

OLDER AND WISER: Myths about older adults are destructive, says seniors advocate

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B.C.'s seniors advocate Isobel Mackenzie speaks at Silver Harbour Seniors Centre earlier this month. photo Paul McGrath, North Shore News

Have you fallen for the usual myths about seniors?

It seems many of us do, according to B.C.'s Seniors Advocate, Isobel Mackenzie, in a presentation to a group of 152 seniors on the North Shore last week.

The presentation, organized by the Municipal Pension Retirees' Association and hosted at Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre, looked at a number of ways seniors individually and as a group can be stereotyped.

Silver Harbour president Lynne Pentland, who attended the presentation, said: "Isobel Mackenzie really focused on the importance of dispelling the myths we have about aging and seniors. Whether it's about ourselves, our friends, or our family members, we need to reject these misconceptions. There are changes that come with the aging process, but our discussions about aging need to be evidenced-based and not rely on stereotypes and misinformation."

So, what are some of those myths? One myth Mackenzie focused on was how seniors are often seen as a homogenous group with little to differentiate them. Not so. "The only thing all seniors have in common is that they are all older than the rest of the population," she said.

Using two seniors who were born around the same time, Mackenzie talked about their differences as young women and that those differences did not just fade away as they aged. In their younger years one

of the women had been a stay-at-home mom and one a hippie. Though they may look similar now, those women continue to maintain their differences with their own aspirations, values and hopes in the same way as young people.

Unfortunately, some services do not accommodate those differences. In fact, services are often “one size fits all.”

It seems that society often treats seniors as irrelevant, infirm, feeble, and in the throes of losing their ability to make good judgments. They can also be infantilized – we act like we know what’s best for our aging senior. Whether it is doing an errand or making a financial decision, never assume you know what seniors want.

As we age, our bodies and minds do change. We experience some memory loss and loss of strength, perhaps we have trouble sleeping, we are at risk for more chronic conditions, and we lose some of our abilities with our five senses.

But why should these natural aging processes affect how we treat seniors or why the myths abound? There are many seniors who adapt to the aging process. For instance, the loss of our abilities can be compensated through assistive devices such as hearing aids, glasses, and walkers, and through modifications of the older person’s environment. Maybe it’s time to get that walk-in bathtub, put up grab bars in the bathroom and get rid of throw rugs (a falling prevention piece of advice).

Some people assume older people are not sexually active, dementia is inevitable, and, at 80, no matter what driving record they have, all seniors should stop driving and seniors are a drain on the economy.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada states that most people do not develop dementia as they age; dementia is not a normal part of aging. According to recent data available from the Public Health Agency of Canada in 2017, more than 402,000 seniors (65 years and older) were living with dementia in Canada (data from all provinces and territories except Saskatchewan). This represents only 7.1 per cent of the seniors’ population.

Mackenzie said in a presentation in 2016: “Prepare to live a long life, most of it independently (94 per cent over 65 and 74 per cent over 85), but you could expect to lose your driver’s licence after age 85.”

Seniors are required to take the Driver’s Medical Examination Report at 80. Many feel that this is unfair especially if a senior’s driving record has been exemplary.

Often you hear that seniors are a drain on the economy. In an address on the International Day of the Older Person in 2019, Mackenzie said: “There are literally hundreds of thousands of seniors throughout this province volunteering to deliver meals; provide rides to medical appointments; raise money for hospital foundations; lead chair yoga sessions and visit those who cannot get to the seniors centre.

Without this selfless donation of time, government would be spending close to a billion more dollars each year on services.”

Let's fight ageism with facts.

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