

Attitudes Toward Older Adults and Aging

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Roadmap for today

- ▶ Patient experiences
- ▶ Definitions
- ▶ Intersectionality
- ▶ Ageism and health
- ▶ Ageism in health care interactions
- ▶ Ways to reduce your own ageism
- ▶ Resources
- ▶ Questions

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Patient stories

- ▶ "My shoulder has been bothering me and they said, 'well, it's a 90-year-old shoulder'"
- ▶ "I wanted to talk about my current health, and I felt like they were more interested in talking about my end-of-life plans"
- ▶ "The doctor kept asking my daughter questions instead of me during our appointment"
- ▶ "I just transferred my care to the VA and in my first appointment with my primary care he said, 'you are 67 but your medical problems are like you are 87' and I felt really like that was rude way to talk about my health problems."
- ▶ "I felt so irritated at the woman who I asked for help in the lab when I'd been waiting for a long time, she talked down to me with such a patronizing attitude... and called me 'sweetie' ... I'm a grown woman who was in the army before she was born!"
- ▶ "I feel scared, and I'm pissed off, because if I get COVID and get really sick, and there is a scarcity of ventilators, I think I will be low on the list to get one. I think they would just let me die."

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Stereotypes of older adults

- ▶ Sick
- ▶ Cognitively Impaired
- ▶ Burdensome
- ▶ Asexual
- ▶ Cute
- ▶ Incompetent

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Most adults over 65....

- ▶ Consider themselves to be in good health (National Prevention Council, 2016)
- ▶ Do not have a physical or cognitive disability (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2020)
- ▶ Experience emotional well being (Carstensen, et al, 2011)
- ▶ Are involved with a romantic partner (Malani et al., 2017)
- ▶ Live independently in their home (Administration for Community Living, 2020)
- ▶ Make up a large part of the volunteer labor in the US (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)
- ▶ Use technology regularly, especially since 2020 (AARP, 2021)
- ▶ Coped better during COVID 19 isolations (Young et al., 2021)

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The answer is not to be “age blind”

- ▶ Unhelpful
- ▶ Neglectful
- ▶ Ableism and ageism
 - ▶ A person with a wheelchair is not immobile, but they can be immobilized by insufficient accommodations
 - ▶ A person with hearing loss is not unable to engage, but they can be limited without support
- ▶ Seeing the individual in front of us

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Ageism

- ▶ Robert Butler (psychiatrist) defined ageism in the 1960s
 - “Negative stereotyping and discrimination based on age, including stereotypical attitudes and beliefs, behavioral discriminations, and institutional policies that have a negative effect at both the individual and the population level.”
- ▶ Becca Levy’s Stereotype Embodiment Theory (2009)
 - ▶ Older adults' negative self-perceptions of aging

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External and Internal Ageism

External

- ▶ Not included in clinical trials or testing norms
- ▶ Having resources rationed due to age
- ▶ Assumptions that an older adult is inept at technology
- ▶ Discriminatory hiring behavior
- ▶ Prejudice, discrimination, and micro-aggressions that can be insidious and hard to quantify
- ▶ Measured as “perceived discrimination” as a proxy (Paradies, 2006)

Internal

- ▶ Attitudes and stereotypes internalized across the lifespan
- ▶ Can be conscious or unconscious
- ▶ Measured by questions about beliefs about aging and older adults
 - ▶ “do you feel useless with age”
 - ▶ “do you think older people can learn new skills”

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Ageism is a unique

- ▶ Aging is a universal experience
- ▶ More culturally acceptable to express (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017)
- ▶ The group “older adults” is diverse across many characteristics

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Identity Considerations

Gender

- Cohort experiences
- Older women = double jeopardy
- Older men are at increased risk for under-treated depression and suicide

Race

- Cohort experiences
- Older BIPOC women = triple jeopardy
- Older BIPOC adults
 - More limited access to mental health care
 - Less like to use services due to perceived discrimination and mistrust of institutionalized medicine
 - More likely to seek services through general medicine or clergy

LGBTQ+

- Cohort experiences
- History of LGBTQ+ and mental health treatment
 - Homosexuality was not depathologized from the DSM until 1987
 - Conversion Therapy officially denounced in 1998
- Anxiety about “going back inside the closet”

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How do these stereotypes develop?

- ▶ A study of print media found negative descriptions of older adults outnumbered positive ones by 6 times in US and UK (Ng, 2021)
- ▶ Entertainment industry often presents older adults in demeaning ways or exclude them (Levy, 2022)
- ▶ Multi-billion dollar “anti-aging” industry marketing messages of aging as something to avoid or be afraid of
- ▶ Several studies have shown that these stereotypes develop in early childhood

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Healthcare attitudes towards older adults

- ▶ Mental Health:
 - ▶ Therapeutic nihilism starting with Freud
 - ▶ Case vignette studies found provider assumptions that older adults were less likely to benefit from treatment and received poor prognosis (Helmes & Gee, 2003; Ray et al., 1987)
 - ▶ Psychotherapy is effective at similar rates across adulthood (Cuijpers et al., 2020)
- ▶ General Healthcare: Studies show similar attitudes across provider types
- ▶ Across all areas of health, there are relatively very few providers trained in geriatrics

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Ageism & Physical Health

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Perceived age discrimination

- Poorer subjective health appraisal
- Greater disease burden (Sutin et al, 2015)

Negative self-perceptions of aging

- Increased functional impairment (Levy et al., 2009)
- Worse health outcomes (Moser et al., 2011)
- Increased mortality (Levy et al, 2002)

Ageism and Mental Health

Perceived age discrimination

- Lower life satisfaction
- Increased loneliness (Sutin et al., 2015)

Negative self-perceptions of aging

- Increased depression scores (Han & Richardson, 2015)
- Veteran sample: higher rates of suicidal ideation, anxiety, and trauma symptoms (Levy et al., 2014)

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Self-perception of Aging and Dementia

APOE ϵ 4 (Levy et al., 2018)

- ▶ Individuals with positive age beliefs less likely to develop dementia
- ▶ Study participants with APOE ϵ 4 who had positive age beliefs were almost 50% less likely to develop dementia than those with negative age beliefs

Brain Structure (Levy et al., 2016)

- ▶ Negative age stereotypes were associated with hippocampal-volume loss
- ▶ Also associated with greater accumulation of neurofibrillary tangles and amyloid plaques at autopsy

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What is the link?

1. Beliefs related to locus of control
 - ▶ If problems are considered “inevitable” this can influence health behavior
2. Impact of stress and anxiety on health
 - ▶ Chronic stress negatively impacts the immune system and cardiovascular health

(Wurm et al., 2007)

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Hostile Ageism

Definition

- Overt
- Aggressive behavior and language

Societal examples

- “Boomer remover”
- Demeaning media portrayal
- Media messages of older adults as a social burden

Health Care examples

- Laughing at ageist jokes
- Making comments about the patients age in a disrespectful way

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Neglectful Ageism

Definition

- Trivializes value of older adults
- Makes them invisible

Societal examples

- Failing to treat the death of older adults as a serious issue
- Limited older adult representation in media

Health Care examples

- Avoiding health discussions about important topics
- Not offering treatment for treatable problems
- Not including older adults in clinical trials
- Don't discuss important topics like sex

Benevolent Ageism

Definition

- Likeable but incompetent
- Compassionate but paternalistic point of view

Societal examples

- COVID-19 messaging
- One-dimensional media portrayals of older adults as “adorable” and other infantilizing messages

Health Care examples

- Elderspeak
- Reductive interactions
- Overly polite
- Failure to diagnose problems like dementia or substance abuse

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What to do about it

- ▶ Self-reflection
 - ▶ Several attitudes measures
 - ▶ Implicit bias test (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>)
- ▶ Intergenerational exposure
- ▶ Continue your education
- ▶ Person-centered care approach
- ▶ Awareness of language

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Resources

- ▶ Reframing aging initiative (<https://www.reframingaging.org/>)
- ▶ Books:
 - ▶ *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* by Ashton Applewhite
 - ▶ *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life* by Louise Aronson, MD
 - ▶ *Breaking the Age Code: How your Age Beliefs Predict How Long and Well You Live* by Becca Levy, PhD
- ▶ GeriScholars (<https://www.gerischolars.org/>)
- ▶ Recent special edition of *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* on geropsychology competencies for providers

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