

Virtual Reality Study Encourages Subjects to Save for the Future

Morphed Photographs Show What You'll Look Like 'When You're 64'

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At the [Virtual Human Interaction Lab](#) at Stanford University, researchers are tackling one of the [Beatles'](#) crucial questions: "Will you still feed me, when I'm 64?"

Hal Ernser-Hershfield, a behavioral-finance researcher from the [Kellogg School of Management](#) at Northwestern University, has developed a new idea to help young people answer that question -- to determine if they've saved enough to feed and take care of themselves in their 60s.

"The average American, the average person, is not taking a ton of ownership over their finances," Ernser-Hershfield said.

He developed a virtual reality world so subjects are able "to literally walk a mile in the shoes of your future self," morphing photographs of the subjects in a sort of [aging](#) mirror and allowing them to see what they'll look like when they reach retirement.

"It is a lot more engaging to see yourself in the future and actually be embodied in that self," Ernser-Hershfield said.

Jen Simmons, 22, otherwise known as Subject 012947, responded, "Yeah, not so much," when asked if she'd thought of herself as a living, breathing human being in her 60s.

"I kind of never thought I'd get past right now," she said.

The study is almost like a "reality creation," Ernser-Hershfield said, because "for a lot of people," like Simmons, "that reality doesn't exist to them."

He said there is a difference between knowing you will exist in the future and actually feeling it.

"Sometimes, people don't feel a real connection to who that person is that they'll become in 30 or 40 years," Ernser-Hershfield said. The research project served as a reality check for subjects like Simmons. People in the study who looked at their future selves allocated twice as much money toward a hypothetical retirement savings account. As the savings rate increased, the aged images' expressions became happier.

"You can start to have some empathy for who that person will be, and feel what it might be like for your future self to not have enough money in the future," Ernser-Hershfield said. "You can really get a better one-to-one sense of what I'll feel like, what I'll be like, and what I'm gonna want," by looking at your virtually-aged self.

Ernser-Hershfield's team currently is developing Web-based tool so people can view their future selves in the virtual reality at home, and an iPhone application so they can age themselves anywhere and plan for retirement.