

Ageism and Older Adults

April Fleming, M.S., C.P.G.

In this country and in some countries abroad, many older adults experience social, health and financial disparities, lowered self-image, rejection leading to lack of purpose, and exaggerated or undiagnosed health identification (Irving, 2015). Inequities such as these were officially recognized and defined in America as ageism in 1969. Ageism is discrimination against older adults (Gergov & Asenova, 2012).

On its website, the National Center on Elder Abuse (www.ncea.aoa.gov) posted the following definition of ageism:

"A process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills...Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings ..." (Butler, 1975).

Ageism is often a result of negative perceptions and attitudes or misinformation about aging (Gergov & Asenova, 2012). Stereotypes can be found in the workplace, in our communities, online, on television, at our dinner tables, and even in agencies which provide human services. These stereotypes have become so engrained in our culture that we do not even realize when we are communicating or participating in ageism. We label older adults as peculiar, senile, grumpy, sickly, and even child-like. Furthermore, as a society we participate in systemic ageism. An example of this is when we categorize the increasing numbers of individuals over the age of 65 as the "gray or silver tsunami!"

Hmm...aging is equal to natural disasters?

Additionally, the media and greeting card companies use a form of comic relief depicting older adult males as "old geezers", with dirty overalls, suspenders, wearing a bib covered in food, or the "dirty old man" passing gas and chasing younger women. Older women are often portrayed as unattractive, hyper-sexed, braless and breasts sagging, and wearing smeared red lipstick. Some older adults are also portrayed as docile; for example the "grandmother" who spends her days "baking and knitting." These stereotypes are hurtful and offensive.

Why is this important? Year after year, generation after generation, the war against ageism is lost because we taint youth with our biases, ignore older adults altogether, or portray them as threatening to our economy or civilization. Even we as professionals perpetuate stereotypes of older adults as vulnerable and helpless. Often too, because we are "spread thin" with high caseloads, and agencies lack necessary funding or adequate manpower, we are forced to choose between the needs of the young or the old.

According to a longitudinal study conducted by Yale University and appearing in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 83, No.2, ageism can impact individual perception of self, and when this perception is negative, life expectancy can be reduced (Dittmann, 2003).

Not embracing older adults and valuing them as significant members of society presents a loss to us all. Maggie Kuhn, social activist and founder of the Gray Panthers stated:

"Old age is not a disease—it is strength and survivorship, triumph over all kinds of vicissitudes and disappointments, trials and illnesses."

Our efforts to combat ageism are essential to the well-being of older adults and to enriching our communities. **Steps we can take as professionals include:**

- Empowering ourselves with information and education
- Learning about the aging process
- Becoming competent in culture and diversity
- Avoiding stereotypes
- Talking openly about feelings and attitudes

We can also take the time to evaluate our own biases, and promote positive change in our society.

To learn more about aging, please contact your Regional Training Center for the upcoming calendar of workshops or visit ohsts.org.

References

Butler, R. (1975). *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dittmann, M. (2003). Fighting Ageism. *American Psychological Association*, 34(5). Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/may03/fighting.aspx>

Gergov, T., & Asenova, I. (2012). Ageism and Negative Mental Tendencies in the Third Age. *Psychological Thought*, 5(1), 69-74. doi:10.5964/psyct.v5i1.12

US Department of Health & Human Services. National Center for Elder Abuse. (n.d.). *Prevention Strategies*. Retrieved from http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/Stop_Abuse/Prevention/Strategies/index.aspx on January 5, 2016