

Disrupting Ageism

Awareness, language and actions can begin to turn the tide of a pervasive prejudice.

By Anne Geske

“Ageism is the last acceptable prejudice.”

– Ashton Applewhite

From an early age, we absorb stereotypes about aging and older people. Perhaps it’s not until we ourselves get older and experience being treated differently that we begin to consider what ageism is and how it affects us.

Coined by psychiatrist Robert Butler in 1969, ageism is defined as “the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age,”¹ and it can have profound negative consequences on our health and wellbeing as we grow older. In our youth-obsessed culture, discrimination against older people can begin at ages many of us wouldn’t even consider old. When the federal government passed the Age Discrimination in Employment Act in 1967, it was written to protect people 40 years of age and older.

“Ageism is so pervasive in our American society,” says Gayle Kvenvold, president and chief executive officer of LeadingAge Minnesota. “It affects almost everything related to services to older people, including our ability to attract workers to caregiving careers in the senior living field.”

LeadingAge Minnesota, whose mission is to transform and enhance the experience of aging, assists a network of more than 1,100 organizations across Minnesota that provide senior housing, assisted living, skilled nursing, home care and other services for older adults.

Working closely with long-term service providers, Kvenvold has firsthand knowledge of this segment of health care and support services. “Caregiving as a career is

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not as highly valued or sought after as other health care-related services,” she says. “It typically suffers from many of the stereotypes we have about aging, linking it closely with loss of independence or growing disability, or our own fear of dying. And it tends to cloud the public’s view—and our potential workers’ view—of the importance and vitality of this field of work.”

In our society, negative views about older people can significantly affect their physical and mental health. When older people feel they are a burden and perceive their lives to be less valuable, they are at risk of depression and social isolation.

Research shows that older adults who hold negative views about their own aging don’t recover as well from disability, and they live 7.5 years less, on average, than people with positive attitudes.² Self-held negative views of aging may also cause older adults to resist seeking services when they need them, because they associate services with their fear of growing older and being dependent.

“Because we’ve all absorbed negative stereotypes, each of us has ageist behaviors embedded in our everyday vocabulary and practices,” Kvenvold explains. “Really thinking deeply about our own assumptions on an ongoing basis is a part of this journey.”

Another major impact of ageism in health care is an increased risk of under-treating or over-treating older adults. Additionally, providers opting out of Medicare, researchers excluding older people from clinical trials and the declining interest in the field of geriatrics all represent discriminatory practices resulting from discriminatory beliefs.³

So how can senior living and skilled nursing facilities stem the tide of risk associated with ageism? According to Kvenvold, one basic principle of safe, quality care is to get to know every individual we serve as a person—and that includes not making assumptions about them because of their age.

This goes hand-in-hand with what Kvenvold calls the bedrock principle of person-centered care. “If you’re looking at reducing the risk of harm in a care delivery setting,” she says, “you’re creating a culture based on really knowing and understanding the individual you’re serving. That lies at the heart of eliminating ageism: Rather than making the assumptions about elders that we do because we live and breathe in this society with its pervasive ageism, we set that aside and use our professional skills in ways that build cultures of safety.”

Kvenvold stresses that one key is really being aware of the stereotypes embedded in our language and actions. “Words really matter here,” she says. “If we can change how we talk, we can change minds, and that will change actions.”

Part of this includes holding up and promoting positive stories about aging—even how we refer to ourselves as we age. For example, Kvenvold has banished the now-common terms “silver tsunami” and “age wave” from her vocabulary because, she says, “The number of older people we’re going to have is not a scary thing, but a demographic fact that represents

terrific resources for our communities in terms of volunteers, older workers to help address shortages, grandparenting—so many things that will benefit our world.”

We need to change both our minds and our attitudes—not just for the sake of others, but for ourselves. At the core of changing ageism is recognizing that we’re all aging. “We tend to segment generations without recognizing that no matter if we’re 30 or 60, what we have in common is that we’re all aging—we’re human, that’s what we do,” Kvenvold says. She also counsels that we need to acknowledge that for some of us as we age, we will experience changes that will increase our need for support and care, which may result in no longer being able to live on our own.

“That’s also part of life’s journey,” she says. “Even if we’re dealing with a chronic condition that impairs us in some way, that doesn’t mean that we no longer have joy in our lives or the opportunity for purpose and contribution.”

References

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2. World Health Organization. **Discrimination and negative attitudes about ageing are bad for your health.** bit.ly/2OXQvS6. Published September 29, 2016. Accessed February 21, 2020.
3. Ouchida KM, Lachs M. **Not for doctors only: ageism in healthcare.** *Generations (American Society on Aging)*. 2015;39(3):46-57.

Resources

LeadingAge.org. **Anti-ageism quick guide.** bit.ly/2vG6Ns1. Published March 2018. Accessed February 21, 2020.

Old School: Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse. OldSchool.info. A clearinghouse of free and carefully vetted resources to educate people about ageism and help dismantle it.

Yo, Is This Ageist? yoisthisageist.com. A running list of questions submitted by the public, with answers from Ashton Applewhite.



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