



Applying the TSA Model of Adjustment for Understanding Adolescents' Wellness

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Abstract. The exploration of adjustment processes is rarely studied in traditional positive psychology models. Still, as people go through life transitions, they face a mix of challenging and positive experiences. Whether or not they feel prepared, individuals encounter moments of negative emotions caused by leaving the familiar, dealing with uncertainty, and handling new demands to behave in unfamiliar ways. However, during these transitions, they also find new strengths, such as increased resilience, engage in meaningful reflection, gain valuable insights, and experience the empowerment that comes from mastering new behaviors. The TSA model (Israelashvili, 2023) provides a universal framework for understanding the common individual and environmental/organizational components of the adjustment process during life course transitions. It can serve as both a conceptual tool and an applied framework to support individuals and organizations during transition periods and to help prevent maladjustment. The present study checked the utility of applying the TSA model for a better understanding of adolescents' flourishing. Based on the TSA model, a study involving two samples of Israeli adolescents—Jewish (N=442) and Arab (N=331)—was conducted. Participants completed several measures, including Adolescent Vigor, Reynolds Adolescent Adjustment Screening Inventory, Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale, School Adjustment Questionnaire, Adults' Guidance on Life and Living, and Transitional Stress and Adjustment Index. The findings highlight the potential benefits of using the TSA model to understand adolescents' well-being and identify factors that could lead to maladaptive behaviors. Additionally, the results support the notion that adolescents in transition are eager to discuss and seek answers on a wide range of spiritual issues, both theistic and nontheistic. Surprisingly, the study also found that those who feel less adjusted are less willing to discuss moral and spiritual issues further. Overall, the results emphasize the vital role adults—such as parents and teachers—play in helping adolescents understand key spiritual topics and in conveying messages that promote thriving, encompassing both the darker and more positive aspects of human life.

Keywords. Adolescence, Adjustment, Spirituality, Transitional Stress and Adjustment Model, well-being.

1 Introduction

Many scholars who study Positive Psychology perceive positive development and flourishing in adolescence as desirable and challenging goals. As a result, various interventions, such as the Positive Education program (Rickard et al., 2023; Seligman, 2009), have been proposed. Unlike the traditional view that emphasizes removing negative antecedents that may lead adolescents to problem behaviors, these programs focus on promoting the positive strengths of children and teenagers (Arslan, 2019). An example of the development achieved by scholars in Positive Psychology is the development of the *covitality* concept—i.e., the presence of several positive psychological traits together, which is the opposite of comorbidity. Recent studies show that *covitality* is a better explanation for adolescents' flourishing than any single positive trait (Lau et al., 2024).

Positive Psychology 2.0 (PP 2.0) emphasizes the importance of understanding positive development alongside negative development. That is, understanding the factors that contribute to individuals' well-being and flourishing while also considering the circumstances that lead some individuals to become part of marginalized social groups. By "Marginal groups," we mean individuals characterized by negative behaviors such as substance abuse and aggression. Thus, PP 2.0 highlights that issues related to spirituality, such as personal values, beliefs, and stigmas, become

especially important at the crossroads between flourishing and marginality. Therefore, when considering adolescents, it is crucial to explore their spirituality within the context of their positive adjustment to life and their flourishing as adults.

Interestingly, the topics of “adjustment” and “adolescents' adjustment ” are understudied in Positive Psychology. Generally, the number of studies in positive psychology focusing on issues of transition and adjustment is relatively small compared to research on related concepts. This notion is illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the number of publications that include the terms “positive psychology (PP)” and other related terms, either anywhere in the paper or as keywords.

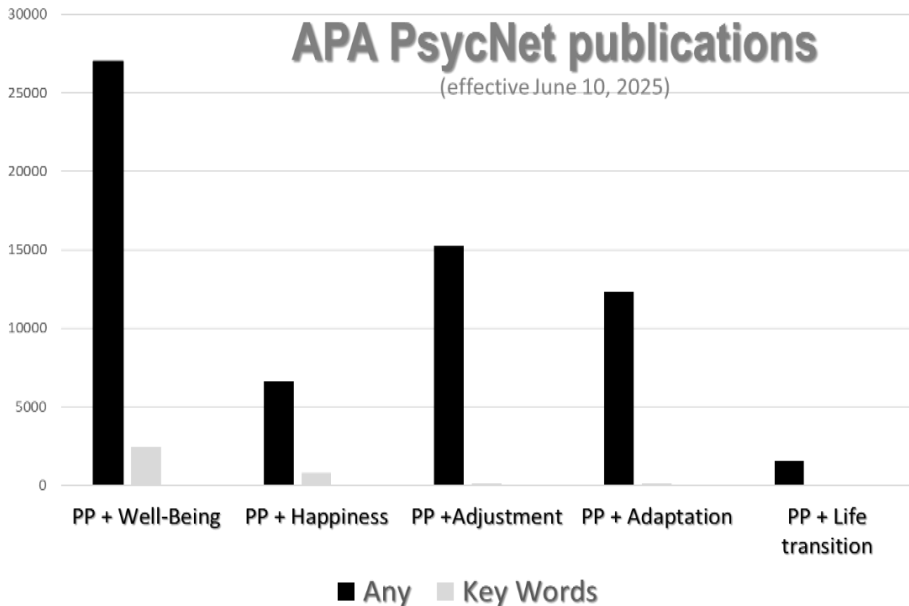


Figure 1: Number of publications cited in PsycNET in which the terms positive psychology and adjustment-related terms appear, either anywhere in the manuscript or as keywords

Moreover, terms related to adjustment are loosely defined in the positive psychology literature. For example, the definition of adjustment in a prominent publication on positive psychology in school states: "...an umbrella-term for various terms that might be interchangeable; e.g., "Children's positive adjustment depends in part on...the socializing context...organized so that optimal development is fostered...to promote children's mental health and well-being, and we can expand our notions of well-being to include positive markers of school adaptation (Baker et al., 2009; p. 189). Notably, in this definition, the terms adjustment, socialization, optimal development, well-being, and adaptation are mixed and unjustifiably used interchangeably (Israelashvili, 2012).

Therefore, to provide a more transparent conceptual framework for the future development of knowledge on adolescents' adjustment, this study has two goals: First, to examine the applicability of a new theorem on adjustment to transition called The Transitional Stress and Adjustment (TSA) Model (Israelashvili, 2023) for understanding adolescents' positive development. Second, to assess how much spiritual issues concern adolescents and whether such concerns are related to their current adjustment as measured by the TSA Model.

1.1 Adolescence as a transitional state

For many years, scholars have described adolescence (ages 10-18) as a period of intense internal and external experiences. They characterized it as a time of passion (Plato, 427-348 BC), bodily

desire (Aristotle, 384–322 BC), wronging the ancestors (Shakespeare, 1564–1616), and storm and stress (Hall, 1904). More recent research emphasizes the significance of major physical changes during these years, including different brain functions in adolescents (e.g., impulsivity, aggression, risk misjudgment, volatility; Diekema, 2020), specific hormone-mood and hormone-behavior relationships (Buchanan et al., 1992; Graber et al., 2006), and temporary shifts in metabolism (Zimmet et al., 2007). However, studies show that 80% of adolescents navigate this period successfully (Buchanan et al., 2023; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992). In other words, many experience adolescence as a challenging time but still find ways to adapt and move toward positive adulthood.

The challenges faced by adolescents are linked to the various stressors and changes they experience, such as: physiological changes, like puberty; cognitive changes, like shifting from concrete thinking to understanding abstract concepts, metacognition, and deductive reasoning; evolving perceptions of death, including an understanding that death is the inevitable future for all living beings, including themselves (the adolescent); changes in self-perception, such as developing distinct individual, cultural, and gender identities that help articulate future plans (as adults); increased exploratory behavior, like a desire to learn more about nearly everything, especially concerning their family and peers; social changes, including perceptions of and interactions with peers, who become not just playmates but also references for what is considered normal and for self-evaluation; and family changes, where parents often struggle to accept the behavioral changes in their child, leading to heightened conflicts between parents and adolescents.

It is beyond the scope of this manuscript to explore the origins and implications of each of these changes. However, the overall message from this list is that the reason for labeling adolescence as a transitional period is due to the numerous neurobiological, socio-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes that occur during this period. These multiple changes and their significant impact on adolescents' lives draw their attention and concern. Adolescents understand that managing these changes and developing accurate self-perception and self-understanding is a critical task they must face.

Generally, the term "developmental transition" implies that the roots of the given transitional stress are anchored in the individual's developmental stage; that is, characteristics typical of that age or life stage. For example, in the context of transitioning to old age, it often relates to declines in physical, cognitive, and mental functioning (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). In adolescence, as mentioned above, it suggests that much of adolescents' behavior may be related to temporary changes in metabolism (Zimmet et al., 2007), brain (Casey et al., 2008), or sexual maturation (Tolman et al., 2011).

However, considering the many changes adolescents experience, another way to view adolescence is through the lens of general models of adjustment to life-course transitions. When examining how individuals manage developmental transitions, the focus is on common "episodes" that individuals in this age group typically encounter. Alternatively, when analyzing how people handle general life-course transitions, it means attention to the universal characteristics, or generic components, that characterize internal and external experiences during adjustment processes. This alternative approach relates to the full range of transitional events, including those that may occur within the same developmental stage (e.g., transition to marriage, pregnancy, or parenthood) and those events that occur across different developmental stages (e.g., relocation). Sometimes features of both developmental and general transitions are combined, mutually influencing each other. For example, the transition to middle (junior-high) school (Shek & Israelashvili, 2023).

In light of the above notions, it seems relevant, and even promising, to explore the utility of applying general models on adjustment to life-course transitions, such as the TSA Model theorem (Israelashvili, 2023), for measurement and understanding of adolescents' state, in terms of their present state of well-being and adjustment as well as their future flourishing as adults.

1.2 The Transitional Stress and Adjustment (TSA) Model

Transitional events, such as school transitions, have significant implications on adolescents' mental health and well-being (e.g., Sundqvist et al., 2024). However, the conceptualization of adolescence as a transitional event is not elaborated in the literature. Schulenberg and colleagues (2004; 2014)

are among the few who conceptualized adolescence as a general process of adjustment to transitions. Their longitudinal study explores the emergence of problem behaviors (e.g., substance use) and is entitled "Monitoring the Future" (MTF). This survey is conducted annually among several American groups - adolescents, college students, and adults up to age 50 - and investigates the prevalence and determinants of problem behaviors. Relying on the Life-Course theory (Elder, 1985), Schulenberg and colleagues show that adolescents typically experience relatively homogeneous life roles. Yet, the transition to emerging adulthood is associated with greater variety in life experiences and contexts, leading to heterogeneity that is mediated by family, possible opportunities, and adolescents' agency. This increased heterogeneity is also linked to more diverse trajectories in health and well-being over the life course, including substance use and psychopathology (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). Their discussion of the emergence of heterogeneity in problem behaviors employs several terms and concepts typical of transitional periods, such as coping, meaning-making, and person-environment fit (e.g., Louis, 1980). However, their focus was mainly on problem behaviors, rather than on other aspects like adolescents' commitment to moral or national norms, or their flourishing. Conversely, Israelashvili's (2023) *Transitional Stress and Adjustment* Model proposes a more comprehensive view of adolescence as a transitional process.

The TSA Model emerged on the basis of a vast body of theoretical and applied studies, including an analysis of 100 stage models of adjustment to various life-course transitions (Israelashvili, 2023). This analysis revealed similarities across different adjustment processes and identified common components that are embedded in all transition adjustment processes. The generic components are: Departure; Shock & Confusion; Reassessment of personal rewards; Pursuit of person-environment fit; and Emergence of Personal Commitment. Notably, the TSA Model advocates that these components do not follow a linear sequence. Instead, once individuals recognize they are experiencing a transition, the components interact dialectically and mutually until feelings of adjustment emerge; that is, until the person subjectively perceives that the transition has concluded. In addition, it is suggested that environmental features and other people's reactions shape the adjustment process by shaping the features of these generic components. Thus, when the environment is supportive, lawful, rewarding, and instructive, it fosters the person's ability to adjust.

Several studies validated and support the TSA's postulations. These studies investigated people in various transition states, including the transition to and from elementary and middle school, transition to mandatory military service, transitions to employment, immigration, motherhood, and more (Israelashvili, 2023). However, as mentioned earlier, the model's applicability to understanding adolescents' overall feelings of adjustment and well-being has not yet been explored.

1.3 The Present Study

Two insights have driven this study's approach: (a) The alignment between the TSA Model components and the Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) framework (Seligman, 2011), which seeks to explain the development of personal flourishing. (b) The TSA Model components are closely connected to the conceptual claims of Positive Psychology 2.0. Specifically, TSA components include moral and spiritual considerations in which the person making adjustments is involved. For example, when applying the TSA Model to understand adolescence as a process of adjustment, spiritual and moral issues might be embedded within each TSA model's components:

- ☞ Departure - Why should I depart from the past (e.g., childhood)?
- ☞ Shock & Confusion - Is there justice (and order) in the world? To what extent does God manage the world?
- ☞ Reassessment of personal rewards – Should I adjust? To what extent may I eventually be in a better position?
- ☞ Pursuit of person-environment fit - What are my limits to behavior? What am I not ready to do?
- ☞ Emergence of Personal Commitment - Do I belong to this (new) entity?

Hence, based on the TSA theorem, having no answers to these questions might foster adolescents' maladjustment. Such an emerging feeling of maladjustment would be the root of a person's inclination to escape the negative feeling/situation by exhibiting problem behaviors,

including suicidal behavior, substance abuse, anorexia, school retention, day-dreaming, refusal, antisocial behavior, malingering, depression, bullying, political radicalism, and apathy.

Given these similarities and related topics, the current study examined whether the TSA Model can be used to assess adolescents' well-being and future orientation.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants in the study were two samples of Israeli adolescents: (a) 442 Jewish adolescents; 54% females; learning in three junior-high schools, 40% in grade 7 and 60% in grade 10; and (b) 331 Arab adolescents (various religions - Muslims, Christians, and Druze); 48% females; learning in three high schools, in grades 10 to 12.

2.2 Measures

The participants completed a questionnaire that included the following scales:

Adolescent Vigor Measure. (AVM; Israelashvili et al., 2021) is a version of the Shirom-Melamed Vigor Measure (SMVM). The scale consists of 14 items divided into three subscales: Physical Strength, Cognitive Liveliness, and Emotional Energy ($\alpha=.89$).

Reynolds Adolescent Adjustment Screening Inventory. (RAASI; Reynolds, 1998) consists of 33 items divided into four scales: antisocial behavior, anger control problems, emotional distress, and positive self-perception ($\alpha=.86$).

Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale. (Barnes & Olson, 1985) measures the degree of openness in family communication (10 items; $\alpha=.93$) and the extent of problems in family communication (10 items; $\alpha=.81$).

School Adjustment Questionnaire. (SAQ) (Israelashvili, 1997) consists of seven items assessing the TSA model components, and five items tapping student evaluations of adjustment to various aspects of school life ($\alpha=.76$).

Adults' guidance on life and living. (Abed, 2017) measures what "mediates" between the adolescent and life (e.g., talk to the adolescent and give advice on "How to..." in life) ($\alpha=.72$) and whether the adolescent wishes to be instructed ($\alpha=.83$).

Transitional Stress and Adjustment. (Goldberg, 2008). This questionnaire is based upon the TSA model and relates to the intrapersonal adjustment of adolescents to daily living. Higher scores represent better adjustment according to the TSA Model components ($\alpha=.92$). Factor analysis on the TSA adolescents' questionnaire (Jewish sample; $n=442$) replicated the structure of the TSA Model components. However, in light of the dialectical nature of the relationship between the TSA Model components (see above), and for the present study we computed a single general score, composed of the participant's mean answer to the TSA items (on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5- completely adjusted; 1 – not yet adjusted at all). This general score represents the adolescent's feelings of adjustment, with higher scores indicating feeling more adjusted to one's life; i.e., equivalent to higher well-being.

2.3 Procedure

All procedures performed in this study adhered to the ethical standards of the Tel Aviv University Ethics Committee, the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments, and comparable ethical standards.

The two samples were convenience samples. Six high schools were randomly selected from the Israeli Ministry of Education's list of middle and high schools: three from the Jewish sector and three from the Arab sector. We sent applications to the six school boards, suggesting that they administer a questionnaire to their students in exchange for getting data about their students' feelings and well-being (group rates and means) once the study is completed. After receiving agreements from the principals and boards of the schools, written messages explaining the study's goals, topics, and potential impact on improving the school climate were sent to the parents of all 7th and 10th-grade students. All parents agreed to their child's participation in the study.

The questionnaire was administered in groups while students were in homeroom. After a brief introduction about the study's general objectives and significance, we assured the students' anonymity. The students willingly cooperated, and some even said they enjoyed completing the questionnaire. Although we informed the students that participation in the study is optional, none of them refused.

3 Results

Table 1 presents Pearson correlations between the TSA general score and the study variables for the Jewish and Arab samples separately.

Table 1: Pearson Correlations Between TSA General Score and the Study Variables

	Adjustment and Well-Being			Maladjustment Screening (RAASI)			
	<i>Adolescent Vigor</i>	<i>School Adjustment</i>	<i>School Belonging</i>	<i>Positive Self</i>	<i>Emotional Stress</i>	<i>Antisocial Behavior</i>	<i>Problems with Anger Control</i>
Jewish							
<i>TSA Score</i>	.57***	.40***	.49***	.53**	-.63**	-.44**	-.57**
Arabs							
<i>TSA Score</i>	.58***	.48***	.48***	.45**	-.20**	-.21**	-.20**
<i>Wish to Discuss Further</i>	-.12*	.17*	.11*	.20**	-.28**	-.19**	-.20**

The high and significant correlations, along with their directions, clearly indicate that the TSA general score aligns well with other indicators of adolescent well-being. The general score was composed of the TSA Model's components. Therefore, these results indirectly support the relevance of the TSA Model for understanding adolescents' adjustment. Additionally, the correlations are similar for both the Jewish and Arab samples, suggesting that the TSA Model provides a universal and cross-cultural approach to measuring and conceptualizing adolescents' adjustment to life.

Table 1 also shows the correlations between adolescents' desire to discuss spiritual and moral topics with an adult and their feelings of adjustment and well-being, but only for the Arab sample. Overall, these correlations are mild but significant. The general trend indicates that those who are more adjusted are also more willing to discuss these topics. The only exception is the negative correlation between adolescents' vigor and their desire to discuss matters with an adult. Specifically, maladjusted adolescents are likely to be defensive and avoid discussions that might worsen their already unstable and negative emotional state. However, the study's findings regarding the willingness to discuss each topic, separated by Jewish and Arab samples, suggest that the scenario of reluctant maladjusted adolescents avoiding spiritual discussions is culturally dependent and not necessarily applicable to Jewish adolescents.

This complex set of negative and positive correlations between the study variables and willingness to discuss spiritual and moral issues explains why the simple correlation between the TSA general score and the willingness to discuss various issues with adults is nearly zero—that is, the relationship varies depending on specific aspects of adjustment, well-being, and cultural context.

Table 2 presents the percentages of adolescents who reported past opportunities to discuss spiritual and moral issues with an adult and those who wish to discuss these matters further in the future.

Table 2: Prevalence of adolescents who already have or wish to discuss spiritual and moral topics with adults, divided by ethnicity

<i>Topic</i>	Jewish (n= 442)		Arab (n= 311)	
	<i>Someone discussed it with me</i>	<i>I wish someone would discuss it with me</i>	<i>Someone discussed it with me</i>	<i>I wish someoyne would discuss it with me</i>
1. How does the world run (politically and economically)?	73.1	69.2	73%	62.4%
2. What helps youth succeed in school?	65.4	75.8	85.2%	77.2%
3. Is there justice in the world?	54.1	69.7	57.2%	72.7%
4. What skills are needed to succeed in life?	69	81	82.3%	81.4%
5. Why live?	44.1	63.1	60.8%	69.8%
6. Why learning?	87.8	67.6	92.6%	73.3%
7. What does it mean to be "an adult"?	62	56.3	71.1%	80%

The data in Table 2 indicate that many adolescents have already discussed spiritual and moral topics with adults. However, it is unclear who initiated these discussions or what effects, if any, they had on the adolescents' willingness to discuss these issues further. Regardless of how often adolescents have had such conversations, it is evident that a relatively high percentage still desire more of them. Between 62%

and 80% of adolescents want to engage in additional discussions. In other words, most adolescents are eager to talk about these subjects.

Clearly, the two samples of adolescents reported greater exposure to discussions related to learning topics and less to general issues such as "justice in the world" and "why live." The topic of justice pertains to one's ability to control events and manage one's life (To et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2018), while the topic of "why live" relates to suicidal ideation (Bakhiyi et al., 2016; Hawgood et al., 2020; Van Zyl et al., 2022). Therefore, we conclude that past and current discussions have likely contributed to the adolescents' perceptions of their future.

4 Discussion

The present study had two goals: (a) to assess the relevance of the TSA Model in understanding how adolescents feel about their adjustment, and (b) to evaluate the extent to which adolescents are concerned about the spiritual and moral aspects of their lives now and in the future.

The results suggest several essential observations regarding adolescents' adjustment. The findings support the possible usefulness of the Transitional Stress and Adjustment (TSA) Model (Israelashvili, 2023) as a framework for assessing adolescents' situations, specifically their overall feelings of adjustment and well-being. This is based on significant correlations between the TSA score and other measures of adjustment and well-being. While these findings are promising, further research is needed to evaluate the TSA model's usefulness in measuring and understanding adolescents' mental health and positive development. It is particularly important to determine whether the TSA's general components can help identify issues that may require intervention. If these components prove relevant to adolescents' lives, targeted interventions can then address concerns like difficulty understanding the world and spiritual matters. For details on possible interventions, see Israelashvili (2023c).

Another key question explored was adolescents' need for adult support in managing spiritual and moral issues, which yielded valuable new insights. Overall, the results support the idea that adolescents, being in a state of transition, are eager to discuss a broad range of spiritual topics, both theistic and nontheistic, and seek answers. However, an unexpected finding was that maladjusted adolescents showed less interest in discussing moral and spiritual issues. This finding could be due to their tendency to avoid uncomfortable situations. Another explanation is that these adolescents may feel unable to handle immediate adjustment and survival problems, which prevents them from engaging with more abstract issues. These findings and interpretations merit further investigation in future research. Nonetheless, the large number of adolescents wanting more discussions highlights the crucial role of adults in influencing how youth confront life's challenges.

Finally, it is argued that transition periods offer unique opportunities for individuals to pursue a more meaningful life by fully embracing and internalizing "thriving messages" that encompass both the darker and brighter facets of human existence. Thus, times of change and adjustment can serve as an exceptional opportunity to explore human flourishing or fading. Unfortunately, current positive

psychology literature tends to focus more heavily on other topics, leaving this area of adjustment processes underexplored.

The present study was conducted among Israeli adolescents, both Jews and Arabs, with the aim of exploring the usefulness of the TSA conceptual model for understanding their mental and spiritual states. The study design has several limitations, including the use of convenience samples, the focus on Israeli adolescents only (despite coming from two different cultures), a narrow age range of participants, and the administration of scales that were validated mainly within Israeli samples.

Nevertheless, the findings support the idea that a better understanding of adolescents' needs and ways to promote their positive development—such as addressing spiritual issues that significantly trouble them—can be achieved through models like the TSA Model, which emerged in the context of adjusting to life-course transitions. This conclusion warrants further exploration, particularly among adolescents from a broader range of cultures.

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