



Ageism and Abuse in Later Life

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or ourselves based on age reduces older adults to a homogenous group that is often disregarded by society or deemed unworthy of dignity and respect. Ageist beliefs—such as viewing older adults as less competent, less credible, less productive, or less capable—can contribute to their marginalization and increase their risk of mistreatment.

Ageism not only shapes public perception but also intersects with and perpetuates abuse in later life. Ageist messages—equating youth with beauty, vitality, worth, and relevance—are internalized across generations. Over time, they can contribute to a collective devaluation of older individuals, affecting how they are perceived and treated, including in cases of abuse. Understanding how ageism shapes perceptions and responses is



critical to ensuring that older victims are seen, heard, and afforded the same care, support, and dignity as individuals of any age.

What Does Ageism Have to Do with Abuse in Later Life?

Perpetrators of abuse in later life frequently draw on ageist assumptions to rationalize their behavior. They may view older adults as less competent, less aware, or even less worthy of dignity and autonomy. Assumptions that older individuals are cognitively impaired or nearing the end of life can be used to justify neglect, abandonment, and emotional, financial, and physical harm. In these instances, the older person is not seen as a full human being, but rather as someone who is expendable, inconvenient, or a burden.

Abuse in later life is the nexus between domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and elder abuse. The forms of abuse, which often co-occur, include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and stalking.



Importantly, ageism doesn't only influence perpetrators, it also shapes society's view of the "perfect victim of abuse" by often casting younger individuals as more credible or sympathetic, while overlooking or dismissing the experiences of older adults as less serious or believable. Consider how the idea of a victim of domestic violence usually conjures up an image of a younger adult, perhaps with a

child, rather than an older adult. Ageist beliefs dictate that abuse stops at a certain age and that older adults don't experience domestic violence. This is

also true when it comes to notions of older adults, sexuality, and sexual abuse. American society is obsessed with staying young and cultural norms favor and center youth. This creates an environment where older people are viewed as unattractive and therefore less likely to be sexually assaulted. Societal attitudes and responses to those who experience sexual violence, still largely characterized by shame and silence, are compounded by ageism that portrays older people as asexual and therefore outside the accepted boundaries of concern as survivors of sexual violence. These attitudes may prevent abuse in later life from being taken seriously,

When we fail to recognize the full complexity and humanity of older adults, we risk missing critical opportunities for intervention and justice.

delay intervention, or discourage older individuals from seeking help.



This bias doesn't just influence public perception; it also permeates institutional and systemic responses to abuse. Law enforcement, healthcare providers, social services, and even the legal system may unconsciously deprioritize or minimize reports of abuse from older adults, assuming their claims are exaggerated, confused, or less urgent. Take for example,

stalking, which is most commonly seen as something that only happens to younger individuals. Research, however, indicates that almost 30% of all stalking victims are aged 50 or older.¹ Assumptions about mobility, cognitive decline, or communication ability often lead professionals or caregivers to dismiss or misinterpret disclosures of abuse. As a result, older victims may

¹ Truman, J.L., & Morgan, R.E. (2021). Stalking Victimization, 2016. Washington, DC: US DOJ, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report

receive slower responses, fewer resources, and less follow-up than younger individuals. These disparities reflect a broader societal devaluation of aging and contribute to the invisibility of abuse in later life.

When we fail to recognize the full complexity and humanity of older adults, we risk missing critical opportunities for intervention and justice. Challenging ageist assumptions is essential to ensuring that all victims of abuse—regardless of age—are treated with the seriousness, respect, and support they deserve.

Challenging Ageism in the Context of Abuse



Challenging ageism—particularly in the context of abuse—begins with self-reflection. Many people unconsciously absorb negative stereotypes about aging and these beliefs often shape how they treat older adults and how they envision their own aging process. By examining and challenging these internalized attitudes, individuals can begin to unlearn harmful narratives and replace them with more accurate,

respectful, and empowering views of aging. This personal reckoning is foundational for broader cultural change, as it encourages empathy, disrupts ageist assumptions in everyday interactions, and lays the groundwork for advocating more equitable policies and practices across institutions.

When working with older adults, it is essential that we approach disclosures of abuse with belief, empathy, and compassion. Abuse is often not disclosed directly; instead, older adults may communicate something is wrong through a coded disclosure—subtle or indirect language that hints at harm.

Statements such as “He has a temper” or “She doesn’t like when I have visitors” may be indicators of a deeper issue. These moments require careful

listening and a trauma-informed, person-centered response that prioritizes safety and trust.

We must also move away from judgmental assumptions about why someone stays in an abusive situation. For older survivors, the decision to remain in a relationship may involve complex considerations: loss of housing or fear of being put in a nursing home, caregiving needs, family dynamics, financial stability, and deeply rooted generational or spiritual beliefs. Abuse involving adult children or grandchildren

can carry additional layers of shame, guilt, or fear that make disclosure and action particularly difficult. A commitment to anti-ageism means honoring older adults' autonomy and their right to make their own decisions within the full context of their lived experiences.

Representation matters—not just in the images we choose, but in the ways we design services, conduct outreach, train staff, and shape public discourse.



Finally, it's vital to ensure that older adults are visible and accurately represented in the systems and services designed to support survivors of abuse. This includes using inclusive and respectful imagery in outreach materials and ensuring that messaging affirms the resilience and rich and varied history of older adults' lives. ***Do your brochures, posters, and websites feature people of all ages, abilities, and***

backgrounds? Do your outreach efforts include locations that older adults frequent? Representation matters—not just in the images we choose, but in the ways we design services, conduct outreach, train staff, and shape public discourse.

To effectively address and prevent abuse in later life, we must collectively commit to challenging ageism that allows it to persist. This means calling out stereotypes, valuing the voices, perspectives, and experiences of older adults, and recognizing their unique challenges as well as their opportunities, resilience, and autonomy. It also means ensuring that our systems and services—legal, medical, social, and beyond—respond to older adults’ needs with the same urgency and respect afforded to any other age group. By fostering a culture that respects aging and rejects ageism, we can take a crucial step toward ending abuse in later life.

Resources

- **Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse:** [Future Us: Roadmap to Elder Abuse Prevention](#)
- **National Center on Elder Abuse Research Brief:** [Ageism](#)