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# The Golden Age of Ageism

By Sophie Ross

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“You look amazing for your age.” Compliments like this one can feel like soft form of ageism, according to popular actor Jennifer Aniston.<sup>1</sup> Actors, of course, aren’t the only people who experience age-related biases. In fact, in 2020, 82% of Americans age 50 and older reported that they had experienced some form of ageism.<sup>2</sup> Becoming more aware of what ageism is, why it can be harmful, and how to prevent it might help us in our efforts to create a more unified, understanding world.

## What is Ageism?

The World Health Organization defines ageism as “stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age.”<sup>3</sup> Ageism affects even the simplest

things: Imagine someone driving home from the grocery store only to realize that they’ve forgotten the milk. Most people might chalk this up to a simple forgetful moment, but [if the person is over a certain age] others might assume they forgot the milk because they’re “getting older.”

Highlighting “senior moments” is one of the most common ways that we may inadvertently discriminate against older generations. In fact, research suggests that this sort of forgetfulness is normal at any age.<sup>4</sup> Incorrect assumptions may become an added hurdle that the older generation must jump over to maintain their job stability, their identity, or even their mental health.<sup>5</sup>

Physical signs of aging are also scrutinized; beauty products and diets promise to erase wrinkles, tighten tummies, and turn back time. These

products operate under the assumption that our aging bodies are somehow less desirable.<sup>6</sup> Wrinkles seen as a symbol of wisdom in previous eras are now something to overcome with various products purchased in order to look “younger” and more beautiful. In essence, ageism promotes the idea that beauty, knowledge, and purpose are all stripped away from us as we age.

## Why is Ageism Destructive?

By letting ageism rule society, we might unintentionally divide and marginalize our neighbors and community.

When individuals reach a certain age, ageist ideologies insist there is no room for career advancement or growth. Even with the average age for retirement increasing, older adults are consistently passed up for promotions in favor of those from a younger generation.<sup>7</sup> Many people even report

increased time in between jobs simply because of their age.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act is supposed to protect against ageism in the workplace. However, many companies are able to bypass these laws by refusing to even interview older workers.<sup>9</sup>

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## By opening up the ageism dialogue, we learn more about those around us and can form new friendships and acquaintances.

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Ageism also encourages inequality. While most of us look up to our grandparents, we may not treat them as equals. Instead, we might treat them as a people less than us, accidentally dismissing their relationships, lives, and identities. Although often done unwittingly, patronizing language and behavior toward older generations changes how they view themselves.

When older individuals feel their lives no longer have value, they are at higher risk for mental health problems. In their minds they might feel they have completed the “checklist” of life and, therefore, have no more purpose. This mindset can lead to feelings of depression, and, in some cases, suicide ideation.<sup>10</sup> Sadly, people 85 years and older have the highest suicide rate of any age group.

In addition to the stigma of receiving help for a mental disorder, ageism also contributes to the added shame of getting physical help due to fear of feeling old.<sup>11</sup> No one wants to lose their agency and independence, so

older generations often refuse help or hide problems. Without the help they need, many people’s conditions become worse, and they can even pass away from preventable illnesses.

Talking about getting older and dying can be uncomfortable. Most of us are content to ignore this final stage of life, but we are all getting older. If we continue to implicitly reject the older

generations and the aging process itself, we may find out these truths the hard way. However, there is hope for the future if we can deal with ageism in healthy ways.

### How Can we Eliminate Ageism?

Reducing ageism is possible. Here are three ways we can work to eliminate ageism:<sup>12</sup>

1. Create a culture of inclusion. Studies say that the proverb “birds of a feather flock together” still rings true because most people gravitate toward those in their same age group.<sup>13</sup> By opening up the ageism dialogue, we learn more about those around us and can form new friendships and acquaintances. This conversation can begin through discrimination and diversity training that teaches what ageism looks like. This training can even be done in your own neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Many people worry they might say the wrong thing, but by taking that first step to include those around us

in conversations, we start to cultivate a culture of inclusion.

2. Follow the golden rule. If you would not like to be treated a certain way, don’t treat others that way. This test is one of the easiest ways to determine if what you are thinking or doing is ageist. For example, when driving behind a slow driver, thought that the driver must be older are hurtful and unfair—driving speed has nothing to do with the age of the driver behind the wheel. If the assumption would hurt you or how you think about yourself, it could be ageism at work.
3. Cultivate empathy. Popular cartoons can perpetuate ageist stereotypes starting from a young age.<sup>15</sup> These stereotypes can be particularly damaging to relationships because they foster ideas like the fear of aging and disconnection between family members. One of the best ways to combat ageism is by spending time with people older than you and actually getting to know them. Personal connection disrupts stereotypes because now older generations are family members, friends, and loved ones. Once we can see other people as more than just the stereotypes that surround them, we can begin to see their struggles and triumphs and in doing so, build empathy as a community.<sup>16</sup>

Every day, everyone gets a little older. By being aware of the common forms of ageism and ways to combat them, we can help improve the lives of those who have come before us and those who will come after us.

## Endnotes

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