

Identity & Becoming: A Psychological Approach to Behavior Change

Course Syllabus

Summer 2026



Course Information

Department of Psychology, Stanford University
3 units
Summer 2026
M/W 1:30-3:30 PM

Course Instructors

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Bulletin Description:

Why do so many efforts to change behavior, in ourselves and others, fail? This course explores a psychologically wiser approach rooted in social psychology: the idea that our behavior is shaped not by willpower or biology, but more powerfully by the meanings we construct about ourselves, others, and the situations we face. You'll learn how small, well-timed psychological interventions can offer better answers that lead to lasting, meaningful change. Through a hands-on projects focused on adolescent substance use, and in partnership with the national organization 'Know Drugs', students will design psychologically wise solutions with real-world impact. Open to students from all majors; no background in psychology required.

Full Course Overview

Why do so many efforts to change behavior fall short – and what does it take to create real, lasting change in ourselves and our communities? This course explores a psychologically wiser alternative to traditional models of control, which rely on willpower, punishment, and persuasion. Drawing on foundational insights from social psychology, you'll learn how environments – schools, workplaces, peer groups, families – routinely evoke powerful psychological questions: *Who am I? Who could I become? What do others think of me? Do I have what it takes?* Our often-unconscious answers to these questions shape what we do, launching us into spirals of growth or constraint. Real change begins by reshaping these interpretations and designing contexts that invite better answers.

You'll explore classic and contemporary research, much of it developed right here at Stanford, and see how subtle shifts in social meaning have driven powerful change in education, health, relationships, and disciplinary systems.

Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for these questions, and when early behaviors begin to crystallize into lifelong trajectories. Nowhere is the need for a new approach more urgent than in the realm of adolescent substance use, a problem space that epitomizes the failure of the control model and offers a powerful opportunity for psychological innovation. In this course, you'll take on this high-stakes challenge directly. In partnership with Know Drugs, a national organization advancing science-based drug education, you'll design a social-psychological playbook for key stakeholders—educators, peers, and families — to foster more supportive, effective, and empowering responses.

No background in psychology is required. This course is for students from all majors who are passionate about understanding human behavior and creating meaningful, sustainable change – in themselves, in institutions, and in society

Learning Goals

By the end of the course, you'll have:

- A deeper understanding of why conventional behavior-change strategies often fail
- Tools to shape behavior by shifting meaning and social context
- Experience designing a psychologically wise solution to a real-world problem
- Insight into your own self-concept, growth, and “becoming”.

Tentative Course Schedule

Module 1: The Foundation - A New Lens on Behavior

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - **The Power of the Situation:** Moving beyond the "flaw in our genes" to see how situations shape behavior.
 - The writer Louis Menand said in a New Yorker article: "*It's all in the genes*": *an explanation for the way things are that does not threaten the way things are.*"
 - **The Power of Construal:** Behavior isn't a reaction to reality, but to our *interpretation* (construal) of it.
 - **Shifting the Question:** Instead of asking "what's wrong with your behavior," we ask "what's right with it?" (Understanding the *function* of a behavior—connection, meaning, coping—is key to understanding its construal).
 - Lewin's Insight: Change often comes from removing barriers (like stigma or criminalization) rather than adding force (like punishment or persuasion).
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991)—Introduction to construal
 - Wilson, T. D. (2022).

Module 2: A Social Psychological Model of Motivation (Promotion vs. Prevention)

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - **Two Motivational Systems:**
 1. *Prevention Focus:* Avoiding the "bad" (e.g., "Just Say No," avoiding withdrawal, punishment). This is the dominant, failing model.
 2. *Promotion Focus:* Working toward a "good" (e.g., "something to say yes to," a better future, connection, mastery).—> what motivates people? To see themselves as good and competent
 - 1. *Adolescents' need for status and respect (Yeager)*
 - **The Goal:** Shifting our interventions from a "prevention" to a "promotion" framework to strengthen our stake in civil society
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - Sidelining bias paper- elevating the positive vs calling out the negative
 - Condom and hypocrisy paper
 1. Read alongside Jason, PNAS probation and parole officers—empathetic discipline. Living up to our visions. Integration of promotion and prevention

- o *Brian's paper*- responsive to the developmental circumstances in healthy eating paper)
- o *Bullying* – standard elementary school programs don't work for adolescents because they apply a compliance mindset
- o *Yeager, Dahl, Dweck (why interventions don't work for adolescents but do for children)*

Module 3: The Power of Beliefs & Mindsets

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - o Our beliefs and mindsets act as a core part of our "construal" and regulate our behavior.
 - o **Fixed vs. Growth Mindset:** How beliefs about the nature of change (or addiction) can predict outcomes.
 - o **Beliefs about Willpower:** Whether you *believe* willpower is a limited resource *actually* predicts if you run out of it.
 - o **Expectancy Effects:** The "Pygmalion" effect.
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - o Job, V., Dweck, C. S., & Walton, G. M. (2010).
 - o Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski, K. H., & Dweck, C. S. (2007).—individualistic
 - o Theories of personality – fixed views of identity – social world
 - Construction of identity and self-fulfilling consequences and identity threat
 - o Rosenthal, R. (1968). – labels of growth not labels of ability – social

Module 4: The Socially Constructed Self & Identity Threat

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - o How the 'identity cage' gets locked
 - **Identity "Caging":** How labels (like "addict," "criminal," "at-risk") can trap people in a negative identity.
 - o **Identity Threat:** When our identity is threatened (e.g., in school, by PSAs), we may disengage or double-down on a negative identity to compensate.
 - o How to 'identity cage' gets unlocked
 - **The Self as Socially Constructed:** We are who others tell us we are (and how they treat us).
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - o Rosenthal, R. (1968).
 - o Rosenhan's "On Being Sane in Insane Places" (The power of a label to cage identity).
 - o "A threat in the air" (Disengagement from school when identity is threatened).
 - o Steele & Aronson
 - o Responsibility without blame
- **Case Studies & Discussion Points:**

- o The Portugal Decriminalization story: from criminal to patient

Module 5: Identity-Based Interventions I: Affirmation & "Possible Selves"

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - o **Self-Affirmation Theory:** Interventions that affirm a person's *broader sense of worth* (e.g., "you are a good student," "you are a kind person") can reduce identity threat and open them to change, without ever mentioning the problem behavior.
 - o **"Possible Selves":** People are motivated by who they *could become*. A positive, accessible future self is a powerful "promotion-focused" motivator.
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - o Markus, H. (1986).

Module 6: Identity-Based Interventions II: Attribution & Labeling

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - o **Persuasion vs. Attribution:** It's more effective to *attribute* a positive identity to someone ("You are a clean person") than to *persuade* them to be it ("You should be clean").
 - o **Labeling for Change:** Giving people a label that implies a positive identity (e.g., "voter" vs. "voting").
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - o Miller, R. L., Brickman, P., & Bolen, D. (1975).
 - o Bryan, C. J., Walton, G. M., Rogers, T., & Dweck, C. S. (2012).

Module 7: The Power of Groups, Norms, & Rituals

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - o **Social Norms:** Group norms shape behavior powerfully and often unconsciously.
 - o **Group Identity & Decision-Making**
 - o **The Loss of Ritual:** Prohibition has destroyed the traditional, ceremonial, or community-based rituals that once guided safe and contained use, leaving only a chaotic, dangerous, and isolated market.
- **Key Readings / Studies:**
 - o Ross, Lepper, & Ward (2010).
 - o Downstream broken windows
 - o Psychedelic Rituals and Psychology
- **Case Studies & Discussion Points:**
 - o **Speaker Connection:** Ismail Ali (Discussing the reintroduction of ritual and containment in therapeutic contexts).

Module 8: Synthesis - Designing "Wise Interventions"

- **Core Concepts (Topics):**
 - **What is a "Wise Intervention?"**: An intervention that is "wise" to the *construal* and *situation* of the person. Change the meaning-making
 - This module synthesizes all prior concepts (construal, identity, norms) to design new solutions.
- **Core Readings**
 - Walton & Wilson (2018)
 - "Lifting the Bar"
 - "More Than That"
 - *Catherine and Zainab- fitting interventions to context and populations – argument is to center the people on the ground (caregivers), you accomplish 3 types of fitting at once cultural, contextual, and developmental*

Final Project description:

The final project is a hands-on, community-engaged assignment where you will create a concise, partner-ready "Wise Intervention" Playbook for our community partner, *Know Drugs*. Your mission is to translate the core theories of this course and social psychology into a practical toolkit designed for adults that support youth contending with substance use.

You will design 3-5 interventions for key actors (e.g., parents, educators, peers) facing high-stakes "choice points." Each intervention must follow a 4-step process:

1. **Step 2: Diagnose the "Behavior Control" Trap.**
 - a. What is the instinctive, traditional reaction? (e.g., "Ground them!", "Suspend them!", "Shame them!").
 - b. Why does it backfire? (Cite the psych.) Does it cause Reactance? Does it create Identity Threat (e.g., "You're a 'bad kid'")? Does it use Labeling Theory to create a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?
2. **Step 3: Design the "Wise Intervention."**
 - a. What is the new, "psychologically wiser" response? This is your intervention. It's often a script, a new question to ask, or a new way to frame the conversation.
 - b. How does it shift the meaning? (e.g., "It shifts from a punishment to a conversation," "It shifts from accusation to curiosity").
3. **Step 4: Explain the Mechanism.**
 - a. Why does it work? (Cite the psych.) Does it use Self-Affirmation (affirming their worth before tackling the problem)? Does it offer a "Possible Self" (a positive future identity)? Does it use Attribution Theory (attributing a positive motive, "I know you're a good student, so I'm wondering what's up")?