



Academic Year 2025–26

Protecting Israel's Oldest Citizens in Times of War

Combining science and community action to safeguard seniors during emergencies

When the rocket siren sounds, the clock is unforgiving. In just 30 seconds, most Israelis can reach a shelter. For thousands of our oldest citizens, it's not that simple.

Some cannot move fast enough. Others hesitate, afraid of slowing loved ones down. Too many live alone, unaware of the safety alert flashing on a phone they cannot hear or see. One fall in such moments can unleash a cascade of events—preventable injuries, anxiety, declining health, and the slow erosion of independence that, all too often, leads to premature death.

This is not an isolated problem. Israel is home to 1.25 million people aged 65 and older—nearly 13% of the population. Tens of thousands live in northern Israel, far from major hospitals and extensive eldercare services. In this region, the Iron Swords War has left many seniors coping with trauma, isolation, and disrupted routines, compounded by damage to public transportation and social support systems. These pressures accelerate physical and mental decline and heighten the risk of chronic illness. Without urgent action, entire communities risk losing their senior populations, along with the experience, guidance, and wisdom they provide.



The University of Haifa's Departments of Gerontology and Physical Therapy are launching Israel's first research-based initiative to address this crisis. Drawing on our unique interdisciplinary expertise—**uniting physiotherapy, psychological science, gerontology, and social work**—we will combine nationwide surveys, advanced lab testing, and community-based interventions to create proven strategies that keep seniors safe, strong, and connected. With your support, we can begin put lifesaving measures in place now and build a national model to protect older adults across the country.



THE CHALLENGE

Older adults are disproportionately harmed in crises — not because they lack courage, but because the system isn't built for them. Shelters and evacuation routes rarely account for mobility needs, forcing many to choose between risking injury or sacrificing safety altogether. During the 12-day war with Iran, nearly 40% of the casualties were older adults.

The challenges do not end there. Displacement disrupts daily routines, interrupts continuity of care, and limits access to caregivers, leaving many without the medical and personal support they depend on. Trauma compounds these difficulties—accelerating physical and cognitive decline, eroding confidence, and impairing decision-making under pressure. Falls are among the most devastating risks: nearly 30% of seniors who suffer a hip fracture die soon after the injury. Without targeted intervention, these factors will lead to permanent loss of independence, higher healthcare costs, and more profound isolation — an avoidable crisis. The time to build robust protections for this vulnerable population is now, before the next emergency strikes.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The **Older Adults in War-Related Crisis Project** will be the first in Israel to fully integrate physical rehabilitation, psychological resilience, and decision-support training for seniors living under threat. Led by the University of Haifa's Departments of Gerontology and Physical Therapy—with contributions from experts in social work and psychological science—our 2-year program will move from identifying risk to delivering practical, evidence-based solutions in the very places older adults live and gather.

Every component is designed to generate knowledge we can apply immediately—reducing risk for falls, restoring confidence, and creating an operational blueprint for municipalities nationwide. This is more than an emergency response; it is the foundation of a scalable national model for safe and independent aging in times of crisis.

Program Outcomes:

- 1 **Significantly reduce falls and injuries during sirens through targeted strength, balance, and reaction-time training.**
- 2 **Build confidence in high-stress situations, enabling seniors to make swift, informed decisions while countering negative stereotypes of aging.**
- 3 **Combat isolation through small-group activities, fostering resilience and community belonging.**
- 4 **Deliver evidence-based protocols to municipalities and emergency planners, creating a blueprint for safer aging in crisis.**

Turning Science into Lifesaving Strategies

We will implement a four-pillar strategy, grounded in rigorous research and community collaboration, to directly strengthen the lives of hundreds of older adults in northern Israel and to inform national strategies that will protect thousands more.

Nationwide Risk Mapping—Survey 500 adults (aged 65+) in two rounds, six months apart, to build a longitudinal dataset on how they respond in emergencies. These surveys will identify risks such as falls during evacuations or hesitation due to fear of slowing others, while also tracking how these responses change over time.

Targeted Assessments in the North—Evaluate 200 adults (aged 75+) in war-affected communities using wearable sensors and functional tests to measure mobility, balance,

and psychosocial factors such as anxiety, age perception, and decision-making under pressure.

Advanced Lab Testing—Work with 40 older adults in small groups at the University of Haifa to strengthen balance, reaction speed, and confidence under pressure. Using motion analysis, virtual reality exercises, and controlled balance challenges, we will generate detailed evidence on how targeted training enhances stability, sharpens reflexes, and improves decision-making in high-pressure situations.

Community-based Intervention—Launch a 10-week program for 80 older adults, combining Nordic walking, balance training in fitness gardens, and group discussions on aging and self-protection. Partner municipalities will embed the program locally, ensuring sustainability and scalability.

Our strategy connects research and practice at every level. Data from nationwide surveys informs lab-based training, which in turn shapes community interventions. This integrated approach delivers Israel's first fully evidence-based model for senior protection, ensuring older adults can respond safely and confidently in times of crisis.



LEADERSHIP TEAM



Prof. Einat Kodesh is Head of the Department of Physiotherapy and the Physical Activity, Exercise, and Health program at the University of Haifa. Trained as both an exercise physiologist and a physiotherapist, she examines how physical activity and training affect performance, resilience, and well-being in healthy and medically compromised populations. Her work combines advanced laboratory assessment with community-based training programs that enhance functional mobility, balance, and help older adults maintain resilience, safety, and independence.



Prof. Yuval Palgi, a globally recognized gerontologist and psychologist, has spent over two decades studying trauma, resilience, and subjective aging. His pioneering research focuses on trauma in old age, views of aging, and positive aspects of well-being. Currently, he is the president-elect of the international society STAR: Stress, Trauma, Anxiety, and Resilience. Together, Kodesh, Palgi, and their multidisciplinary team bring unmatched expertise in physical therapy, gerontology, psychology, and social work — making them uniquely positioned to deliver a research-backed solution that can transform senior safety in times of war.

2-YEAR BUDGET

ITEM	DETAILS	EXPENSES USD
Implementing Team	1 research coordinator, 4 research assistants, 3 physiotherapists, 1 statistical consultant; Lab supervisors for lab training sessions	230,000
Survey and Recruitment	Survey design, pilot testing, data management	40,000
Training Equipment and Wearable Tech	120 training kits, dynamometers and sensor systems	35,000
Lab Consumables and Software	Electrodes, 3D reflective markers, etc.	30,000
Oversight, Audit, and Quality Control		65,000
TOTAL:		\$400,000

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

With your partnership, we can help older adults in northern Israel recover from the trauma of the Iron Swords War and protect thousands more in the years ahead.

» **A gift of \$400,000 over two years** (\$200,000 per year) will restore strength and decision-making skills and confidence for hundreds of seniors, while producing research, protocols, and a replicable model that can be used in other war-torn regions across the globe.