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# Gerotranscendence: A Developmental Theory Of Positive Aging



## Synopsis

Given the 2006 GREAT GERONTOLOGY AWARD for outstanding contribution to gerontological research by the Swedish Gerontological Society Received a VALUE GROUND AWARD from the journal Aldreomsorg (Old Age Care) Expanding upon his earlier writings, Dr. Tornstam's latest book explores the need for new theories in gerontology and sets the stage for the development of his theory of gerotranscendence. This theory was developed to address what the author sees as a perpetual mismatch between present theories in social gerontology and existing empirical data. The development towards gerotranscendence can involve some overlooked developmental changes that are related to increased life satisfaction, as self-described by individuals. The gerotranscendent individual typically experiences a redefinition of the Self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental existential questions: The individual becomes less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in the choice of social and other activities. There is an increased feeling of affinity with past generations and a decreased interest in superfluous social interaction. The individual might also experience a decrease in interest in material things and a greater need for solitary "meditation." Positive solitude becomes more important. There is also often a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death. Gerotranscendence does NOT imply any state of withdrawal or disengagement, as sometimes erroneously believed. It is not the old disengagement theory in new disguise. Rather, it is a theory that describes a developmental pattern beyond the old dualism of activity and disengagement. The author supports his theory with insightful qualitative in-depth interviews with older persons and quantitative studies. In addition, Tornstam illustrates the practical implications of the theory of gerotranscendence for professionals working with older adults in care settings. A useful Appendix contains suggestions of how to facilitate personal development toward gerotranscendence.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Lars Tornstam's Gerotranscendence demands that we look more deeply at those admirable qualities of character found among those who have lived the whole course of life, people who have attained a level of freedom and spiritual fulfillment that can be a goal for us all...He has set a standard that will inspire both scientific investigation as well as practice in the professions. More questions will undoubtedly be asked as others are inspired by Tornstam's ground-breaking work."--Harry R. Moody, PhD, Director of Academic Affairs, AARP, in *The Gerontologist* The book therefore provides a record of how a pioneer conceived, executed, and defended theory building on the micro to intermediate level in a scientific field of inquiry that James Birren characterised as data-rich and theory-poor.... Gerotranscendence is an important book, a testimony to the continuing need for theory-building that widens our field of vision conceptually and practically. "--Aging and Society" Every baby boomer looking for an alternative paradigm to activity theory's 'energetic aging' in later life and its projected treadmill of trips to the personal trainer and plastic surgeon, sky diving lessons, and updates from the stockbroker, should read this book...Tornstam's book is chock full of fresh insight and substantial evidence, supporting his convincing argument that gerontologists have, for too long, circled their wagons around one theory of aging (activity theory) with too little attention to the 'subjects' of their enquiries-older people themselves-in all their diversity and abundance of unique personal experiences of growing older...Tornstam provides an alternative way to see the world-'a theoretical tool that makes certain parts of reality comprehensible'."-Kip Jones, PhD, MSc, Honorary Research Fellow, Mary Seacole Research Centre, De Montfort University

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Gerotranscendence represents a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one. Easily read, Tornstam's book is chock full of fresh insight and substantial evidence, supporting his convincing argument that gerontologists have, for too long, circled their wagons around one theory of aging (activity theory) with too little

attention to the 'subjects' of their enquiries; older people themselves; in all their diversity and abundance of unique personal experiences of growing older. We live in a post-modern time where identities are seen as fragile, shifting, multiple and transitory and where all truth is localised. Tornstam produces an inclusive, developmental approach to growing older that invites gerontologists (as well as the rest of us) to reconsider aging from an array of perspectives in this increasingly multicultural, multifaceted, interactive world. His theory flies in the face of more commonly invoked theories of aging, particularly activity theory, allowing manifold images of later life to materialize from reality and an emergence of the importance of individual meaning to describe phenomena. There is a spirituality in Tornstam's approach; that part of the person concerned with meaning, truth, purpose or reality and the ultimate significance of things; and one that I find refreshingly engaging. Perhaps the last 40 years or so of getting granny out of the chair and into a hang glider has been at cross purposes to not only what granny wants, but also what nature/the gods/her muse encourage her to do. Tornstam provides an alternative way to see the world; "a theoretical tool that makes certain parts of reality comprehensible". - Kip Jones, PhD, MSc Honorary Research Fellow, Mary Seacole Research Centre, De Montfort University

This is a refreshing book on aging. At last, someone in a position of authority is daring to find some positive aspects of getting old. For much too long psychologists and geriatric "experts" have been stuck in the rut of viewing old age as being only pathological in its nature. Lars Tornstam, a Swedish gerontologist, was inspired to investigate and write this book by a discrepancy he witnessed between theories of aging and what older people actually said about their experience of it. The result- a theory that there may be some positive developments which occur in the process of aging. "It's all downhill from here" may just be a lot of prejudiced bunk! Find out what older people have to say about it for themselves. Their views are not all just the result of dementia. Nature provides positive development in all the other stages of human life. Why not in old age too? I highly recommend this book for all those interested in the aging process (we all get there sometime). It may be the start of a new and valid perspective. For a long time people thought the earth was flat- it certainly looks like it through the senses, doesn't it? Put those stereotyped views of old age away, you may be glad that you did when you get there! A highly readable and understandable book.

Lars Tornstam is a pioneer in the field of gerontology having led the educational and advocacy movement on behalf of older people in Sweden and Denmark. I heard about him through studying Joan Erikson's work on expanding the Eriksonian Stage Theory beyond the original 8 stages which

she writes about in *The Life Cycle Completed*. This book of Dr Tornstam's is one of the best books I have read in my 10 years of studying aging. His articulate descriptions support what I have experienced often in my service as a psychotherapist and case manager and loved one of many people in their 80's and 90's including my own beloved 92 year old mother. I highly recommend this book and think it should be part of gerontological training programs everywhere.

A good book but it needs a second edition right now.

Just the best thing I have seen on understanding the developmental possibilities of old age.

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