

USC Mann

Alfred E. Mann School of Pharmacy
and Pharmaceutical Sciences

Fall 2025 - GSEM 141g: Diseases of the Brain: Why Haven't we won the Battle Yet?

Satisfies GED: Life Sciences

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Course Weight: 4 Units

Day/Time/Location: Tuesday/Thursday, 3:30 to 4:50 pm in GFS 204

Introduction

The human brain remains one of the most challenging topics in science. It is much more than a complex computer designed to store information and utilizes comprehensive and complex neural

“wiring” (connectome) to solve problems. These connections can quickly respond to the environment and experience, displaying what is termed neuroplasticity, the ability to alter the strength of connections, create new circuits, all leading to the emergence of new behaviors and the maintenance of established ones. It is only within the last few years that we are beginning to expand our understanding and appreciation of the dynamic human brain. Unfortunately, the human brain is subject to a wide spectrum of neurological disorders and diseases at all stages of life from birth, development, adolescence, adult hood, and old age. These manifest in complex behaviors and are often incompatible with sustainable life. The economic and social burden of neurological disorders is vast and continues to grow. As such, there is a great need to better understand brain disorders and to find new pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatments to address these issues.

The purpose of this freshmen seminar course is to provide an opportunity for students to explore a spectrum of brain disorders, spanning a wide range of topics including neurodevelopmental disorders such as schizophrenia and autism; neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases; neurological conditions linked to alcohol and substance use disorders, and much more. Another goal of this course is to introduce and help the entering students to better understand current and future therapies ranging from pharmaceutical and nutraceutical options to treatments such as brain stimulation and lifestyle changes.

The themes of this course include (1) discussions that introduce the student to the brain, functions of the brain – how the brain works in a simplified manner; (2) discussions around neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease; (3) neuropsychological disorders such as Schizophrenia; (4) spectrum disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); (5) diseases linked to or brought on by alcohol and substance use disorders; (6) drug discovery: why are diseases of the brain so difficult to treat.

Overall, the class will draw upon a range of critical and analytical approaches to these topics and will conclude with an exploration of the links between the shortcomings of the current treatment strategies and how can we do this better. This will include presentations that will discuss strategies in processes used to discover, develop, and get FDA approval to be used in humans. This will include oral medicines, nasal sprays, IV injections and other novel formulations that are being incorporated in the drug strategy to help advance the delivery of drugs to the brain. These themes will be presented in ways that are designed to lead to lively discussions during class.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Describe, in plain language, many of the common functions and processes of the brain and how these processes are affected by brain diseases.
- Explain why diseases of the brain are detrimental to life processes and why it is important for society to focus on those.
- Describe some of the societal and economic burden of these diseases.
- Explain the current strategies used to discover and develop therapies for brain disorders.
- Compare and contrast therapies that are currently available for brain disorders and describe why they are falling short in treating these diseases. Explain shortcomings of strategies.

- Adapt scientific information about these diseases into plain language for general consumption.
- Describe and apply theories shared in the media as they pertain to diseases of the brain.

Grading and Evaluation

Evaluation based on a midterm and final examination, written assignments, reaction and analytic papers that will form the basis for student-led discussions in class and participation. Attendance at all classes is expected. Participation will include asking and answering questions and being actively engaged in the discussion. It is expected that students will read the assigned papers prior to the lecture and be prepared to discuss background, current understanding, treatments, and gaps in knowledge for the topic in each lecture.

30% Assignments (Quizzes) – 10% each

The Assignments are meant to be a learning tool for you. Over the course of the semester there will be **three (3) Assignments**. Completion of the Assignments should result in full credit if you put in a good faith effort. Instructions for each assignment will be posted in Brightspace.

Due dates – submission deadline time 11:59 PM

Assignment 1: Thursday, September 4, 2025

Assignment 2: Thursday, October 2, 2025

Assignment 3: Due Thursday, November 13, 2025

15% Reaction Papers – 5 % each

Students will be required to prepare **three (3) reaction reports (5% per report)**. These reports will be related to the weekly topics and students will sign-up for their topics via Brightspace. Students will prepare a one-page reaction paper. Students will need to research their topic based on materials presented and outside reading that will be suggested during the lectures and updated on Brightspace. This can include journal articles, news report, legal case, ethical issue, or policy review. Students should then be prepared to lead class discussion on the topic that week. Students are encouraged to sign-up early as it first-come, first served – once a topic week has passed, no additional reactions will be accepted for that week. You are expected to cite at least two sources (class books and articles, articles from journals, books, etc.) per essay. You will be penalized -5 points for each missing resource. The reference page does not count toward the total paper length. You should NOT use Wikipedia or any other similar form of wiki to write these essays. The reaction papers cannot be on the same topic as the analytical paper.

Due dates – submission deadline time 11:59 PM

Reaction Paper 1: Thursday, September 18, 2025

Reaction Paper 2: Due Thursday, October 30, 2025

Reaction Paper 3: Due Tuesday, November 25, 2025

10% Analytic Paper

Students will write a 3–4-page analytic paper on the framing of an issue as presented in scientific reports, pharmaceutical blogs, news media and any other sources pertinent to any one of the disease states presented in class. Notably, you cannot select a topic that you have presented as one of your reaction papers. We want this to be a new area of study for you. The goal of the

paper is to present a paper discussing the challenges of a particular disease and/or therapies related to the disease as well as future opportunities to treat the disease. The student will draw on the framework provided in class.

Analytic Paper Due on Tuesday, December 2, 2025 at 11:59 PM

Important Note on Assignments: Please pay close attention to the assignment deadline dates and time (11:59 pm on Brightspace) as the window to submit will close on the deadline date and time of a particular assignment. Please check to confirm your submission went through. No submissions will be accepted by email.

20% Midterm: Thursday, October 7, 2025

There will be 1 midterm for this course that will cover the first 8 weeks of course material. The midterm will consist of a series of questions involving T/F, Multiple Choice and short answers.

Important Note on the midterm exam: The midterm cannot be changed due to travel, nor can it be administered remotely. The midterm exam must be taken and submitted in class. Please plan accordingly.

25% Final Exam: Tuesday, December 16, 2025 2-4 p.m.

The Final Exam will be in the form of an in-class examination during exam week.

The final exam will be composed of two parts, each having equal weight towards the final grade. The first part of the exam will include questions from the lectures and from the textbook in the form of multiple choice, T/F and fill-in the blank questions. The second part of the final examination will consist of short written answers to demonstrate the students' knowledge regarding topics covered in the course. This latter part of the final exam will allow students to express their ideas based on facts derived from the course.

Important note on the final exam: The final exam cannot be changed due to travel, nor can the final exam be administered remotely. The final exam must be taken and submitted in class on the date and time noted in the syllabus and on the schedule of classes. Please plan accordingly.

Lockdown Browser Requirement

Exams are administered on Brightspace via Respondus Lockdown Browser. Please download and test Lockdown Browser.

<https://download.respondus.com/lockdown/download.php?id=945755274>

Once you open the midterm/final from Brightspace (usual log in), you will be prompted to either launch LDB to start the midterm or download it. **In the interest of time, please download the LDB before coming to class.** This way you can address compatibility issues in advance.

IMPORTANT - please read: You will be prompted to close all other browsers, Office, etc. on your laptop. LDB will prompt you for your USC user name and password - they must be manually loaded. No DUO requirement at this point. However, LDB does NOT/will NOT recognize your username and/or password even if you have automatic log in/save password set

up for anything USC. You will not be able to reset your USC credentials in LDB. **Know your password!** You will be able to test lockdown browser by taking a mock, non-graded exam.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
Assignments 3 @ 10% each	30%
Reaction Papers 3 @ 5% each	15%
Midterm Exam	20%
Analytical Paper	10%
Final Exam	25%
TOTAL	100%

Grading Scale

93% to 100%: A	79% to 81%: B-	65% to 67%: D+
90% to 92%: A-	76% to 78%: C+	62% to 64%: D
87% to 89%: B+	71% to 75%: C	55% to 61%: D-
82% to 86%: B	68% to 70%: C-	0% to 54%: F

Course Readings

Required Readings

How the Brain Works: The Facts Visually Explained, March 2020 Publisher: DK; ISBN-10: 1465489797; ISBN-13: 978-146548979

The text is mandatory because 1). It only costs \$14 on Amazon and 2) it is a great primer that visually illustrates the complexity and disease states of the brain that we will be covering. Students do not need to have a background in neuroscience as they will be able to use identified chapters in the text to support their learning process throughout the semester.

“Aging Wisely: Brain Health for Everyone.” Week 2 lecture and assignment 1.

This short series of videos (only about 15 mins total for all five videos, collectively) require viewing to enhance the students understanding of the process of ageing and will provide suggested ways to help your brain age more successfully. Many of the topics presented over the course of the semester will be linked to changes in brain health.

Part one of Brain Health is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=67Gp7HTBLEA>
Please follow the next four videos.

Supplemental Readings

Chapters from the core textbook will be supplemented with a variety of source materials including online resources, media outlets and cinema. Supplemental materials will be available on Brightspace either as documents, media links, or embedded files. The selected materials are intended to provide students with a broader perspective by rounding out the information presented in the required text. Other course materials including but not limited to the syllabus, supplemental reading assignments and additional handouts will be posted on Brightspace. Students are also encouraged to use the online discussions among students via Brightspace.

Content Warning

Our course readings and classroom discussions will often focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. As with any course dealing with drug use, abuse and addiction, course topics can at times be political and personal. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor, and even boredom. Some of us will have emotional responses to the readings; some of us will have emotional responses to our peers’ understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us.

Course Evaluations

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university wide. It is an important review of students’ experience in the class.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

There is an expectation about AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) use for this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and discussions about appropriate use are welcome. It is recommended that you take the opportunity to meet with your professor to get guidance with the use of these tools during office hours or after class. Keep in mind the following:

- AI tools are allowed to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- If you supply minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- Proceed with caution when using AI tools and do not assume the information provided is accurate or trustworthy. If it gives you a number or fact, assume it is incorrect unless you either know the correct answer or can verify its accuracy with another source. You will be responsible for any errors or omissions provided by the tool. It works best for topics you understand.
- AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include a paragraph at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and

indicate / specify the prompts you used to obtain the results what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.

- Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance. The use of AI tools requires attribution. You are expected to clearly attribute any material generated by the tool used.

Course Outline

This course will be in the format of a direct seminar/lecture under the guidance of the instructor for the specific session. During each weekly session the instructor will engage the students with questions and draw comments or interpretations primarily based on the assigned reading. Students are expected to ask questions and participate in interactive fashion.

Week Date	Topic	Subtopics to be Included	Assigned & Supplemental Reading
Introduction to the Course and Background			
Week 1	Dr. Davies		
Tues. Aug. 26	Introduction: expectations and the goals of this class.	What the brain does	DK "Physical Brain" pp 10-48
Thur. Aug. 28	General overview of the physical brain	How does it change during development? From a simplistic standpoint, what are the key players in the brain.	neuroanatomy made simple https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZFW-waIpQg&t=81s How does aging affect the brain? Can we slow the process down? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67Gp7HTBLEA
Week 2	Dr. Davies		
Tues. Sept 2	Brain Functions and the Senses	How does aging affect the brain? Can we slow the process down? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67Gp7HTBLEA	DK "Physical Brain" pp 50-60

Thur. Sept 4		<p>Use this one min introductory YouTube and follow the next four short videos for basic terminology of aging of the brain presented above in “Recommended reading”.</p> <p>Genetics and the brain --</p> <p>What are key differences between male and female brains and why does this matter?</p> <p>Nature versus Nurture – why are they important?</p>	
Assignment 1: Due Thursday, September 4			
Neuroinflammatory Diseases and Current Therapies			
Week 3	Dr. Asatryan		
Tues. Sept. 9	Neuroinflammation	What are inflammation and neuroinflammation? Good and bad inflammation, players contributing to neuroinflammation.	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Thur. Sept. 11	Neuroinflammatory Disease	Neuroinflammatory disease example – CNS infections, including bacterial meningitis, West Nile Virus, neuro-COVID.	
Week 4	Dr. Asatryan		
Tues. Sept. 16	Neuroinflammatory Disease (cont’d)	Neuroinflammatory disease example - autoimmune demyelinating disorders.	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Thur. Sept. 18		Neuroinflammatory disease example - Autoimmune encephalitis	
Reaction Paper 1: Due Thursday, September 18			
Week 5	Dr. Asatryan		
Tues. Sept. 23	Cerebrovascular injury - Stroke	What are different types of stroke, injury mechanisms including neuroinflammation. Treatment modalities.	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Thur. Sept. 25	Microbiome and neurological disease	What is microbiome, how does it affect brain and behavior,	

		neuropathology? Can we target gut to treat brain disease?	
Neurodegenerative Diseases and Current Therapies			
Week 6 Tues. Sept. 30 Thur. Oct. 2	Dr. Jakowec Neurodegenerative diseases	Most common neurodegenerative diseases Alzheimer's Disease, the most common neurodegenerative disease.	DK p 200
Assignment 2: Due Thursday, October 2			
In-class Midterm Exam Tuesday, October 7 Midterm exam date cannot be changed due to travel, nor can the final exam be administered remotely			
Fall Recess, Thursday Oct. 09 to Friday. Oct. 10, 2025			
Week 8 Tues. Oct. 14 Thurs. Oct. 16	Dr. Jakowec Neurodegenerative diseases	Parkinson's Disease second most common neurodegenerative disease. Treatment options	DK p 201
Week 9 Tues. Oct. 21 Thurs. Oct. 23	Dr. Jakowec Neurodegenerative diseases	What is an "orphan" disease and why does that matter? Huntington's Disease – an example of an orphan neurodegenerative disease. Treatment options Huntington's	DK p 201
Neuropsychiatric Disorders			
Week 10 Tues. Oct. 28	Dr. Asatryan Autism Spectrum Disorder Tourette's Syndrome	What is Autism? What makes a disease a "Spectrum Disorder"?	DK pp 209, 217

Thurs. Oct. 30		What is Tourette's Syndrome?	
Reaction Paper 2: Due Thursday, October 30			
Week 11 Tues. Nov. 4 Thurs. Nov. 6	Dr. Asatryan Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	What is ADHD and why is this learning disorder important to understand? Why do amphetamines help patients with ADHD? Why do amphetamines NOT help learning and memory in college students not afflicted by ADHD?	DK p 216
Tuesday, November 11: Veterans Day, non-instructional day			
Week 12 Tues. Nov. 11 Thurs. Nov. 13	Dr. Asatryan Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders	What is anxiety and anxiety disorders: what are the effects on learning, sleep, general well-being? Generalized anxiety disorder and treatment options	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Assignment 3: Due Thursday, November 13			
Week 13 Tues. Nov. 18 Thurs. Nov. 20	Dr. Asatryan Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) Dr. Davies	Drug, addiction, what are key brain regions driving SUD; Neurobiology of drugs - reward pathway. Pharmacology and physiology of alcohol use disorder (AUD). AUD - behavioral effects	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Week 14 Tues. Nov. 25	Dr. Vera-Schubert SUDs continued	Opioid crisis, fentanyl, overdose, harm reduction	Lecture and links to reading materials and YouTube videos
Reaction Paper 3: Due Tues. Nov. 25			

Thanksgiving Holiday, Wednesday, November 26 to Sunday, November 30, 2025			
Week 15	Dr. Gukasyan		
Tues. Dec. 2	Pharmaceutical Development of CNS drugs	What are the challenges of developing novel drugs for CNS?	Examples drawn from case studies
Thurs. Dec. 4		Introducing the Blood-brain barrier.	
Analytic Paper Due on Tuesday, December 2			
In-Class Final Exam			
Tuesday, December 16, 2-4 p.m.			
Final Exam date cannot be changed due to travel, nor can it be administered remotely			

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the USC Student Handbook. All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Statement on University Academic and Support Systems

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for undergraduate- and graduate-level SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

CARE-SC: Confidential Advocacy, Resources, and Education Support Center - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7/365 on call.

Confidential advocates, prevention educators, and professional counseling teams work to promote a universal culture of consent, and prevent and respond to gender- and power-based harm. Services available to all USC students at no cost.

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

USC Emergency Information

Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety

For 24 hour emergency assistance or to report a crime: UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323)-442-1000.

For 24 hour non-emergency assistance or information: UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: 323-442-1200.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.