THE RHYTHM OF CONNECTION

HOW SYNCHRONY SHAPES YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Economic uncertainty, social unrest and the lingering effects of the global pandemic have taken a toll on mental health, with millions of people worldwide battling anxiety and depression.

"In a world where uncertainty is the only certainty, psychotherapy serves as a compass, providing direction and purpose amidst the unknown. It is not just a tool to alleviate distress, but a journey of self-discovery and growth. Through the therapeutic alliance, we learn to navigate life's storms, not by avoiding them, but by developing the resilience to weather them. In the face of adversity, psychotherapy helps us find our inner strength and cultivates our capacity for change," explains Prof. Sigal Zilcha-Mano, head of the Psychotherapy Research Lab.

Prof. Zilcha-Mano's research is transforming psychotherapy from simple talk therapy into a powerful bridge between mental and physical health, effectively treating conditions like anxiety and depression while also equipping people to manage stress, develop coping mechanisms and prevent future problems. This not only improves well-being, but even reduces medical costs by addressing the root of physical symptoms linked to mental health. As healthcare embraces a more integrative approach, psychotherapy stands as a key player in this exciting shift towards total well-being. "In our day-to-day lives, we're constantly connecting and disconnecting with those around us, from our loved ones and casual acquaintances to complete strangers. This natural rhythm of connection, known as synchrony, is more than just a social dance; we believe that this process is a key survival tactic passed down through evolution." Recent technological advancements have allowed researchers to collect vast amounts of data on synchrony across various fields. These data hold immense promise, but also present a challenge. "By piecing together insights from different studies, it becomes apparent that there are two prevailing views on synchrony: one sees it as a fixed trait, unique to each individual, while the other views it as a variable state that can be adjusted in controlled environments."

"Everyone has a unique 'sync signature' that influences their physical and mental health. The closer we get to improving this signature through positive interactions (think laughter with a friend!), the better we feel."

- Prof. Sigal Zilcha-Mano
School of Psychological Sciences

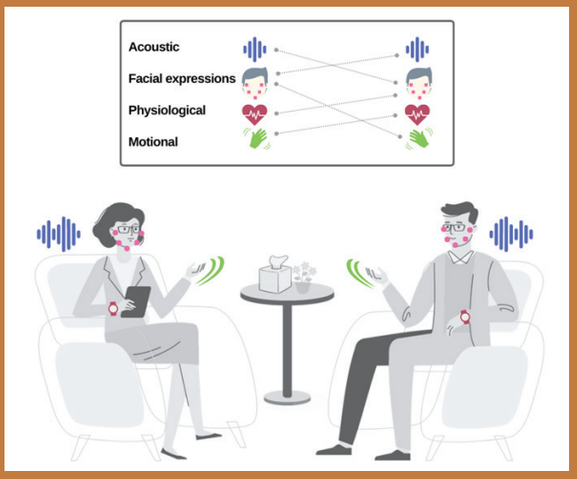
To untangle these competing views and bridge these perspectives into a unified theory, Prof. Zilcha-Mano was awarded an ERC Consolidator Grant. Prof. Zilcha-Mano and her team at the Psychotherapy Research Lab believe that everyone has their own natural rhythm of synchrony, which influences their physical and mental well-being. They hypothesize that it is possible to tweak this rhythm in ways that promote better health. When individuals adjust their natural synchrony towards more adaptive patterns, mental health benefits emerge, and these adjustments are seen as therapeutic.

In essence, this approach calls for a more personalized understanding of synchrony, acknowledging both its inherent qualities in individuals and its potential for positive change. Through this lens, we can better appreciate how our innate ability to sync with others not only shapes our social experiences, but also holds the key to unlocking greater well-being.

Prof. Zilcha-Mano's groundbreaking research offers a glimpse into the future of mental healthcare, where personalized therapy empowers individuals to navigate challenges and build lasting well-being. By unlocking the potential of synchrony, we can tap into a powerful resource for mental and physical health that resides within us all.

European Research Council

Figure 1



Synchrony as a multimodal phenomenon.
Similar to other interpersonal interactions, synchrony between the patient and the therapist is multimodal such that the synchrony between them manifest across modalities. For example, the therapist's breathing is synchronized with the rate at which the patient moves her foot while she talks. This multimodal reality is in contrast to the unimodal focus in scientific research.

Figure 2

Individuals have their own trait-like tendency to get in sync, which manifests differently in different interactions.
On the left, the individual's trait-like tendency is delineated. The trait-like signature is expected to be relatively stable across relationships, conditions, and contexts. On the right, state-like deviations from this trait-like tendency are delineated across interactions with different figures.