



Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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### *Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements envers les aîné(e)s*

Many senior groups, service providers, and academics in Canada have noted that ageism can be an important factor in senior abuse. (1) (2) (3)

#### **What is Ageism?**

Ageism is a social attitude. It is way of looking at older people that stereotypes them, just as people of particular races may be stereotyped as "smart", "industrious", "thrifty", "lazy", or "easy going" or when men and women are stereotyped as being "strong", "nurturing" or "sensitive" because of their gender.

Many people note that as they grow older and as they reach certain age milestones, (age 65 being one of them), others who are younger than them begin to treat them differently. Their attitudes change. In many cases, being treated differently means being treated as "less"— less valued, less capable etc. That is ageism.

Robert Butler coined the word "ageism" in 1968. He explained

"Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different than themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings." (as cited in Butler, 1975) (4)

Older people are often stereotyped as weak, frail, and disabled. However, sometimes there are positive stereotypes of aging, when people assume all older people are wise or caring.

Ageism can involve stereotypes and myths, or outright disdain and dislike (e.g., "I don't like working with older people"). In some cases, ageism means avoiding contact with older people. Ageism includes the wide range of attitudes that prevent people from accurately assessing and responding to social problems

and conditions of older adults. Ageism can be reflected in discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds. (5)

The Ontario Human Rights Commission describes "ageism" as

“a tendency to structure society based on an assumption that everyone is young, thereby failing to respond appropriately to the real needs of older persons.” (6)

Negative attitudes towards older persons stem from myths about aging, the aging process, and being old. (7)

Ageism often intersects with and can be reinforced by other kinds of discriminations such as racism, sexism, and "able-bodied-ism" (where preference or greater social value is given to people who do not have impairments or disabling conditions).

## **Why Does Ageism Occur?**

Probably for many reasons. Canada is an industrial society, and many times people's perceived personal value is tied to whether or not they are in paid work. In this environment, many of the significant past and current contributions which older adults have made to family, community, and society through raising children, work, volunteering and in paying taxes are overlooked or discounted. If a society has an exclusively economically focussed perspective, older adults may become treated as “disposable citizens”, and they may be perceived as some as having outlived their usefulness in adding to the economy.

## **What Are Some Examples of Ageism?**

Ageism comes in many different forms. Sometimes the way that adult children respond to their parents may be ageist, e.g. treating the aging parents like children. Sometimes service providers may be ageist when they treat older adults in a paternalistic way.

Policies, decisions and negotiations that fail to take into account the impact on older members of society may reflect systemic ageism. A decision by a government or community group to not include any seniors on their advisory committee when the issues under discussion primarily affect older adults "because they wouldn't understand the policy issues" is another form of ageism, as is denying older adults opportunities to build their knowledge of issues. So is tokenism: tokenism occurs when a small group is invited to participate in an event or initiative to demonstrate that a program is progressive, or to show someone has consulted the constituency, but in fact has ignored their views.

Ageism and discrimination are closely linked. The doctor's office with the sign "One appointment, one medical problem" is discriminatory, because older adults are more likely than other age groups to have multiple health problems that need addressing.(8)

Ageism may take the form of "granny bashing" in the popular press (blaming some or all of society's current economic or other worries on older adults). (9) It is often reflected in advertisements where older adults are depicted as slow, out of date, and lacking knowledge about new technologies, and where youth are shown as quick and knowledgeable. It may also be reflected in the media where older adults as a group are characterized as a perceived potential drain on society or as alternatively, as a well off group who are unconcerned about the needs of others (in which case they are labelled "greedy geezers").

Ageism is sometimes reflected by the extent to which older adults are visible to society. Our society can make older adults feel unwelcome, marginalizes them, and forces them to become invisible.(10) Older adults in institutional care become almost totally invisible to the rest of society.

## **Ageism and Language**

Ageism is also perpetuated by the ways in which our society talks about older adults.(11) It is common to see ageist language in medicine, law and social sciences, when terms like "the elderly" and "the aged" are used to refer to older adults. Both of these terms give the impression that most older adults are mentally and physically frail. Health journals sometimes include people in their 50s as "elderly".

This use of language ignores the fact there are wide differences among seniors in their chronological age. Sixty year olds are different in their life experiences than 90 year olds .(12) People aged 65-74 more closely resemble people under age 65 than they do those aged 85 and over in terms of their abilities or impairments. People aged 85 and over, on the other hand, are the older adults most likely to be characterized by disabling conditions that we associate with "old age" and "aging".

Phrases like "our seniors", "the elderly", or "your loved one" can be ageist: these terms treat older people as they are someone's property, possessions or objects, not as individuals.

Ageism, like racism and sexism, is a form of prejudice or prejudgment that shapes the perceptions of young and old. Both young and old can hold ageist attitudes.(13) This may be one of the reasons that many older adults have not actively and effectively fought ageist ideas or the longstanding stereotypes about ageing.

## **What is the Connection Between Abuse and Ageism?**

Ageism is pervasive in Canada and many other societies. As a result, people seldom consider whether or not their actions could be ageist. It is very common to see the individual and broader social problems that older people face rationalized or discounted out of hand. Serious social and legal problems affecting older adults such as abuse and victimization by family, staff, or people in position of authority may be characterized as rare events. Ageism can occur when people in authority do not believe older adults, or do not consider the harms as serious. Older adults may have their credibility questioned because of assumptions about how reliable older adults' memories are.

There are many ways in which abuse of seniors is rationalized or deflected by the abuser ("It's the residents who abuse us" or "Well, I'm going to get the money anyway after she dies, why not take it now"). Some people will accept these rationalizations because of ageism, expecting that harms affect older adults less or that older adults have less right to their money or property than younger people do. We need to recognize these attempts at justifying behaviour such as financial abuse for what they are -- rationalizations. (14)

The Ontario Human Rights Commission notes that abuse of older adults occurs in large part due to negative attitudes towards older people or their economic or social vulnerability. (15)

Ageism can be reflected in social policy that assumes all families are willing, able and capable of providing care to aging parents, even though in reality, some of these relationships can be strained from the outset and can become abusive.

Ageism is apparent when a jurisdiction enacts a protection law that takes away abused people's rights to make choices about their lives based solely or primarily on their age. The law equates being older with being "mentally incapable". Ageism is apparent when there are fewer public resources available for abused seniors compared to other groups.

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## How Do We Get Past Ageism?<sup>(16)</sup>

### 1. Identify the myths and mis-information.

Recognize the myths about aging and negative attitudes about older adults. Start challenging the myths.

There are many erroneous beliefs in our society - e.g. that older adults' lives are less valuable and older adults are less deserving of having their rights respected; that older adults feel emotional pain less or do not have sexual feelings; or that older adults are largely responsible for growing health care or other social costs.

### 2. Go beyond the stereotypes of aging.

Recognize that a label like "elderly" or "seniors" tells us little about what to expect from the person. These labels do not tell us whether the person is kind or uncaring, healthy or her health is diminishing, mentally capable or mentally incapable, a reliable or an unreliable worker or volunteer. Labels do not tell us about the person's capacity for friendship or creativity or accomplishment.

Address ageism by highlighting older adults' individual, collective, and lifelong contributions to our society.<sup>(1)</sup>

### 3. Learn more about aging.

The better informed we are about aging and what to expect, the better we are able to evaluate and resist many of the inaccurate and negative stereotypes of aging.

### 4. Learn more about ageism and discrimination.

It is very common for older adults to face discrimination in housing, health, and other key services. They may be treated as burdens on services, excluded from or simply refused admission to services. Learn to recognize when "neutral policies" aren't "neutral". Also recognize how ageism intersects with other "isms" such as sexism or racism.

### 5. Listen to seniors who have experienced ageism.

They are in the best position to tell us how ageism affects their lives.

### 6. Monitor media and respond to ageist material.

Changing the typically negative ways in which older adults are portrayed in news programs, commercials, films and television shows that reach millions of people on a daily basis is necessary if ageism is to be reduced. Write a letter to or e-mail the editor, TV sponsor or movie producer.

## **7. Speak up about ageism.**

When someone you know uses ageist language or images, tactfully let them know about the inaccuracy. Educate them about the correct meaning.

When someone disparages a senior, tells a joke that ridicules them, or makes disrespectful comments about an older person, we can let them know that this is hurtful and that as seniors or advocates we find the comments offensive and harmful.

## **8. Watch our language.**

Most of us, including health professionals, health advocates and consumers use terms and expressions that may perpetuate ageism. We depersonalize older adults by referring to them generically as "the elderly" or "our seniors".

## **9. Talk openly about aging issues and ageism.**

The more ageism and age discrimination remain hidden, the more people believe it is acceptable to act this way.

Show and recognize the heterogeneity of seniors. Older adults are not all the same. Let others see real older people - people who are resourceful, articulate and creative, who are familiar as valued friends or coworkers. Also include older adults who have conditions that may limit their abilities in some ways; they are not limited in other ways. People who do not fit the stereotype are a powerful way to fight ageism.

## **10. Build intergenerational bridges to promote better understanding.**

Ageism often builds in the context of ignorance. The more generations realize they are connected to each other throughout the lifespan and affect each others' wellbeing, the greater the opportunities for reducing negative attitudes against young and old, alike.

## **11. Provide support for organizations that address ageism.**

There are a number of organizations that advocate for better treatment and greater acceptance of older adults. Their influence and effectiveness depends, to some extent, on their membership size and the adequacy of their finances. Join. Be involved. Be part of a positive solution.

## **12. Push for changes from your elected representative.**

Policies that perpetuate ageism can be changed if enough people let the appropriate politicians know that they want this change. Keep informed on key aging issues and policies. Know the names of government officials to contact.