

Aging and Staying Positive

By Susan Sherriff

Life expectancy is increasing in the USA and other wealthy countries, yet as the population ages they are faced with very real prejudice. Ageism against the elderly population manifests itself throughout the American culture. From fighting against the “old geezer” stereotype, to the assumption of cognitive or physical impairment, to being the butt of the old timer jokes, today’s elderly constantly battle against Ageism. In fact nearly 80% of the elderly population report experiencing Ageism. Despite the fact ageism is now recognized a problem in society, it is not decreasing at a fast enough rate. American culture focuses and idolized youth. Negative stereotypes about the elderly often develop from of fear of the unknown and are established at a young age in a person’s mindset. This fear of the aging process creates Ageism and is often expressed by the assumption that:

- Elders are slow when they move about.
- Elders are in ill health.
- Elders cannot learn new things.
- Elders are depressed and complain all the time about change.

The stereotype assumes that the elderly are needy, feeble, idle and demanding rather than deserving, yet in reality the majority of elderly today are self-sufficient, middle-class consumers with resources, talent and time to contribute to society. Unfortunately Ageism not only affects how society treats the elderly but also how the elderly perceive themselves.



A positive attitude about aging plays an active role in health.

Reliable research on today's aging population shows an increased quality of life while aging. This research supports the idea that stereotypes held by people have a direct link to their health and well-being. For example, Yale University found that older people who hold negative stereotypes about themselves getting older are more likely to display negative response to stress, self-efficacy, cognitive function, and are more likely to have a negative view of their own peers. Not only was it found that negative stereotypes affect performance and attitudes, it was also found that these beliefs contributed to the elderly's will to live, and to live with a healthy development.

These stereotypes may hold some value to the people who are suffering with later stages of an incurable diagnosis. Those with health issues who are active and hold a positive outlook on reaching developmental milestones throughout their entire life are not affected by negative stereotypes and do better physically and emotionally. The good news is that holding positive views of ageing has a real beneficial impact on people. Keeping a positive attitude compared to a negative attitude on aging has been associated with a 44% greater likelihood of recovery from severe disability.

Holding a negative thought about aging is self discriminating.

"If you are a man you are prejudiced against women you will never know how a woman feels. If you are white and you are prejudiced against blacks, you will never know how a black person feels. But if you are young and you are prejudiced against the old, you are indeed prejudiced against yourself, because you, too, will have the honor of being old someday" (Lewis, C 1989)

Changing negative stereotypes is difficult because people hold predetermined social images reinforcing these stereotypes, and thus are resistant to change. Environmental and social impact of being comfortable with aging allows for a positive impact on healthy life choices for all generations.



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