

Older and Wiser: Ageism can do real harm to seniors

We all can do more to counteract ageist attitudes about the capabilities of seniors

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When you talk about seniors and COVID-19 as if their lives don't matter, you are being ageist, writes columnist Margaret Coates. Ira T. Nicolai/Getty Images

What do you think about ageism?

As I have been aging, I wonder a lot about people's views on growing older and, more significantly, I worry about people's negative attitudes towards older people.

The World Health Organization defines ageism as "the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age." On the WHO's website, they say ageism is rife in our society. They recently reported that one in two

people are ageist when it comes to older people. Unfortunately, this includes seniors themselves who have internalized stereotypes about older people.

Why is ageism so prevalent? WHO says, "Older people are often assumed to be frail or dependent and a burden to society." They are all thought to be declining in cognitive ability, prone to physical decline and unable to care for themselves, again putting a burden on society. It might be wise to remember, as the seniors advocate for B.C. Isabelle Mackenzie says, only a small percentage of older people live in care facilities. She says, "seniors should prepare to live a long life, most of it independently at home." Statistics show that 94 per cent of seniors over 65, and 74 per cent over 85, live in their own home.

Older people are often thought to be resistant to change, unable to learn new skills such as using computers or tablets, and that most are on the verge of dementia. These assumptions all contribute to negative stereotypes of seniors. Dementia is not an inevitable part of aging, according to Alzheimer's Canada, who say that only 7.1 per cent of the total seniors' population of Canada has dementia. Over the last few years of the pandemic, many older people learned how to use technology to stay connected to community. Change is inevitable for all of us, and seniors have successfully lived through amazing changes – giant strides in technology, men on the moon, wars, recessions in the economy and pandemics.

Admittedly, as we age, our bodies and minds do change. Some of us might experience some memory loss and most of us lose physical abilities. But seniors adapt to the aging process. For instance, the loss of our physical abilities can be compensated through assistive devices such as hearing aids, eyeglasses, and walkers, and through modifications of the older person's environment. Our mental capabilities can be sharpened by staying mentally active. As I have written in an earlier column, keeping mentally active is as important as keeping up our physical health.

One of the worst forms of ageism is writing off older people as expendable. During COVID-19, I heard unsettling statements from people who thought that the overwhelming rates of deaths of seniors was OK and that resources should not go their way – after all, they had a good long life. For many families and friends of seniors on the North Shore who have lost their lives to COVID-19, their passing has caused considerable grief. Also, as a person in this most vulnerable group, I want to be looked at as a citizen who should receive care, not as a stereotyped aging person.

Often older people are seen as a homogeneous group with no differentiation. But as Mackenzie says, "The only thing all seniors have in common is that they are all older than the rest of the population."

The Alberta seniors advocate, Dr. Sheree Kwong See, says "Compelling research shows that ageism has detrimental effects on the health and well-being of older adults." She continues, saying "holding more negative age stereotypes, for example, has been found to be associated with a greater likelihood of future hospitalization, poorer hearing and memory, and early biomarkers for Alzheimer's."

Conversely, Kwong See says, people including seniors who have positive attitudes about older persons create a climate whereby seniors are predisposed to proactively look after themselves. Buying into the stereotype whereby people see loss of function only as an aging process as opposed to, for instance, being busy or stressed, is problematic for older people. If you momentarily forget something, I will advocate, like Kwong See, to never say again I'm having a "seniors moment."

The WHO says, "Public health professionals, and society as a whole, need to address these and other ageist attitudes, which can lead to discrimination, affect the way policies are developed and the opportunities older people have to experience healthy aging."

In the next few months, the federal government is sponsoring a survey, discussion, and consultation about ageism. The online survey can be found at esdc-consultations.canada.ca/ageism-consultation, and is open to everyone.

Consultations will be held with groups across Canada over the next few months and will deal with questions about ageism with these themes in mind: employment, health and health care, social inclusion, safety and security, and media and social media. The North Shore Services to Seniors Coalition has signed up for one of the sessions.

Let's hope these consultations and discussions create change in Canada when it comes to ageism.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for twenty-six of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net.