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Counteracting internalized ageism



People over age 65 exhibit a vast range of abilities both mental and physical. Unfortunately, ageism (the negative stereotyping of older adults) links advancing years with decline in a manner that disregards individual capability. From degrading birthday cards to discrimination in the workplace, 82% of older adults report experiencing ageism in their everyday life.

Most insidious is *internalized* ageism, when we look down on ourselves, often without realizing it. Blaming age when we can't remember a word ("a senior moment"). Feeling flattered when we're told "You don't look [your age]!" Not considering an interesting activity at the senior center because we "don't want to be around all those old people."

It turns out such negative age beliefs can significantly reduce life expectancy. Multiple studies across many years and many cultures have shown that people with negative beliefs about aging die as much as 7.5 years earlier than those with positive age beliefs. (The studies accounted for the influences of income, education and health status.)

Those with negative age beliefs are less likely to engage in healthy behaviors. "If it's all downhill from here, why bother?" Those who are age positive are more proactive about retaining the health they have. People with internalized ageism test higher for C-reactive protein in the blood (a marker of chronic inflammation). Those with a history of age-positive attitudes have lower levels. Also, people with negative age beliefs don't seem to invest as much psychologically in living a gratifying life. Those who are age positive usually have a sense of purpose or meaning.

In other research, people briefly shown age-positive messages (e.g., depicting older adults as wise or accomplished) had improved scores in subsequent tests of memory, blood pressure, walking and balance. Those exposed to negative concepts of aging (e.g., being senile, dependent) had worse memory recall and a heightened stress response afterwards.

What can be done to reduce internalized ageism? Other cultures celebrate people who have achieved advanced age. Despite decades of ageist messaging in the U.S., we can turn things around within ourselves. Keep an ageism journal. Note each remark you hear that centers on someone's age. Was it positive or negative? If negative, was it based on ageism (a stereotype) or an individual's actual ability? Stay alert to your own ageist thinking. Reframe your self-talk to avoid ageism.

Identify five things that you enjoy about being older. Acknowledge them. Add more age positivity to your life and start reaping the benefits!

**Want to work with age-positive professionals?
Give us a call at 206-456-5155**



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Aging Wisdom supports individuals and families in King and south Snohomish Counties as they plan for aging.



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