

# Addressing Ageism



NORTH CENTRAL REGION  
Aging Network

Even though everyone is aging, when is a person considered old? How is aging viewed today? Why is it that if a person lives to old age, they are sure to experience ageism? What can be done to combat it? Let's get started!

## The Plus Sign

Older adults are often categorized by age as those 65 and older or the 65+ group. This may have started based on 65 as the age a person became eligible to receive Social Security and what was traditionally seen as retirement age. The reality is the plus sign represents at least two generations. Does a 10 year old have the same needs or interests as a 40 year old? How about those 60 and 90 years old? Both examples represent a 30 year span between the generations. Grouping aging adults together lends itself to generalizing or stereotyping, which can lead to ageism.

## What is Ageism?



Ageism is a term coined in 1969 by Dr. Robert Butler, a gerontologist and physician, as “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old.”<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization further defines ageism as “the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination towards people on the basis of age.”<sup>9</sup> This broader definition is more inclusive of ageism as a form of discrimination that can target younger as well as older people.

Individual beliefs about aging and older people begin to develop in childhood and are influenced throughout life by messages we receive from those around us, societal culture, and from the media. Stereotypical views of aging can lead to ageist attitudes about others and even oneself.

## Ageism:

- Occurs when age is used to criticize or underestimate the ability of another person
- Is often normalized and accepted in society
- May be deliberate or unintentional
- Is most pronounced in younger and older populations
- May be observed in health care, the workplace, and in the media, among other places and situations

## What Ageism Looks Like

### In Health Care:

- Age stereotypes made about older people by health care professionals can impact the quality of care received and may result in undertreatment of medical conditions when complaints are dismissed as a part of aging.<sup>1,6</sup>
- Older adults can internalize age stereotypes and attribute physical symptoms to getting older.<sup>6</sup>
- Ageist attitudes are demonstrated when health questions are addressed to an accompanying family member instead of the older patient, or when providers use “elderspeak” and talk to older adults in a patronizing way.<sup>5,6</sup>



### In the Workplace:

- Thinking someone isn't qualified for a job based on age - mostly impacts younger and older workers.
- Negatively stereotyping workers because of generational affiliation.<sup>8</sup>
- Not getting hired, getting laid off or fired, or getting passed over for promotion because of age.<sup>3</sup>
- Older workers remain unemployed for longer periods and take lower paying jobs or part-time work.<sup>3,9</sup>

### In the Media:

- Aging and older adults are often negatively portrayed in advertising, television, and the media, thus influencing individual and societal views of aging, and even affecting how older adults see themselves.
- Age stereotypes of older consumers may include poor technological skills, physical frailty, forgetfulness, and being out of step with the times.<sup>7</sup>



## Stand up to Ageism

- Policies and laws make it clear that people of all ages should be treated fairly.<sup>9</sup>
- Shared experiences between people from different generations fosters understanding, encourages mutual respect, and reduces ageism.<sup>1,4</sup>

(Continued on next page)

## Stand up to Ageism (cont.)

- A multi-generational workforce provides people of all ages the chance to work together and learn from each other. Age diversity should be considered an asset in the workplace.
- Teaching about aging in schools – from primary grades through college – and offering intergenerational activities in the classroom plays a pivotal role in reducing age-based stereotypes.<sup>9</sup>
- Aging awareness training for those who work with or support older adults can challenge biases and present a balanced view of aging along with a person-centered approach to address their needs.<sup>4</sup>
- Using inclusive language like, “as we age,” instead of distancing words like, “they” or “them” reflects the reality that aging is an ongoing, natural process and everyone ages.



### Recommended resources:

National Center to Reframe Aging - [www.reframingaging.org](http://www.reframingaging.org)  
Ageism Awareness Day - [www.asaging.org/ageism-awareness](http://www.asaging.org/ageism-awareness)  
*This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*, by Ashton Applewhite  
*Breaking the Age Code*, by Becca Levy, PhD

### References

1. Burnes, D., Sheppard, C., Henderson, C. R., Wassel, M., Cope, R., Barber, C., & Pillemer, K. (2019). Interventions to Reduce Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(8), e1-e9.
2. Butler, R.N. (1975). *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. New York: Harper and Row.
3. Harris, K., Krygsman, S., Waschenko, J., & Laliberte, R. (2018). Ageism and the Older Worker: A Scoping Review. *The Gerontologist*, 58(2), e1-e14.
4. Nelson, T. D. (2019). Reducing ageism: which interventions work?. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(8), 1066. Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6611112/>
5. Officer, A., Thiyagarajan, J., Schneiders, M., Nash, P., & de la Fuente-Nunez, V. (2020). Ageism, Healthy Life Expectancy and Population Ageing: How Are They Related? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 3159, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17093159>
6. Ouchida, K., & Lachs, M. (Fall 2015). Not for Doctors Only: Ageism in Healthcare. *Generations*, 39(3), 46-57.
7. Taylor, C. (2022). *Ageism in Advertising: Common Stereotypes and How to Avoid Them*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charlesrtaylor/2022/03/11/ageism-in-advertising-common-stereotypes-and-how-to-avoid-them/?sh=4d113b18178c>
8. Van Vleck, M. (2021). Kids these days: Why youth-directed ageism is an issue for everyone. From: <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/kids-these-days-why-youth-directed-ageism-is-an-issue-for-everyone>.
9. World Health Organization. (2021). Global Report on Ageism. [www.who.int](http://www.who.int). <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240016866>



NORTH CENTRAL REGION  
Aging Network

The North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) is a collaborative of Extension professionals dedicated to improving the health and well-being of adults in later life through science-based strategies. Visit us at: <https://ncran.org>

As EEO employers, our partner institutions provide equal opportunities in employment and programming in compliance with state and federal laws