

The Psychology of Aging: Truth, Fiction, and Stereotypes

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Beliefs and aging

Beliefs about aging have roots that are individual, familial, cultural, and societal. Your personal experiences concerning your own aging (healthy or burdened with chronic illness) and interactions with aging family, friends, and others around you, contributes to how you perceive, understand, and feel about aging. Possessing enough positive memories from the past, regarding the aging of others, and positive current experiences in your own aging, in spite of some negative aging experiences, help foster resilience in the face of today's ageist society.

Attitudes about aging wield a powerful impact on health and well-being. Negative attitudes about aging herald across society shaping views about and behavior towards the elderly. Even those elderly who report feeling younger than their chronological age tend to label others as old and demonstrate their own measure of age-related bias. The negative consequences of aging are a prominent feature, fashioned by media as something to be avoided at all cost. And since this is really not possible, you are at least expected to mitigate the outward appearances of aging. Surgery, supplements, elixirs and salves, dyes and emollients are purported to be roads to the fountain of youth. Lacking any acknowledgment of aging as a natural life process, the very concept of aging is offered as foreshadow of the grim reaper.

Attitudes and aging

Attitudes are known to exert a powerful influence on a range of behaviors.^[9] Attitudes about aging are often based upon myths, and misconceptions. There is also a general lack of knowledge about the naturalness of the aging process. Some find their aging hard to accept and adjust to. Because aging offers a very slow but steady decline in corporeal integrity many do not seem to notice their aging until a reoccurring ache or unexpected debility. Even then, any association of physical decline or slow-healing injury related to aging may be ignored or even denied. Some individuals report feeling as if suddenly one day they abruptly discovered

they were no longer young as they used to be. It is as if the startling realization of achieving ‘old or elderly’ status was suddenly fostered upon him or her.

Ageism is a multi-dimensional construct that involves negative attitudes, ageist humor, stereotypes, patronizing behavior, and avoidance of contact with the elderly. It is inclusive of age discrimination, denial, anti-ageing, and age segregation in housing, work, and social engagements. Numerous studies document varying levels of negative attitudes held by all segments of society towards aging.^[16] The slow unsteady gait and wrinkled, splotchy appearance of the elderly is sometimes looked upon as something strange and fearful by young children, given looks of disgust by teens, treated as an obstructive annoyance by young adults, and ignored as irrelevant by the middle-aged. The oldest old are often given anxious looks from their slightly younger cohorts as they anticipate their own adverse physical, mental, and personal declines that will occur in spite of attempts to circumvent the process.

The older person often ruminates about the past. He or she may look in the mirror and remember when they were young with smooth skin and a full head of hair, and hate themselves for how they look today; claiming time has not been good to them. Increased psychological distress is associated with the negative mental health effects of aging and death anxieties.^[7] Negative attitudes by older adults toward other older adults are predictably related to personal anxieties about aging and death.^[14]

Social Media and Ageism

Negative stereotypes are often perpetuated by the media. Years of television, radio, newspaper and magazine articles, ads, and reports—and now internet social media, have primed negative aging stereotypes. Consensual negative stereotypes occur when a significant segment of the population buy into misinformation, distortions, half-truths, and propaganda without questioning information accuracy and veracity. Consensual stereotypes exaggerate differences across age groups.^[11] Even social and political circumstances can assume an important role in various perceptions of age discrimination. For example, attributed experiences of age discrimination are related to sociodemographic factors, i.e. older age, perceived age discrimination, and lower levels of household wealth.^[37]

In today's society, individuals are continuously confronted with stereotypical beliefs about older adults. They are often depicted as frail, feebleminded, lonely, and increasingly less capable and less valued by society. The elder is jokingly referred to as an 'old bat' or 'old goat'. Because they motor more slowly than the rest of the population, they are often thought of and/or treated as being in the way of everyone else.

Negative aging stereotypes and the associated biases, perpetuated by the media for decades, have become engrained within the social fabric of life. As a person ages they incorporate and accumulate their own particular view of the aging self. Those positive or negative aspects that are given preeminence in how one construes his or her aging can have a profound effect. The ability to savor positive life events is associated with advanced well-being.^[22] Those who can fondly reminisce about their bygone days (savoring the past) and look forward with anticipation to what life still has to offer (savoring the future), have a much more positive attitude towards aging than those elderly whose days are filled with worry and regrets.

Culture and Aging

Cultural norms are those life practices which are widely shared among cultural members, and are used to guide decisions and behavior. Among cultures around the world there are both similarities and differences in attitudes about aging as well as attitudinal behavior towards older adults. Eastern cultures as well as native or indigenous cultures generally tend toward collectivist or communal oriented social structure. They are more likely to seek positive engagements with their elderly, see them as a wisdom resource, include them in their daily life interactions, and have a more positive regard for and affirmative view of the aged. Western society which values individualism increasingly tends not to readily engage the elderly or seek their input.

Negative conceptualizations of aging pervade many societies. Social culture influences discrimination against older workers. There is a cross-cultural consensus in societal views of aging, regarding perceived declines in physical attractiveness, the ability to perform everyday tasks, willingness to engage in new learning, or the ability to acquire new skills^[27] Research results regarding cultural differences in attitudes toward older adults are sometimes found to be inconsistent, possibly attributable to the differences in the conceptualizations of both cultural

and personal values.^[46] Some cross-cultural research show a difference in ageist perceptions and behavior, based on culture-level indicators of population aging, national character stereotypes, education levels, personal and group values, and even differences in population structure.^[27]

It is necessary to differentiate the effects of personal and cultural values because within the context of ones' culture, people often internalize some biases, beliefs, values and norms at the national level while concurrently forming a distinct self-construal at a more individualistic level. Although society may link some positive attributes to aging (such as psychological maturity, emotional balance and wisdom), negative attributes are far more often used to reference the older person. Research on the cross-cultural similarities in perception suggests findings on personality perception apply around the world as universal, inclusive of inaccuracies and exaggerations, suggesting ageism may be related to a pancultural processes.^[11]

Self-perception, personality, and aging

Self-perception, personality and personal beliefs about aging play a major role in how a person perceives his or her own aging. The foremost negative aspects of aging that many elderly can identify with are illness, functional limitations, and the resultant loss of autonomy. Simultaneously, for many others, old age is a time of psychological growth, higher extraversion and agreeableness.^[10] It is a way-of-being that allows one to adjust to life as an elder in the context of what is the reality of now.

Aging stereotypes are not just held by younger persons. Research reveals members of all age groups are prejudiced toward older adults. Many elderly themselves retain age biases accumulated over their lifetime. Many older individuals are imbued with stereotypical beliefs, ageist attitudes, off-color comments, and even age-related self-deprecating behavior. Research shows that the activation of self-relevant age stereotypes can influence older adults' presentation and enactment of self-behavior and performance.^[26]

Positive and negative stereotypes of aging can have enabling and constraining effects.^[15] Attitudes to one's personal experience of ageing are influential in shaping health and well-being as well as self-portrayal. Positive attitudes to aging

enhance wellbeing. Negative attitudes, consistent with negative stereotypes of ageing, can result in achieving a self-fulfilling prophecy. As beliefs with an evaluative component, negative attitudes that parallel negative stereotypes leads to behavior that matches, mirrors, or lines up with the negative beliefs. The unfortunate consequence is that all this negativity prompts people to become less active, possess lower confidence, and derive less meaning from life.^[8] For example, stereotypes and expectations related to loneliness in old age are significantly associated with loneliness in later life. The expectation of growing old and lonely is met if one does not intervene proactively.^[34] Your own negative stereotypes about getting older can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.^[40] Further research that extended this theory revealed those elderly who more strongly endorse negative aging stereotype traits (*lonely, dependent, forgetful* and *slow*) as opposed to positive traits (*wise, mature, calm* and *sociable*) tend to experience and interpret pain as more acute.^[4]

Personality is one of several factors that contribute to the formation of attitude towards personal aging. The ‘big five’ personality traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion) that expanded upon the previous trait dimensions of introvert-extrovert and unstable-stable, are universal and reasonably consistent.^[17, 31, 41] Your attitude towards your own aging, impacts your satisfaction with life.^[9]

The one trait most particular to likely to interfere with holistic aging and well-being is neuroticism. Adverse health outcomes are associated with negative aging perceptions. Characterized by anxiety, fear, frustration, moodiness, and worry, neuroticism is a negative emotional state. Higher levels of neuroticism are associated with a less positive attitude towards aging.^[12] Higher levels of negative ageing perceptions significantly predict the onset and persistence of both depression and anxiety^[19]

With all this said, it must be fairly noted that some stereotypes may be accurate to a certain degree. For example, in late adulthood, (in comparison to early adulthood), there is a decreased openness to new experiences, while agreeableness and conscientiousness increase significantly.^[6, 11] Furthermore, across the spectrum of both humanity and life, human perceptions and judgments are laden with inaccuracies and often deviate from rational objectivity. Ageism impacts

attitudes and actions, decisions and performance in ways that influence short and long-term health of an older adult.

Perceptions of aging refer to the ways people conceive the ageing process and, experience their own transition to old age and the end-of-life process. The ageist epitomizes old age as an inherently negative time in which older people must confront and endure daily, the decaying self. ^[13] Internalization of social norms impacts self-identity, and health. As a final point about ageist roots, some research notes that fearful aging and death anxieties contribute to ageist attitudes ^[7] While aging anxiety is associated with the threat of physical and cognitive deterioration, death anxiety is related to fear of non-existence (absence of being) and the fear an of unknown afterlife. ^[7, 14, 42]

Aging in the workplace

Work plays a very important role in people's lives. Although the primary benefit of working is financial remediation, there are also secondary rewards of additional value. Ancillary benefits include feeling useful and productive, having a platform to exercise creativity, learning new skills, retaining talents and abilities, and expanding areas of expertise. For the majority, working is necessary to feed, clothe, and house your household—whether it is only one person or a house full with ten loved ones. Work is necessary to achieve short-or-long-term goals. It is through gainful employment that socioeconomic status, upward mobility and personal advancement is effectuated.

The workplace atmosphere has a profound effect upon the general health and well-being of employees. Elements of the workplace interactional environment include relationships between a person and his or her coworkers and those between a person and the workplace managerial team. Successful aging at work consists of older employees' self-reported adaptability (personal perception of adjustment to flexible/inflexible work environment), personal health, positive relationships, occupational growth, personal security, and achievement of personal goals. ^[45]

Within the context of the work milieu there is a relationship between perceived age similarity, satisfaction with coworkers, and employee engagement with their coworkers. People tend to interact and congregate based on age, ethnicity, department, level or rank within an organization, or some other commonality. In a

competitive work environment, the older worker is often viewed as ‘past prime’ and needing to step aside to make room for the young ‘up and comer’. If unwilling to readily do so, the older worker may be looked upon with disdain and begin to receive disparaging treatment in the form of discrediting remarks. Two out of three older workers report having seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace.^[33]

Younger colleagues may sometimes act in a condescending manner toward their older coworker. Some of the mistaken beliefs held by younger workers about their coworkers include: Older workers being burned out and less productive; older workers as unable to multitask and embrace the latest technological tools of the modern world; and older workers not being as creative as younger workers.^[35] Satisfaction with ones coworkers is significantly correlated to the workplace interactions^[2]

Age discrimination is alive and well in the workplaces of both public and private institutions. Recognizing this reality can be difficult and yet a necessary first step toward self-empowerment.^[24] Negative social relationships can adversely influence psychological well-being. Unfortunately, negative interactions are overwhelmingly more potent than the beneficial effects of positive social interactions.^[32] Older adults who internalize negative attitudes toward aging are at increased risk for both functional and cognitive decline.^[39]

Negative attitudes towards older workers are at the heart of the employment discrimination experienced by older workers as well as aging jobseekers.^[23] An overwhelming number of older job seekers cite age discrimination as a major obstacle to getting hired. Many of those elderly currently working, report missing out on an opportunity for a job promotion because of age, and some former employees report being laid off or fired as a result of ageism in the workplace.^[33] Although there are laws against this, it still happens much more often than acknowledged since the majority of negative experiences go unreported.

As a result of the unprecedented global rising number of elderly populations, the overall workforce is growing older. At the same time, the percentage of younger supervisors placed in charge of the workplace environment is increasing. Employee age, relative to coworker age, is factorial in determining attitudes,

performance, and career-related opportunities.^[38] Within the work setting, negative age effects are strongest and most consistent when the interactions are between an older employee and a younger manager. Manager-rated assessments of employee work attitude, skill development, job performance and suitability or recommendation for promotion are not always impartial or without some measure of covert bias. Relative to younger workers, older workers are consistently negatively evaluated.^[28]

Hiring managers hold numerous stereotypical beliefs about the older worker. Many mistakenly assume older adults are less motivated, less willing to adapt and learn new things, less willing to participate in training and career development, less healthy, less social and more vulnerable to work–family imbalance^[18, 28, 36] Employers erroneously assume older applicants are less creative, less productive, mentally slower and more expensive to employ relative to early or mid-career employees. When decision-makers are highly prejudiced, younger job applicants receive higher suitability ratings than older job applicants, even when no information regarding experience is presented about the younger applicant.^[20]

Research reveals: Hiring managers at state agencies tend to reject older job seekers because they felt these applicants were more likely to be burned-out, resistance to change, have a lower ability to learn, are resistant to new technologies, more likely to be absent due to illness, poor at working with younger supervisors and reluctant to travel.^[18, 35] Moreover, the older you are the less likely you are to be hired, so those oldest old are the least likely to be hired regardless of present fitness, past skills or depth of education.^[36]

Although negative stereotypes have been associated with older workers, research contradicts these negative stereotypes and resounds in support of the elder persons' positive attributes which include dependability, loyalty, high work ethic, exemplary attendance, and good citizenship^[12] Furthermore, research shows elder people are better able to regulate their emotional reactions to workplace problems than younger people.^[5] Some elderly prefer to continue working in their later years because they derive satisfaction and fulfillment from remaining productively active by continue to work in their later years. Others continue to work because they have to.

Socioeconomic status is one of the key factors in determining the quality of life of older persons. Aging in the context of an insufficient financial platform that provides enough to meet life needs can have a profound effect on health and well-being. Research indicates the detrimental effect of age discrimination on the older worker's physical and emotional health is associated with poor subjective health, greater disease burden, lower life satisfaction and greater loneliness at both pre and post assessments, with declines in health across a two year time span. ^[39]

Irving (2015) suggests, for the older worker to successfully age in their workplace he or she must position his or her self in such a way as to make their later working years as productive and purposeful as they can be. Although some legal protections are available to protect older workers against age discrimination ^[43], if it suits their purpose, management will deliberately ignore or circumvent the law. AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) notes, ageism in the workplace has resulted in an increasing number of complaints filed with the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission).

We can conclude that age discrimination occurs cross-culturally. The mechanisms by which age and culture interact to promote and sustain discrimination range across societal, organizational, and individual characteristics. ^[28] Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, (2014) posit this lends support for the idea that "ageism against older adults is rooted in our innate and evolutionarily driven fear of death" both of the personal self and that of our loved ones.

When confronted with age bias and aging-related stereotypes over a long period of time, individuals assimilate this stereotypical information into their self-evaluations. ^[26] 'From the water cooler to the webpage, negative age bias is frustratingly prevalent'. ^[24] Stereotypes often frame the life course into fixed stages. According to the World Health Organization ^[44], the belief that learning something new is an activity that only occurs during the formative years or early stages of life reflects an outdated, life-limiting view. Although many older people resist negative stereotypes in their own self-perceptions ^[29] many tend to negatively judge or stereotype other elderly who are older or those of the same age that are not aging as well as they. It is important to highlight the positive, downgrade the negative, and focus attention on the enjoyable aspects of life.

Miche et al. (2014) note, a more realistic and constructive view of aging acknowledges both the positive and the negative changes that occur as people grow old. Self-perceptions of aging in the context of successful aging are very important because a positive self-perception is associated with greater well-being. Important aspects that make aging a positive experience include self-acceptance, contentment, having a sense of purpose, appreciative value of life, exercising as much autonomy as possible, and pleasant social relationships. ^[25]

There are several things you can do to decrease your own personal aging bias. First allow yourself a measure of self-compassion. As a strong predictor of attitudes towards physical change and the psychosocial loss that aging produces, self-compassion directly and indirectly predicts well-being and psychological growth through its influence on attitudes to aging. ^[8] Secondly, practice acceptance of aging from a more positive viewpoint. Think of ways in which to shape positive attitudes about aging. You are going to age regardless of whether you want to or not—find the brighter side of life by socializing with positive, energetic people.

What do you do to nurture yourself? Balance your life with activities you enjoy. Try new adventures, meet new people, learn new things, or join a cause you can be passionate about. Do something that is positive and life-affirming! Be as active as you reasonably can within the context of your life as it is now. Ultimately, only by changing negative stereotypes of aging at both the individual and societal level can we help to promote a more reasonable, holistic view of successful aging.

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