

Ageism is deeply normed in our society. This means that it is so “normal” to hear and even say ageist things that many people do not often take offense or just laugh it off. But ageism hurts us all. It can make people who are old now feel bad about themselves and it can cause us to fear our own futures. Oftentimes, we feel like we don’t want to get old.

The problem with this is that when we don’t wish to grow older, we deny our full, authentic selves. Growing older is a process of gains and losses, and adapting to changes. Pretty much like any other stage of life! Research shows that some things get better as we age:

- Our vocabulary increases
- Our ability to engage in integrative thought gets more powerful (we can see and understand connections between things, we are better at embracing complexity)
- Our emotional regulation improves
- We tend to look at things more positively both in the present and looking back through our memories (this is called the “positivity effect”).

An example of the mix of gains and losses, and adapting to changes is this: Our recall and thinking slow down as we get older, so we have more tip of the tongue moments (when we are trying to think of a word and it rests on the tip of our tongue instead of coming right out). On the other hand, what we have to say is often deeper, wiser, and more powerful.

Some examples of ageism in everyday life that you may or may not have noticed, and why they are ageist:

Examples of ageism	Why this is ageist
<p>Calling an older man “young man” or an older woman “young lady”</p>	<p>While we are likely trying to pay a social compliment to this person, what we are really saying is, “It is better to be young and you are old, so I will identify you as young to make you feel better.”</p> <p><i>We need to stop implying or telling others and ourselves that there is something wrong with being old. It’s no better or worse than being in any other stage of life!</i></p>
<p>Telling an old person that they look “good for their age.”</p>	<p>While we are, again, likely trying to pay a social compliment, what we are really saying is something like, “I expect someone of your age to look pretty bad because it’s so old. But you look pretty good, all things considered.” That’s not much of a compliment when you think about it. And embedded in this so-</p>

	<p>called compliment is an underlying belief that aging is bad and ugly and our expectations for it are pretty negative overall.</p> <p><i>Why don't we just say to someone, you look good!</i></p>
<p>Telling an old person that they have a "youthful spirit".</p>	<p>Again, we are likely trying to signal to someone that they are behaving in a positive way. We probably mean that they are energetic or vibrant or enthusiastic. But by using "youthful" as the default word for "good" things, we imply that "old" is the default word for "bad" things.</p> <p><i>Instead of using "young" to mean "good" and "old" to mean "bad", we can just say what we actually mean, which is "You have such a vibrant spirit!". And by the way, someone can be frail and vibrant at the same time.</i></p>
<p>The "anti-aging" industry with advertisements telling us to fight aging, and that we should erase the "visible signs of aging" (like gray hair and wrinkles)</p>	<p>Firstly, fighting aging is like saying we should fight living! Secondly, we should think carefully before we allow ourselves to be shamed into covering up the physical evidence of growing older.</p> <p><i>Our culture has taught us that gray hair is ugly or it will make us less attractive and that we should want to look younger. But ask yourself why?? There are companies out there making literally billions of dollars a year out of shaming us in respect of our physical appearance. You are beautiful just the way you are.</i></p>
<p>Birthday cards</p>	<p>Birthday cards are often very rude about growing older. They often contain mean jokes about some of the things connected with growing older, like skin sagging, wrinkles, and slowing down. They also contain many misunderstandings about growing older like losing your memory (this is not a normal part of aging - it's a disease process). Ask yourself if you would buy a card for someone that</p>

	<p>effectively says, “You suck because you are a [ woman, person of color, a young person]. You probably wouldn’t because you would not want to insult someone you are celebrating.</p> <p><i>We need to recognize that our culture has roped us in to shaming ourselves for growing older, and birthday cards are part of that problem. Look for ones that actually celebrate the unique person, whatever age they are.</i></p>
<p>Common sayings like “over the hill”, “old as dirt”, and “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks”</p>	<p>Ageism has crept into our language and is very common in sayings. “Over the hill” implies that being old is all bad and all the good things have already happened to you. <i>This is so not true! Just ask anyone over 80 who is living their best life, in spite of any challenges they may face (which, by the way, is how anyone of any age lives their best life - we all face challenges at all stages of our lives).</i></p> <p>“Old as dirt” implies that there is something dirty or bad about being really old. <i>There is nothing dirty or bad about being any age – each age is valid and each age is unique.</i></p> <p>“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” taps into many stereotypes of growing older, like “old people are stubborn” and “old people can’t or don’t want to learn new things”. <i>Yet all the evidence says that old people can learn just like anyone else - however, if they do not HAVE to learn something that they are not interested in they may well not bother (unlike children who are required to learn things adults say they should). This is not an inability to learn, it is an example of self-determination!</i></p>

So what can we do? Start by reflecting on how you feel about your own aging. Studies have repeatedly shown that when we have a more negative attitude to our own aging, we are more likely to hold negative attitudes about older people in general. Remember that all stages of life are valued and valuable.

This can be hard for us because our society typically places less value on characteristics associated with growing older (moving more slowly, being more cautious, seeking peace, being comfortable with just being) and typically places more value on characteristics associated with being younger (doing things faster, innovating, seeking change, focusing on doing and being productive). However, we need both of these energies to make our society work and be as strong and flexible as possible.

A helpful place to start is with yourself and what you think, feel, and believe about growing older and being an older you. If you want to see changes in society, change yourself first. You will be amazed at how many people you will be able to positively influence, starting with you!

Jenny Inker, MS, MBA, PhD, LALFA  
Assistant Professor  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
College of Health Professions  
Department of Gerontology  
[agingstudies@vcu.edu](mailto:agingstudies@vcu.edu)

