

# Researcher investigates the 'subjective time trajectory' in psychological health

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In life, we're told, we must take the good with the bad, and how we view these life events determines our well-being and ability to adjust. But according to Prof. Dov Shmotkin of Tel Aviv University's Department of Psychology, you need more than the right attitude to successfully negotiate the vicissitudes of life.

As recently reported in *Aging and Mental Health*, Prof. Shmotkin's research reveals that people's well-being and their adaptation can be ascertained by their "time trajectory" -- their concept of how they have evolved through their remembered past, currently perceived present, and anticipated future. A close study of how patients compartmentalize their life into these periods can help clinical psychologists treat them more effectively, he says.

## From trauma to everyday life

Prof. Shmotkin says that the theory emerged from the study of patients who had experienced [traumatic events](#). "We discovered that overcoming trauma was related to how people organized the memory of their trauma on the larger time continuum of their life course," he explains.

In a study of Holocaust survivors, Prof. Shmotkin separated these survivors into those who considered the "Holocaust as past" and those who conceived of the "Holocaust as present." Those in the "Holocaust as past" category were able to draw an effective line between the present

day and the past trauma, thus allowing themselves to move forward. Those in the "Holocaust as present" category considered their [traumatic experience](#) as still existing, which indicated a difficulty in containing the trauma within a specific time limit.

But Prof. Shmotkin quickly saw that these coping mechanisms were not exclusive to those who had experienced trauma. Instead, he theorized, these mechanisms are a part of the normal [aging process](#). When young, he explains, our wishes for self improvement and growth lie in an anticipated future. But as we get older, our longer perspective can help or hinder in confronting the present challenges of aging.

## **A time line to improve patient care**

Prof. Shmotkin tested his thesis in collaboration with his former PhD students, Drs. Yuval Palgi and Amit Shrira. They studied participants with an average age of 92 who described their personal time trajectories in terms of their satisfaction with the recent past, the present, and near future.

The best-functioning participants were those whose time trajectory appeared stable rather than "descending," as was expected to occur in very old age, or "ascending," as is normal for youth and adults. Participants at this advanced age also revealed higher well-being when they managed to contrast their present with the suffering they endured in miserable periods of their life. Notably, Holocaust survivors were less able to make this break between the present and the trauma of their past.

This information, says Prof. Shmotkin, is crucial for improving therapeutic care, although it is often overlooked by clinical psychologists. "A person's subjective time frame is key to the formulation of that person's life story and well-being," he explains. Prof. Shmotkin urges [psychologists](#) to try to better understand their patients'

personal time trajectories, using these as a tool to help patients reconcile their traumatic pasts and the present challenges of aging.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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