



Aging and Ageism

Aging

From the time we're born through our early adult years, our bodies' critical functions—lungs, heart, kidneys, and liver—tend to be similar from person to person. But as we get older, things start to change, and those changes can look different for everyone. Aging affects us on many levels, from the tiny building blocks inside our cells to the way our organs work and how we feel overall.

Chronological age—A person's age measured from birth to a given date. It's the number of years you've been alive.

Biological age—A person's age measured by the physiology of one's cells and tissue. Biological age considers factors such as genetics, lifestyle, stress, and overall health.

How fast we age biologically isn't just about getting older—it's also influenced by our genes and the choices we make every day. Things like how much we



exercise, how well we sleep, what we eat, and whether we use substances like tobacco or alcohol all play a role in the aging process. Other factors can accelerate aging too, like dealing with long-term stress, being exposed to violence or trauma, or lacking access to healthy food. Life transitions such as retirement, housing relocations, and the death of loved ones and friends further affect aging.

Ultimately, what this means is that there is no typical older person. Adults 50 and older have unique life experiences, backgrounds, and needs. They also exist on a broad spectrum of physical and cognitive ability. A person's age is simply a measure of time. Someone's age tells us little about their capabilities, potential, or vitality.

Ageism

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or ourselves based on age. In other words, ageism is discrimination against an individual strictly based on their age. Ageism cuts both ways; people both young and old experience ageism. When talking about how society views aging and older adults, it's important to recognize that not all age-based attitudes are the same—some may seem kind or well-intentioned, while others are more openly negative; both, however, can be harmful in different ways.

The Types of Ageism

Benevolent ageism is based on the belief that older adults are warm and friendly but not very capable. Because of this belief, people might act in a way that's overly helpful or even patronizing. This kind of behavior can lead to assumptions that older people aren't independent or competent, and it often

overlooks their individuality and strengths. Examples of benevolent ageism include:

- Assuming that older individuals need guidance with basic tasks because of their age;
- Addressing an older adult with baby talk or pet names;
- Expressing pity toward an older adult; and
- Treating older adults with excessive kindness or overprotectiveness.

Hostile ageism is a form of prejudice where individuals view older people as a burden, contemptible, or expendable. It manifests as direct expressions of disrespect, scorn, and negative stereotypes.

Hostile ageism expresses openly aggressive beliefs about age. Some examples of hostile ageism include:

- Avoiding physical contact with older people due to discomfort or disgust;
- Viewing older adults as disposable, irrelevant, and past their prime;
- Blaming older adults for societal problems;
- Dismissing an older person's opinion by saying they're "from another time" or "don't get how things work today;" and
- Bullying or harassment based on age.

The Levels of Ageism

To fully understand how ageism operates in everyday life, it's helpful to look at it on different levels—how it's expressed between individuals, built into systems and policies, and even how older adults can internalize these attitudes themselves.

Interpersonal ageism occurs within interactions between two or more individuals. Examples include, using age to:



- devalue an individual's work ("that's pretty good for someone their age");
- discredit someone's capacity ("they're old and just confused"); or
- patronize or disrespect them ("you must be having a senior moment").

Interpersonal ageism may also show up in the way we communicate. Some examples are:

- speaking over an older adult or interrupting and ignoring them when they talk;
- speaking louder, slower or in simpler terms;
- overcompensating for the individual's presumed needs like carrying their groceries or helping them cross the street; and
- avoiding an individual altogether.

Institutional ageism refers to policies, practices, or rules within organizations, institutions, or systems that discriminate against people based on their age—usually to the disadvantage of older adults. Some examples include:

- healthcare systems that deprioritize older patients for certain treatments or surgeries based on age rather than individual health status;
- insurance companies charging higher premiums or denying coverage based solely on age, regardless of actual health or risk factors;
- lack of workplace training or professional development programs offered to older employees, assuming they're near retirement and not worth the investment;



- inaccessible transportation services that limit older adults' independence and mobility;
- tech and digital services designed without older adults in mind, making them harder to access or navigate without assistance; and
- limited media representation of older adults in advertising, entertainment, and news—often portraying them as fringe characters who are frail, irrelevant, full of comic flaws, or burdensome.

Unlike interpersonal ageism, which happens between individuals, institutional ageism is built into the structure of society, often making it harder for older people to access opportunities, services, or fair treatment.

Interpersonal ageism is an internalized belief that you shouldn't or couldn't do something based on your own age. Examples include thoughts like “I'm too old to start a new career” or “technology is for young people not old people like me.” It can also include negative self-talk and self-perception such as rejecting compliments or positive feedback, blaming memory lapses or mistakes entirely on age, even when they're normal or stress-related, or feeling embarrassed to wear certain clothing, wear hearing aids, or use a mobility aid.



The Impact of Ageism

Interpersonal, institutional, and self-directed ageism are not mutually-exclusive—these forms of ageism often overlap and compound each other. Ageism affects everyone at different stages in their lives and has far-reaching impacts on both individuals and society. For older adults, ageism can lead to reduced self-esteem, isolation, and loneliness as well as limited

access to employment, healthcare, or social opportunities. These negative experiences often contribute to poorer mental and physical health, a reduced

quality of life, and shorter lifespan. On a societal level, ageism reinforces harmful stereotypes that dehumanize older people and devalue their contributions. This may heighten fears of growing older, create doubt about the benefits of aging, and create a culture that ignores and tolerates the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older adults.

Taking Action

The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life works to ensure the safety, dignity, and quality of life of all older adults. Addressing and confronting ageism is foundational to this mission. We invite you to join us in this endeavor and offer the following ideas to celebrate aging and confront ageism.



- **Use age-positive language.** Older adults are a diverse demographic. Refrain from generalizing that all older adults are the same and avoid characterizing all older adults as frail, weak, and vulnerable.
- **Use age-positive images.** Avoid using outdated or clichéd imagery that reinforces decline and dependence. Instead focus on genuine, relatable representations of older adults across a variety of ages, situations, and abilities.
- **Lift up the voices of older adults and celebrate their stories and resilience.** Older adults have rich and varied lives. Share their perspectives, experiences, contributions, and achievements.
- **Avoid generational tropes.** Pitting young vs old masks generational diversity and encourages social divisions and discord.
- **Reflect on your own views of growing older.** To live is to age and every one of us is aging each day. If we are lucky, we will all get to experience our own unique journey of aging. Ask yourself where and how you see

yourself in the next 5, 10, 20 years or more and discover whether you are comfortable with your future self or not.

- **Notice how ageism shows up in your life.** Be aware of instances where you or others are spoken down to, patronized, or made assumptions about age-related aspects of life.
- **Engage others in a conversation about aging and ageism.** Having a conversation about ageism can be the first step to creating change and challenging negative ideas about aging and older people. Discuss how ageism affects each of you personally and explore [possible ways to encourage collective action to raise awareness and address the issue.](#)

Resources

- **Changing the Narrative:** [Language Style Guides Resources](#)
- **AARP x FrameWorks Institute:** [Reframing Aging Through Images, Recommendations from Research](#)
- **AARP x Getty Images:** [The Disrupt Aging® Collection](#)
- **Shutterstock x American Society on Aging:** [Telling Age-Inclusive Stories](#)
- **World Health Organization:** [Initiating a Conversation About Ageism](#)