

# Ageism the Most Socially Accepted Prejudice.

**Ageism** is stereotypes (thoughts), prejudice (feelings) or discrimination (actions) on the grounds of a person's age. According to the [World Health Organization's \(WHO\) Global Report on Ageism](#) released in 2021, *ageism arises when age is used to categorize and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage and injustice and erode solidarity across generations*. Although ageism can happen across the lifespan, it's perhaps most insidious and widespread as individuals reach older age.

## **Types of ageism**

Ageism exists within institutions and communities, within interpersonal relationships, and can be self-directed.

### **Institutional ageism**

Institutional ageism includes laws, policies, practices, social norms and other systemic structures and behaviours that restrict opportunities and disadvantage people because of their age. Institutional ageism is often hidden, rather than the result of overt actions, and can cause certain people to be excluded from power and influence. Mandatory retirement ages is an example of institutional ageism.

### **Interpersonal ageism**

Interpersonal ageism happens in relationships between groups of two or more people. This can include parent-child relationships. It can involve ignoring someone's point of view in decision making, or how you speak to someone who is older – for example, overly simplifying language (this is called elderspeak).

### **Self-directed ageism**

Self-directed ageism refers to the ageist beliefs we adopt that limit our potential. For example, we may think we are too old to learn new skills or try an activity. We may assume health or mobility declines are a natural part of aging rather than something we can influence or receive treatment for.

The institutional, interpersonal and self-directed ageism can intertwine and reinforce each other. For example, interpersonal ageism can exist within institutions in relationships with colleagues and reinforce institutional ageism.

Ageism, like other forms of bias, can be explicit and implicit. Stereotypes are learned from our culture and internalized. Ageism is ingrained in us from an early age.

## **Impacts of ageism**

Ageism causes a variety of consequences that are costly to society and individuals and families. Here are some of the impacts of ageism:

- Worse mental health outcomes
- Premature retirement
- Less access to medical treatment and lesser quality of treatment
- Adoption of risky health behaviours, including unhealthy eating habits, drinking excessively, not taking medications as prescribed and more
- Poorer sexual health, including increased rates of sexually transmitted diseases
- Accelerated cognitive impairment
- Increased violence and abuse
- Increased social isolation and loneliness

Few studies exist to quantify the societal cost of the problem. It's one of the gaps in the understanding of ageism. A [2020 study](#) from the United States that looked at costs of ageism related to health conditions found that one in every seven dollars spent on those conditions annually was due to ageism.

## **Examples of ageist stereotypes related to older age**

How young, middle or older age are defined and celebrated, and the perceived limits of aging, are socially constructed. Here are some examples of negative stereotypes about aging that exist in society:

- Become less competent
- Become frail, disabled or forgetful
- Can't take care of ourselves or make our own decisions
- Can't learn new skills or be trained
- Don't have sex anymore
- Become incompetent in the workplace, especially when it comes to technology
- Resistant to change
- No longer attractive
- No longer providing value to society

These and other unexamined beliefs permeate our culture and feed the ageism that exists, helping to make ageism the [most socially accepted prejudice](#). The word 'old' is often used as a synonym for something negative; for example, when people say, "you're so old", they don't usually mean "you're so wise, valuable, strong and adaptable."

### **Age intersectionality**

Intersectionality describes the interconnected nature of various categorizations, including race, age, class, gender, and how they overlap and impact discrimination or privilege for individuals or groups. When ageism intersects with other biases, disadvantages increase, worsening the impact on health and well-being.

But the relationship between biases and aging is complex and starts well before we reach older age. The WHO states that "A large proportion (approximately 75%) of the diversity in capacity and circumstance observed in older age is the result of the cumulative impact of advantage and disadvantage across people's lives." This highlights the importance of eliminating inequity across the lifespan.

### **Age, sex, gender**

The intersection of ageism and sexism is sometimes called gendered ageism. It's a term used to indicate differences in ageism experienced by people depending on their gender. Evidence shows women are disproportionately affected by ageism.

[Dr. Paula Rochon, the RTOERO Chair in Geriatric Medicine at the University of Toronto](#), and her research group explore gendered ageism as a focus. Along with two co-authors, she published a paper in 2021 called [Gendered ageism: addressing discrimination based on age and sex](#), which summarizes the available evidence of how women are affected by ageism. It includes the impacts of the anti-aging industry, ageism in the workplace and labour force and ageism in health and long-term care. Dr. Rochon and her team are working to increase awareness of the importance of disaggregated age, sex and gender data for decision making.

Age also intersects with other characteristics including:

- Disability – ageism and ableism
- Race, language and religion – ageism and racism and religious discrimination
- Sexual orientation/gender identity – ageism and cisgenderism or homophobia/transphobia

Some individuals may experience various intersections, for example, sexism, ageism and homophobia together.

Canada will soon be a super-aged society—20 per cent of the population will be over age 65 by 2024—the majority of the group will be women. There's never been a more urgent time to address ageism and look at ageism alongside other biases. Ageism is one of the issues [our foundation](#) is tackling and is part of our [advocacy work](#).