

Longevity for All Ages: An Interview with Dr. Laura Carstensen

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Laura L. Carstensen, PhD is a Professor of Psychology and the Fairleigh S. Dickinson Jr. Professor in Public Policy at Stanford University. Laura is also the founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, which explores innovative ways to solve the problems of people over 50 while improving the wellbeing of people of all ages. Her best-known academic work is on socioemotional selectivity theory, a life-span theory of motivation, and she has published more than 150 articles on life-span

development with her students and colleagues. Laura's research has been supported by the National Institute on Aging for more than 20 years and she is currently supported by a MERIT Award. In 2011, she wrote *A Long Bright Future: Happiness, Health, and Financial Security in an Age of Increased Longevity*. Laura is a member of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on an Aging Society and currently serves on the National Advisory Council on Aging to NIA. She is the recipient of numerous honors, including the Kleemeier Award and Distinguished Mentorship Award from the Gerontological Society of America, as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship. She received a BS from the University of Rochester and PhD in clinical psychology from West Virginia University (biographical sketch adapted from <http://longevity3.stanford.edu/people/laura-carstensen/>).

NO: The reality of dramatically increasing life expectancy is creating a new field of study, and the Center on Longevity is at the forefront of discovery in this field. Can you tell me about the goals you had when founding this center, and if and how they changed with new discoveries?

LC: The mission of the Center is to redesign long life and bring science and technology to bear on the problems that older people face. We also want to change social norms so that people live their lives differently given that they'll live longer than any generation of humans that has ever lived.

NO: In *A Long Bright Future* you stressed that this concept is important not just for the older generations, but the younger as well. How do you hope that the latter will reshape and revise their lives after understanding this?

LC: We've called this the "Center on Longevity" and not the "Center on Aging." That's because this is a center that's focused on creating the conditions where people can live very long and high-quality lives. We aren't really interested in the elderly *per se* in terms of their current state, but rather, how do you grow generations so they arrive at old age mentally sharp, physically fit, and financially secure. That's a very different goal than that of centers on aging that do focus on old people and the problems that they face.

NO: Regarding the makeup of people who work at the Stanford Center on Longevity, how do other people's background differ from your own and how does that help you reach your overall goal? Is there some type of experience you're still searching for?

LC: For me, the most interesting thing about the Center is that it draws on such varied expertise. We have faculty affiliated with the Center from all seven schools at Stanford: law, business, humanities and sciences, medicine, education, earth, and engineering. We have all these people from very different disciplines who are engaged. The reason why this is so important is that when you're trying to address a big societal issue, a single discipline can't answer it. We really need people from multiple disciplines with multiple perspectives. Let's say we want to address working longer. There may be a psychology element to it, but there may also be legal barriers; there may be laws that actually impair someone's ability to do that. You'd also want people from business who might be interested in employers and workplaces and people from medicine who are interested in the effects of work on physical health. You need people from within the university with a lot of different perspectives to address these problems. But we're also a wildly translational center—we want to have an impact outside of the university. We're really not successful if what we

do is generate more academic publications and journals that only people of those specialties would read, so we work hand-in-hand with policy makers and thought leaders and industry leaders—companies like Fidelity and Transamerica and Fitbit and Airbnb, because those leaders outside of the university create products that can be distributed to a population and really change it. We don't start a project if we don't think it can have impact outside of the university.

NO: Can you elaborate on how Fitbit or Airbnb would relate to your work and what you would talk to them about?

LC: Airbnb contacted us a few months ago to say, "We think that the older population are living in homes that are too big for them, they have spare rooms, the kids are gone. Would this be something that they could use? Maybe this is a way for older people to generate more income." So that's the kind of question that attaches us to a company like Airbnb. Sedentary behavior is a huge problem in the population; Americans are exercising more after fifty years of being "fat". We get PSAs going out saying that nothing has changed. Finally change is starting—people are starting to walk more and that's great. It may be related to technologies like Fitbit. But we're also sitting more, so it turns out it may be counteractive.

NO: You have your PhD in clinical psychology. What or who spurred your interest in pursuing longevity?

LC: Back when I went to graduate school, if you studied aging, you went to clinical programs because aging itself was considered a psychopathological disorder. If you're old, you get demented, decrepit, *etc.* I really thought, naively, although I was not the only one, that going into clinical was considered the normal path. Our approach was to try to understand how people decline and become inept in a number of different areas. I became interested in longevity and lifespan development because over many years I ran studies that found that old people were not only doing okay, but in many cases were doing better than younger people in areas like happiness and satisfaction. My hypothesis was not being supported, and that's the most exciting thing that can happen in science—when you find out you're wrong. If you find out you're right, that means you knew it all along. But if you really look at something, if you become quite confident that the current thinking about something is wrong—that is fascinating. So I got really interested in it [longevity] and how it may be that people improve emotionally as they grow older.

NO: One of your most notable contributions to academia is socioemotional selectivity theory, which is the lifespan theory of motivation. Can you talk about that and how you hope it will change the common person's approach to their lives?

LC: What I have found most important about my theoretical work is that it separates changes that we see with age and preferences and motivation. It separates them from chronological age. The vast majority of research on aging is really grounded on the premise that chronological age predicts how you're going to feel, how you'll perform, and what you'll want to do. That's been the overarching premise of most of lifespan psychology. What this theory maintains and now has been tested and supported in many studies in our lab and others is that time horizons are more powerful. It is true that when people become older, they come to see their futures as more limited and constrained. But there are cases where younger people see that their futures are constrained. Under those conditions, their preferences mimic the ones of older people. That's exciting because it says it's not something about being an old person, but about perception of time. The exciting thing about that is that it's malleable—we can change people's perceptions of time. I can give you some conditions that will limit your perception of the future or events you could experience that would prime your sense of mortality and we would see you act very much like an 80-year-old for a period of time. One of the fun aspects of this is that I think it helps young people relate to old people in a way they weren't able to before, and that's important in and of itself.

NO: Is there a particular goal you're focusing on now or looking toward in the future? Where do you see the trajectory of the Center?

LC: The Center is out to launch a major project on February 12—we will release a big report called *Sightlines*. It is ongoing and will become a signature project of the Center. We are assessing and reporting how Americans of different ages starting at twenty-five and going to over seventy-five are faring compared to their same-aged counterparts just ten or fifteen years ago. An example: how are 20 to 34-year-olds doing today financially than this age group did twelve years ago? This project gives us a dynamic snapshot of where we're headed. We selected variables with which to analyze these changes that are known to predict how well people age. We will track how long people live, the quality of their lives, how much they exercise, and the severity of their sedentary behavior. We can also track if they spend less money than they make—this predicts long-term financial security. We can ask questions like, 'If you were in an emergency and you need \$3,000, could you get it, either from own reserves or could you find someone to help you out?' Imagine if the answer were no. Things like that put financial strain and distress on people that are bad for their health. We are monitoring whether there are more people that feel they could access these reserves or fewer. The sad finding is that there are fewer who feel they could access those reserves.

NO: That was my last question, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate your time!

LC: You're very welcome, happy to talk.