

You look pretty good for your age!

By Janet Fowler

Age is one of the first things we notice about people. Do they appear young, or are they older? When we categorize people, whether young or old, based solely on age, it can lead to ageism.

Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) toward others. Ageism can be directed toward the young, but more often is applied toward older adults. Ageism is a form of discrimination that is often perceived as acceptable and socially tolerated.

Ageism can be institutional, interpersonal, or self-directed. Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age. Interpersonal ageism arises in interactions between two or more individuals, while self-directed ageism occurs when internalized and turned against oneself.

Institutions where ageism pervades include those providing health and social care, the workplace, the media, and the legal system. Health care rationing on the basis of age is widespread, and older adults also tend to be excluded from research. Physicians may dismiss a treatable pathology as a feature of old age, and conversely, treat the natural effects of aging as a disease. Recommended screening for breast and colon cancer ends at age 74, despite an incidence rate that increases with age. When an older person is accompanied to a health or other appointment by a younger person, it is often the younger one who is spoken to. Such ignoring, patronizing or insulting of older adults, or assuming they are incapable of making their own decisions is ageism. Staff may have implicit ageist thoughts, feelings and behaviours toward elderly patients without conscious awareness.

Both older and younger adults are often disadvantaged in the workplace. An employer may view an older worker as reliable and experienced, while another sees them as unmotivated or not flexible.

Some stereotypes of older people can be positive and they may be viewed as warm and likeable. When stereotypes are negative, they can be seen as rigid, frail and weak. A leading example of ageism are the jokes made about a person's age and making fun of older adults in general. Older people themselves often perpetuate these myths, biases and stereotypes about aging. 'I'm just having a senior moment?' one says, to explain a forgotten thought.

Why should we worry about ageism? A Canadian survey found 63% of older adults felt they had been treated unfairly based on their age. Ageism is increasingly recognized as a risk factor associated with increased stress, anxiety, depression and lowered life satisfaction. It is associated with poorer physical and mental health, slower recovery from disability, cognitive decline and a shorter lifespan. Ageism reduces older people's quality of life and increases their social isolation and loneliness, both of which are associated with serious health problems.

What efforts are being made to address the issue of ageism? The World Health Organization issued a Global Report on Ageism in March, 2021. For the United Nations International Day of Older Persons on October 1, 2022, people were encouraged to 'Take a stand against Ageism'. In the Ontario Human Rights Commission Code, age is a protected ground. A fact sheet on Age Discrimination and Health Care is available from the Commission. The Alberta Council on Aging is aligned with the Seniors Ministry and the Office of the Seniors Advocate as having identified ageism as a priority area in addressing systemic and cultural trends and barriers to the wellbeing of older persons. The Council has developed a Trainers Manual and presentation, with the goal of increasing awareness and knowledge about ageism and inclusion. A consultation on ageism held in the fall of 2022 by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors produced a report: An Examination of the Social and Economic Impacts of Ageism.

Ageism is being addressed provincially, federally and globally. What might we do locally and personally to remove this bias?

Ref. Global Report on Ageism. Geneva: World Health Organization , 2021 [acaging.ca/lets-stop-ageism](https://www.acaging.ca/lets-stop-ageism)

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