



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

AGEISM

I was just starting to write my monthly message on ageism when I got a link to the current *Aging Insights* video from the NJ Foundation for Aging and a recommendation from a friend to read *This Chair Rocks* by Ashton Applewhite (or see her TED talk), both on ageism. So, the time is right.

Ageism is any discrimination based on age, blatant or indirect. It can impact any person at any age. Ageism relegates older people to second class citizenship as well as disrespecting youth. Discrimination legitimizes and sustains inequalities between groups and is imparted to us from an early age.

Why is ageism still an acceptable form of discrimination? Certainly no one would lump everyone age 20–70 in the same group, so why those 50–100? Growing old has become shameful; we blame ourselves for an array of circumstances beyond our control and dread our futures. Ageism legitimizes abuse.

We have all experienced it:

- A doctor says, “you are just getting older” and doesn’t give full attention to your concerns.
- A job interviewer does not value your years of experience, if you even get an interview.
- You hear comments about someone being “too old” to run for office.
- Walk through a pharmacy and check out the “anti-aging” aisle.
- People send you “old folk’s jokes” that emphasize disability, incontinence, loss of memory, and other functions. If you doubt this, check the birthday card collection at your pharmacy and see how the message changes at the 30th birthday.

What happens when we substitute another protected class of people for the ageist language in these jokes? “Did you hear about the woman who...” “How many gay men...” Most of these jokes would set off alarms that these messages are unacceptable.

Media messages often divide perception of older people into either old and a threat/burden on society (“silver tsunami”) or as super-agers (still running a marathon at 90). Images are often sanitized or romanticized. Neither of those describe most of us. Only recently have advertisers and entertainment media started to feature older people as having normal lives. Ageist ideas like these have a negative impact on people’s willingness to work with older people.

We even turn ageism on ourselves. Have you found yourself purchasing wrinkle cream, avoiding a store or exercise class because you judge it to be for people younger than yourself, or meeting someone your own age and thinking “I’m glad I don’t look/act that old?” Internalizing these negative stereotypes impacts our health, wellness, and longevity.



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It is time to change this form of discrimination. There is a group called the Radical Age Movement, with a chapter in NJ, whose goal is to “end the misperceptions and skewed attitudes toward aging so that people of all ages, races, classes, genders, and sexualities can participate productively in areas of cultural, professional, and community life.” This goal is good for all society.

What can you do?

- The first step is awareness: watch for ageism around you
- Look for ways you are ageist and find ways to change your thinking — for example:
 - Don't use terms like “still” as in “still driving” or “you look good for your age”
 - Don't use adjectives you wouldn't use for a younger person
 - Don't say “If I get like that”
 - Don't refer to “the elderly” — try simply “people” or “older adults”
 - Don't send or respond to ageist jokes
- Tell the truth when asked your age
- Find opportunities to share positive stories with others
- Look for beauty in older faces and bodies
- Assume capacity not incapacity
- Speak up when you hear others use ageist language and behavior. Ask “what do you mean,” then listen, then help the speaker understand how it sounds.

Thanks to Robert Butler who raised this concern in 1969 and to The New Jersey Foundation for Aging and Ashton Applewhite for contributing the concepts in this article.

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