



## Dr. Tina Brinkley

In this podcast, **Dr. Tina Brinkley**, a gerontologist at **Wake Forest University School of Medicine**, discusses the importance of finding mentors to support you and explains how a career in gerontology will allow you to help people as they grow older.

### Break the podcast down:

**00:58:** Hello Tina, welcome to the Futurum Careers podcast. Thank you for joining us. How are you today?

Hi, I'm great! Thank you for having me.

**You're very welcome, it's good for you to be here. So, I normally start off with three quick-fire questions to get to know you better as a person, rather than to do with your research or your career or anything like that. So, the first question is: what's your favorite song to listen to at the moment?**

Oh my gosh! My favorite song? I don't have one. I honestly like all kinds of genres and whatever comes on the radio to make me start dancing or just make me happy I'll listen to.

**Do you have a favorite book, or a favorite author, or a favorite thing to read?**

I don't. Unfortunately, I don't get to read for pleasure as much as I used to. So, a lot of what I'm reading is scientific articles.

**And the next question is: if you could be any animal, what animal would you be and why?**

I'm going to say an eagle, because I can soar really high and see everything from the bird's eye view and really just get a great lay of the land.

**02:13:** So Tina, you're a gerontologist, which is not a word that I've come across before reading about your research. Could you start off by giving our listeners a brief idea about what gerontology is, and your specific research focus within that?

Sure! Gerontology is really just the study of aging. So, aging processes, and that can span physiological, biological changes with aging, social changes with aging, psychological changes, socioeconomic changes. So really just trying to understand what happens to people as they get older. My particular interest in aging is what happens to the body as people get older. I'm an exercise

physiologist by training, that's actually what my PhD is in. So, I'm interested in understanding what kind of exercise interventions and other lifestyle interventions can help people age better and stay functional and mobile and healthy longer. More recently, I've also been interested in understanding how lifestyle interventions impact brain health. That's something that I never thought I would be researching anything related to Alzheimer's disease, and now that's a lot of what my focus is. I've taken advantage of opportunities to go off in different directions but that's still kind of aligned with my interest and my desire to help people as they get older.

**03:41:** What guides you in those moments when a new opportunity arises? What does that feel like, to decide to go down a slightly different route that you hadn't necessarily been expecting?

It's a little scary, but it's also really exciting, right? Because it's something new. It's not something that you're used to or maybe even comfortable with or don't really know anything about. I think you just have to recognize that there is value in going down that different path and being open to the possibility and being willing to take that risk and see where it takes you.

**04:19:** You also said in your brochure that you were a creative teenager with an active imagination. Have you been able to use that creativity and imagination throughout your career as a scientist?

I have. I feel like being a scientist allows you to be creative and to think of creative ways to address problems that impact people. I design studies to address these problems. For example, as people get older, they become less functional and they're not as strong as they used to be. So, what kind of lifestyle intervention can I design to help them? I feel like that allows me to be creative all the time because I am constantly trying to think of another way to solve a problem or find a creative way, something more creative to get people interested in moving their bodies and eating healthier. Because it is a challenge, there is a lot of barriers to healthy lifestyles for many people for lots of different reasons. And so, you do have to be creative and think outside of the box to try to reach those people. ➔



**05:35: Talking a bit about helping people, have you had any people, maybe mentors or role models, that have helped you throughout your career?**

Yeah, I feel like I've really had mentors throughout life. That means a lot and so I try to do the same for young people coming up now. But it's really about just people that have shown up and read my grant proposals and gave me feedback. Mentors that have given me opportunities to be involved in their studies so that I can maybe add on my own interests that may be separate from what the main study is doing but allows me to again be involved, get more experienced with research and get some data of my own that I can then use to get my next grant. So, a mentor is really someone who is invested in your career and invested in you as a person and will do those things to support you and to help you get to the next level. And as I said, I've had lots of those, fortunately, in my life.

**06:51: Yes, it's a lucky thing to have mentors. You mentioned there that you are a mentor yourself to other people. How do you find the reversal of that role? You've had the benefits of good mentors, how do you then flip that round and be a good mentor to your students?**

Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, I'm much older and in a different time than many of the students that I'm mentoring now. So, I recognize that when I was in school and the challenges that I had to deal with aren't necessarily the same challenges that students are dealing with now. And so, trying to be aware of that and understand where they're coming from and how they're seeing the world differently than what I may have been used to. I co-direct a program that is for underrepresented undergraduate students. It's designed to increase their exposure and interest in aging research. Even if I'm not a one-on-one mentor to those students because we do pair them up with different faculty mentors and they get to do a hands-on intensive research internship with them over the course of the semester or the summer. And so even if I don't have my own student that's working with me on a day-to-day basis, I get to work with those students more broadly and just provide the programmatic elements to give them professional development, experience, training, help them with networking and learning how to build connections and learning how to identify their strengths and weaknesses and their needs and their goals for their life. It's very rewarding, I mean, you definitely have those success stories where you have a student who really wasn't sure what they wanted to do, comes into our program, is paired with a wonderful mentor, they have a great experience and then it has just completely altered the trajectory of their life. Because now they have a passion, they have a goal, and they have set a plan to reach that goal. We had a hand in that and so that feels really good.

**09:06: Yeah, that's great. Thinking more about your research and your focus on gerontology, and your focus on mentoring as well, it seems that quite a driving force for you is helping people. Has that been important to you in your career journey? It seems like it has been throughout a sort of constant.**

Yeah, I recognize what a blessing it is to have people that are willing to pour into you, and so I do feel like it's my duty to reciprocate, right? And to find people that can also benefit from support and from a kind word, from guidance, because I feel like there are a lot of people out there that have questions and want someone to help them figure it out. Because, you know what? Life is hard and there are lots of choices and so sometimes it's nice just to have someone that you can bounce ideas off of or just learn from their experience so that you can learn not to do the same thing, or how you can do something differently to be more effective and really figure out what it is that you want to do. So, yeah, I think helping people is something we all should strive to do, in whatever way we can do that.

**10:29: And is that part of the reason why you like the kind of research that you do? Because it's helping the participants or the people who are going to benefit from the research that you're doing?**

Absolutely! And some of the best things that we get out of doing this research is not just being able to come up with a project that you think can be beneficial but actually, the whole process of getting that funded, getting it up and running, getting participants into the study, and through the study, and then having them at their final visit say, "This changed my life! I wasn't doing anything before, I was struggling to play with my grandkids and now I can play with my grandkids again. I can run around with them, I feel stronger, I feel much healthier." You know, that's huge! You changed somebody's life, and so that makes it all worth it.

**11:27: That must be so rewarding. I can't think of a better advertisement for becoming a gerontologist, or anyone researching in the health sphere. Having that interaction with people that you've made a concrete difference to in their life must be really inspiring.**

It is, yeah.

**11:46: We've talked about creativity and imagination. We spoke about mentors. Is there any other advice that you would give to young people who are maybe trying to figure out what to do next?**

I think sometimes it's hard because you don't know what you don't know. And if you haven't been exposed to something you have no idea that it's a possibility. And so, I would just really recommend trying to get exposed to as many things as possible. When you see an opportunity come your way, and even if you're not sure that it's something that you're really that interested in, going through something, even if in the end you find out, "This isn't something that I wanted to do," that's a step closer to you figuring out what it is that you want to do. Again, I would just seek out, not just when they come to you, but also seek out opportunities if you think you're interested in something. See if there are resources or opportunities to be able to shadow somebody or get into a program that gives you exposure to research or whatever it is that you think you might want to do. Because having that opportunity to experience it really does help you figure out if that's actually what you want to do. I think we often think, especially with physicians, I know a lot of students that come in and everybody wants to go to medical school. And so, you know, we try to encourage them to think beyond medical school. There are so many ways to help people. You don't just have to be a doctor to help people. Think about those other ways that you can be impactful to society.

**13:30: Great, that sounds like really good advice. Well, that's about all we've got time for unless there's anything else that you think we haven't spoken about that you wanted to add.**

No, this was great. I think I was able to share what I'm passionate about and some advice, and so I appreciate this opportunity.

**Good, I'm glad to hear it. It's been a pleasure to have you on. Thank you for joining me.**

Thank you.



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