



Ageism and Myths About Older People

Acknowledgements

This material is one part of a larger study on ageism.

These materials are intended for widespread dissemination to the community and to learning settings.

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CanAge 

Ageism

“Stereotyping or discrimination against people because they are old”

- Butler, 1969



Ageism associates aging with sickness, uselessness and death.

Different Kinds of Ageism:

Interpersonal

Internalized

Institutional

Benevolent



Social Myths About Aging

Myth

Older People are
Dependent &
Unable to Care
for Themselves

It is incorrect to assume that older persons will have a loss of independence due to their age.

Instead, dependency may occur when physiological or cognitive impairments cause persons of any age to require extra assistance.



Myth

Older People Need to Live in Supportive Housing



Homes are important and closely related to the identity and life history of a person.

Older persons are not required to live in supportive housing or leave their homes.

Housing can be adapted to better suit changes that may occur as a person ages (e.g., vision, mobility, and progression of disease).

Regardless of age or health, older persons are able to maintain autonomy and independence in their own homes unless progressive health conditions prevent them from safely living independently.

Myth

Older People are not Productive



This is a common misunderstanding because younger persons may be more economically productive and participate in the paid labor force more, compared to older persons.

Many older persons continue to work (in 2015, one in five older Canadians were still working) and may volunteer, mentor, or care for grandchildren.

Diversity in the workforce includes people of a variety of ages working together.

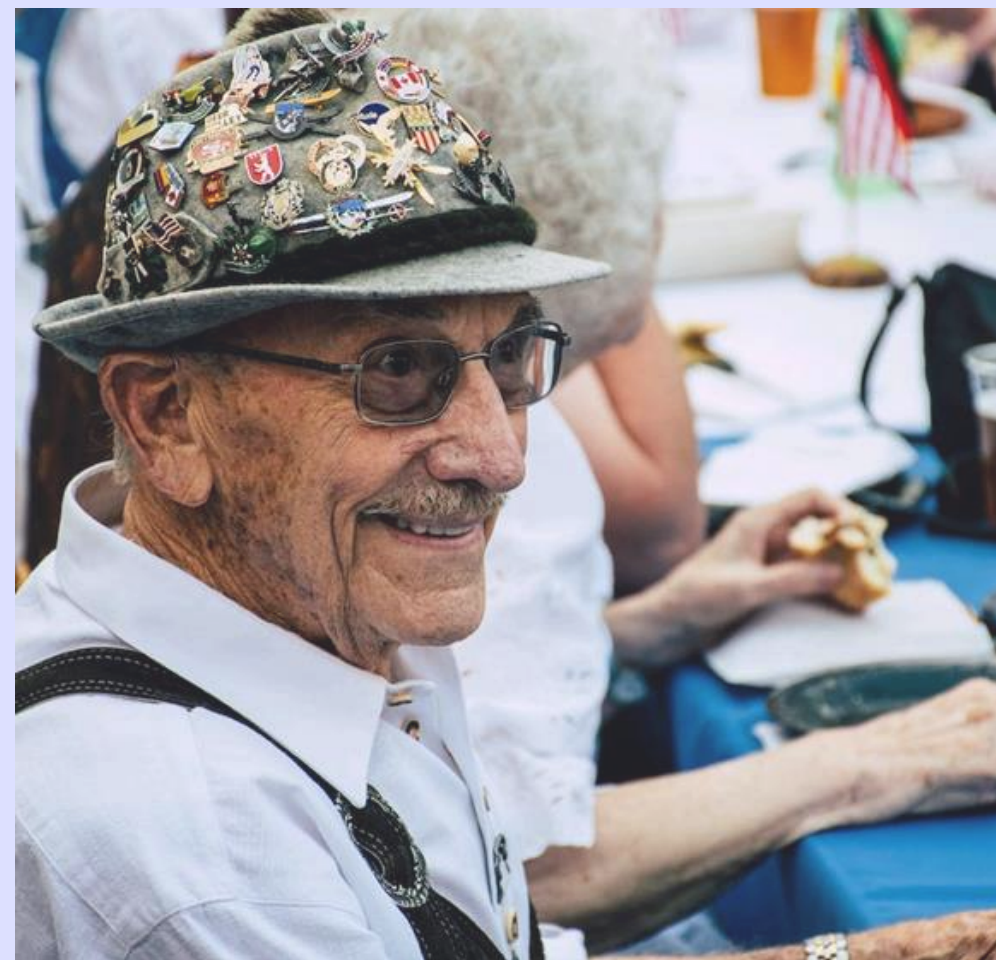
Myth

Older People

Want to

Disengage From

Society



Societal disengagement as we age is not normal.

Yet, various external factors such as ageism, societal pressures, and neighborhood insecurity may cause older persons to withdraw.

Myth

Older People
are Isolated
and Lonely



Older peoples' social circles and networks do not drastically decrease or cause isolation and loneliness as they age.

In fact, there is often little or no change in social circles after and during retirement or disconnection from close social supports.

Myth

Older People are
Opinionated and
Rigid in Their
Thinking



This misconception may impact older persons' ability to form connections and communicate properly with others.

Three strategies for effective communication: see the individual, be respectful, and show empathy and compassion.

It is critical that respect is shown to everybody, regardless of whether or not you agree with their opinion and regardless of age.

Myth

Older People
are no Longer
Attractive



Attractiveness is often based on the belief we should look young forever.

We receive messages starting in early childhood through media that wrinkled skin, baldness or differently-abled bodies are undesirable.

Changes in population demographics have resulted in greater numbers and visibility of older people.

Thinking of aging as the worsening of physical appearance devalues older people and reinforces negative perspectives, which older people may come to believe themselves.





Myths About the Aging Body

Myth

Older People are not Active



If a person stays active as they age, they are likely to continue doing the activities they enjoy.

There is no link between the ability to do certain activities and being a certain age, and many older persons seek out new activities in later life.

Negative expectations may cause older persons to adopt negative self-perceptions and limit their activity.

Myth

Pain is a Part of Normal Aging



Some forms of pain (lower back, neck, and face pain) are more common in people aged 65 than aged 85.

Musculoskeletal pain generally will decrease with age.

Pain should never be dismissed or ignored as a regular part of aging - pain at any age should be treated.

Myth

Incontinence is a Part of Normal Aging



Most healthy older persons are able to remain continent.

Impaired mobility, not age, is the biggest predictor of urinary incontinence in older persons.

The misconception that incontinence is associated with old age may cause older persons who do suffer from incontinence to not seek treatment because they believe it is a normal part of aging.

Myth

Older People
Have Trouble
Eating a Regular
Diet



Age does not cause trouble eating or chewing for older persons.

Not every older person needs dietary supplements.

It is not normal to have difficulty swallowing or chewing at any age.

It is not normal to lose teeth as we age.

Myth

Older People Don't Have Sex



Sex is an important part of life and necessary for people of all ages. Even if mobility is limited or older persons have cognitive impairment, they can still have sex.

Most partnered older people report being sexually active.

Older persons agree that sex is an important part of their lives and are generally “satisfied with their quality of sex life”.



Myths About the Aging Mind

Myth

Forgetfulness and Confusion are Part of Normal Aging



There may be limitations in some older persons' thinking due to the brain getting older (memory may become more disconnected).

Memory loss is not a normal part of aging and may indicate underlying medical conditions or neurodegenerative diseases.

New confusion is a red flag that something is amiss and should be assessed and treated.

Myth

Older People
Cannot
Understand
Normal Speech



“Elderspeak” is never respectful or appropriate.

Elderspeak includes slow speech rate, exaggerated volume, simple vocabulary, shorter sentences, and repetition.

Using elderspeak undervalues older peoples’ ideas and suggests that they are not competent to engage with others.

Myth

Older People are
not Competent
With Technology



Around 60% of older persons use the internet regularly, and around 77% own a digital smart device.

Additionally, many older persons find digital technology as fascinating and empowering.



Ageism is Prejudice!



Discrimination based on age causes harm.

Myths influence decisions about ourselves and others.

When you hear comments about aging, ask, “is that really true?”

Quality of life and health choices improve when we challenge assumptions!



[Click here to play a short video on Myths about Older People](#)



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Photo Attributions



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