mental health struggles in their life; (2) what that experience (or lack of experience) meant to them and their understanding of mental illness; (3) what they have experienced or seen that speaks to the stigma surrounding mental illness; and (4) what we can do to decrease stigma and increase empathy/understanding regarding mental illness. Students will then reflect on their interviews, e.g., shared or distinct experiences or themes; shared or distinct questions or concerns. Finally, students will reflect on their own contributions to mental health stigma and empathy, and consider what they can actively do in their lives to make improvements in these areas.
 - Ultimately, students will submit a paper that (1) details the responses they received, (2) summarizes their experience conducting this project, and (3) details what they have learned.
- Disorder Deep-Dive (20%)
 - I want you to think about your career interests and/or what you envision yourself “doing” when you graduate from Macalester. It’s fine if you don’t have a specific “job” in mind—I didn’t know what I wanted to do until after I graduated! Still, consider at least a general area of interest (e.g., “I want to work with people in a helping profession,” “I want to work in a start-up developing a new app or piece of tech,” “I want to work with athletes on performance and ability...”). Based on your interests, and to the best of your ability, choose a psychological disorder that you believe would be helpful to research further. Ideally, this psychological disorder would have some connection to your interest, even if small.

- Once you have picked a disorder, you will then write a paper connecting your interest with the disorder. Ultimately, the purpose of this assignment is to consider the relevance of understanding mental health problems as you develop your professional identity—which will be unique for each you.

POINT BREAK-DOWN:

Reflections	20
Application Activities	30
Stigma and Empathy Project	30
Disorder Deep-Dive	20
TOTAL	100

Date of Class	Topic(s)	Graded Activities
1/26	Introduction	None
1/28	History of Mental Illness	Reflection 1
1/30	Application: History of Mental Illness	Application 1
2/2	Current Diagnostic Practices	Reflection 2
2/4	Application: Current Diagnostic Practices	Application 2
2/6	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Reflection 3
2/9	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	Reflection 4
2/11	Application: Neurodevelopmental Disorders	Application 3
2/13	Schizophrenia Disorder	Reflection 5
2/16	Application: Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders	Application 4
2/18	Major Depressive Disorder	Reflection 6
2/20	Application: Depressive Disorders	Application 5
2/23	Bipolar Disorder I and II	Reflection 7
2/25	Application: Bipolar Disorder	Application 6
2/27	Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder	Reflection 8
3/2	Social Anxiety Disorder	Reflection 9
3/4	Specific Phobia	Reflection 10
3/6	Application: Anxiety Disorders	Application 7 / S&E Project Due
3/9	Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	Reflection 11
3/11	Body Dysmorphic Disorder	Reflection 12
3/13	Application: Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders	Application 8
3/16-3/20	Spring Break	None
3/23	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Reflection 13
3/25	Acute Stress Disorder	Reflection 14
3/27	Application: Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders	Application 9
3/30	Dissociative Identity Disorder	Reflection 15
4/1	Application: Dissociative Disorders	Application 10

4/3	Illness Anxiety Disorder	Reflection 16
4/6	Conversion Disorder	Reflection 17
4/8	Application: Somatic Symptom Related Disorders	Application 11
4/10	Anorexia Nervosa	Reflection 18
4/13	Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder	Reflection 19
4/15	Application: Feeding and Eating Disorders	Application 12
4/17	Gender Dysphoria	Reflection 20
4/20	Application: Gender Dysphoria	Application 13
4/22	Substance Use Disorders	Reflection 21
4/24	Application: Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders	Application 14
4/27	Antisocial Personality Disorder	Reflection 22
4/29	Borderline Personality Disorder	Reflection 23
5/1	Application: Personality Disorders	Application 15
5/4	Wrap-Up / Takeaways / Relevance	Reflection 24
5/7-5/11	Finals	Disorder Deep-Dive Due

PARTICIPATION AND GRADING: I have found that students report greater learning and greater enjoyment in/of this course when their final grade reflects their engagement with and application of the course material; compared with their ability to memorize a lot of information for an exam (hence no exams). Two of the Graded Course Activities require participation and engagement. To clarify expectations, please see the following:

- **Reflections:** It is expected that students will complete and submit a reflection response after most class meetings (excluding the classes focused on application activities). As noted in the previous section, Reflections are meant to be brief—no more than one paragraph. Thoughtful and specific reflections will receive full points, whereas reflections that are vague, non-specific, and/or incomplete (e.g., the student did not include a question) will receive no points. If not at the end of class, Reflections will need to be submitted within 24 hours of class. I can be flexible, though, so please let me know if you need more time (e.g., you have a particularly busy week).
- **Application Activities:** For the class meetings focused on application activities, students will be divided randomly into smaller groups. Because I can't possibly monitor all groups, and know who is participating and at what level—you will all be tasked with grading yourselves individually and you will communicate this “grade” with your group. Grades will be based on point values. I will provide a rubric for you to use to assign yourself points so that students are using the same criteria and that grading is as objective as possible. Ultimately, you are responsible for your Application Activities grade and, by sharing your self-grade with your group, you will demonstrate integrity in your actions.

I recognize that participation differs between people and can be influenced by several factors—especially ones that might not be known or apparent to me as your instructor. If you have concerns about your ability to participate in class (e.g., engaging with your peers, asking questions, offering a critical perspective) and the impact that it might have on your grade, please talk to me, either before or after class, or during office hours. I am more than happy to discuss ways to manage some of your concerns and to best ensure that your style of engagement is reflected optimally in your grade.

MISSING CLASS / ABSENCES: It is expected that students will attend at least 90% of classes to receive full points for participation-based activities. I recognize that students may choose or need to miss class due to illness or other factors. To account for absences at the end of the semester, I will not include points for four reflections and/or application activities (in total) in your final grade. For example, if a student misses up to four classes, those missed points for reflections and/or application activities will not count toward the final grade—and this student could still receive full points at the end of the semester. Missing more than four classes will result in a reduction in participation points. Missing fewer than four classes will not result in “extra credit,” but will result in my gratitude for showing up and engaging in the classroom.

Please note: If you are a student athlete and/or need accommodations that may impact your ability to attend 90% of classes, please speak with me early in the semester. I am more than happy to make exceptions and adjustments to ensure that you are successful in the course.

INCOMPLETES: Incompletes will be given only under extraordinary circumstances such as death of an immediate family member, an illness or injury accompanied by a physician's note, or a natural disaster. Being busy at the end of the term is not an extraordinary circumstance.

SUBMITTING WORK: All assignments must be submitted via email.

OFFICE/DROP-IN HOURS: Office hours are designed as drop-in hours for students to bring questions, receive 1:1 support for any graded course activities, and/or to check-in generally. Office hours are noted at the top of this syllabus. If needed—for example, office hours do not align with your schedule—I can be available to meet with students on a different day and time. Please let me know and we can schedule a meeting.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI): It is expected that students will produce original work. Scholastic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism, cheating on assignments, and submitting the same or substantially similar work to meet more than one course's requirements without permission from all the instructors involved. These actions will result in the failure of the course and college leadership will be notified. If you have any questions of how this policy applies to this course, please ask me. I am a proponent of emerging technology that can help with writing, for example, ChatGPT and other AI programs. If you intend to use such software to support your writing, please let me know and we can talk through ways that you may choose to use it.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND MANDATORY REPORTING: Due to the content of this course and the reality that every individual will struggle with mental health problems at some point in their life, it is very likely that students might have personal experiences related to the disorders we cover in class—through their own experience and/or through people they know. To best ensure a safe and educational environment, I ask that students please consider whether self-disclosure of mental illness will be helpful in the classroom setting. If students feel comfortable and believe that self-disclosure will support the learning environment, then it is perfectly fine to share general experiences. This may also support the de-stigmatization of mental illness. This course is not designed, however, as a therapy setting, and students are asked to please keep this in mind. You all are adults, and I trust your judgment. If there is content that we will cover in class or information that is raised that is personally concerning or difficult to manage emotionally, please feel free to step out of the classroom or plan to miss certain classes, if needed. Again, I trust your judgment to keep yourselves mentally and emotionally healthy.

Please note: As an educator, I am considered a mandatory reporter on the college campus. This means that, should students disclose information related to hurting themselves or others, or report experiences of discrimination and/or abuse on campus—physical, emotional, and/or sexual—I am required by the college to report these incidences. This is not meant to be punitive in any way; on the contrary, we report any incidences to ensure that students get the support they need. If you have any questions or concerns about my role as a mandatory reporter, please come talk with me during office/drop-in hours.

STUDENT ACCOMODATIONS: I am eager for all students to thrive, and thus I am committed to providing reasonable accommodations to all students with documented disabilities. If you have not done so already, please contact the Center for Disability Resources as soon as possible to discuss your need for accommodations. They will send me a confidential letter detailing the appropriate accommodations for this course. Please plan to follow-up with me to confirm how we'll apply those accommodations within the course.