



AGEISM: A WIDESPREAD, OFTEN OVERLOOKED FORM OF DISCRIMINATION

By Gene Kyle, Chair, Ludington Senior Citizens Advisory Board

Communism, feminism, racism, sexism—all terms most people are familiar with. But there is one “ism” far too many people are not familiar with, and that is *ageism*. Ageism is a widespread and often overlooked form of discrimination that affects people of all ages—but especially older adults—and it has serious consequences for health, dignity, and equality. Simply put, ageism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person’s age. These comments pertain to ageism as it affects senior citizens.

WHY ARE SO FEW PEOPLE AWARE OF AGEISM?

- Ageism against older adults is often overlooked because it is deeply embedded in our culture, is normalized in everyday language, and is rarely challenged like other forms of discrimination are.
- Ageist stereotypes are everywhere, from birthday cards that mock aging to “antiaging” products that frame growing older as a problem. These messages are so common that many people don’t recognize them as harmful. They’re seen as jokes or marketing, not discrimination.
- Unlike racism or sexism, ageism isn’t widely taught or discussed in schools, workplaces, or the media.

AGEISM IS SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE

- Ageism is often considered one of the last socially acceptable prejudices and forms of discrimination.
- People may feel comfortable making age-related jokes or assumptions, without any fear of backlash, because society hasn’t stigmatized these behaviors the way it has similar behaviors stemming from other biases.

INTERNALIZED AGEISM

- Older adults themselves may internalize negative beliefs about aging, making them less likely to speak out or even to recognize discrimination.
- This self-directed ageism reinforces silence and invisibility.

WHY AGEISM IS HARMFUL

- **Mental Health Impacts:** It can lead to feelings of worthlessness, isolation, and depression.
- **Economic Exclusion:** Older adults may be forced out of the workforce prematurely.
- **Healthcare Disparities:** Ageist attitudes can result in undertreatment or misdiagnosis.

HOW TO FIGHT AGEISM

- Learn about ageism and its effects on seniors, educate others about it, and challenge ageist language and behavior by speaking out against ageist jokes or assumptions.
- Support workplace practices that value older employees and lifelong learning.
- Celebrate achievements and vitality at every age.

RECOGNIZE AGEIST RHETORIC. REPLACE IT USING THE PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE AGING.

EXAMPLES OF AGEISM

First, as found in birthday cards:

- “Happy Birthday! Don’t worry, you’ll soon forget how old you are anyway.”
- “Happy Birthday! You’re not old...just obsolete.”

Compare the above examples with these messages:

- “Happy Birthday! You’re not old—you’re bold, wise, and thriving!”
- “Happy Birthday! Another year of experience, resilience, and joy.”

Which would you choose to give or prefer to receive?

Other ageist assumptions:

- Assuming an inability to use technology
- Assuming an inability to hear or comprehend
- Calling any memory lapse a “senior moment”

It wasn’t an accident to call this commentary “Senior Moments.” I am hoping the phrase loses its negative connotation and becomes positively regarded.

So let’s break the barriers of ageism and embrace the contributions of every generation. By valuing wisdom and fostering inclusivity, we can build a future where age is celebrated, not discriminated against.