

Scaling mental resilience more effectively

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Many people get on with their lives after traumatic experiences without any psychological suffering. This is because, in spite of all the trauma, they manage to pigeonhole what they have experienced. Although this sense of coherence was first described in the 1970s, measuring it has remained problematic to this day. Psychologists from the University of Zurich have now developed a questionnaire that renders the sense of coherence in overcoming trauma tangible in a more appropriate way.

In the 1970s, Israeli medical psychologist Aron Antonovsky provided evidence of a mental – or cognitive – ability: Although many Holocaust survivors still suffered mentally and physically from their ordeal decades later, others remained healthy or recovered. Certain people evidently succeed in pigeonholing and processing [traumatic experiences](#) mentally, even if they still have such a horrific impact on their own lives.

Antonovsky singled out this sense of [coherence](#) as a central trait for what is usually referred to as "resilience" – psychological resistance. A [questionnaire](#) that he developed has been used to study the sense of coherence internationally in many research programs ever since.

However, the questionnaire exhibits conceptual and methodological errors, which basic psychological research has been aware of for quite some time.

Clearer and more comprehensible questionnaires

Scientists from the Department of Psychology at the University of Zurich revised the original concept of the sense of coherence and devised a new assessment method. "We stripped the concept back to its

core, i.e. the principle of being able to integrate extremely stressful life events in one's own worldview," explains Andreas Maercker, a professor of psychopathology. Antonovsky's earlier recording method also included the ability to make sense of extreme experiences. "After all, there are now new and specific recording methods under the banner of 'post-traumatic growth' in the individual quest for meaning in the aftermath of traumas," says Maercker. Moreover, psychologists from UZH made the questionnaire shorter and more comprehensible as the previous version also exhibited weaknesses here.

More reliable, objective results

The Zurich scientists were already able to use the new questionnaire in scientific studies. They polled more than 300 bereaved people – most of whom had lost a child or spouse. As expected, those affected displayed feelings of coherence to differing degrees. People with greater psychological resilience suffered less from depression and their bereavement was less painful. "The new questionnaire on the sense of coherence yields more reliable, objective results as an assessment method than its predecessor." For Maercker, this therefore paves the way to conduct research into the causes of the [sense](#) of coherence and find new means to boost this ability in people affected.

More information: Rahel Bachem & Andreas Maercker.
Development and psychometric evaluation of a revised Sense of Coherence Scale. *European Journal of Assessment*. March 14, 2016.
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