

transitions

Just say NO to ageism

By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

Correspondent

Confession: I am guilty of age bias, despite the fact that I have studied and written about aging. Last year, as I arrived at a party, so did a convertible, top down with two people sitting in front and two in back. My first thought was how nice to be going to a party with younger people. I soon realized that the group was from a local retirement community. I knew them, and they were all in their mid-80s.

I was dismayed at my assumption about what age group can fit in the back of a convertible. My thought process reflected my bias about aging that if you are in a retirement community, you would not be in a convertible — especially in the back seat. I was doing what we do all the time: categorizing people by age. We categorize teenagers, middle-aged individuals and older people. But you and I know the reality: There is more heterogeneity as people age, not less.

Age bias is all around us. Nancy Perry Graham, an editor of AARP The Magazine, wrote in the January 2010 issue: “Just listen to the late-night comics. Scarcely an evening goes by that David Letterman ... doesn’t mock a certain 73-year-old politician with lines such as ‘During the presidential campaign, Sarah (Palin) had to cut up John McCain’s meat for him.’” Recently, Jimmy Fallon (granted, a youngster, at 35) announced that the family of a 70-year-old man who had run his 163rd marathon would celebrate by “taking him out to a five-star emergency room.” Similarly, many birthday cards for those over 50 have negative comments about aging, such as “It’s all downhill after 40.” We are constantly bombarded with messages that older people have less — less energy, less opportunity, less sex, less money. Except for wrinkles, it is all about less.

These negative messages have reached

all of us and partly explain why we dread growing old and frantically pursue the fountain of youth.

“Observe the thousands of women and men who go in for tucks and hair dying in an attempt to look younger ... In 2010 there were 84,685 surgical procedures like face-lifts, eyelid operations, liposuctions, breast reductions, forehead lifts, breast lifts and breast augmentations for those over 65,” according to a 2011 article in *The New York Times*.

Kathy Black, a gerontologist at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee and lead researcher on the Aging With Dignity project orchestrated by SCOPE (Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence), found that “ageism was the second most mentioned challenge to dignity, and particularly to self-identity.” According to a 79-year-old male, “Ageism is alive ... as people see either wrinkles, gray hair or frailties and respond in a dismissive manner.” The experience is commonplace, as noted by a 74-year-old male: “I think we’ve all experienced it, whether we are conscious of it all of the time or not, is when you get to a certain age bracket, people do look at you as if ‘it’s time for you to be on the shelf’ or, worse yet, ‘You’re taking up space.’”

But I contend that we must confront ageism, not just give in to it. We must be part of changing aging’s image. To accomplish that, we can do several things:

Step 1. Face our own ageism. Take the Facts on Aging Quiz (see sidebar) developed by Professor Emerita Erdman B. Palmore of Duke University, who has spent a lifetime studying aging and fighting ageism. “What makes me mad is how aging, in our language and culture, is equated with deterioration and impairment,” Palmore said in a 2004 article in the *Detroit News*. “I don’t know how we’re going to root that out, except by making people more aware of it.”

Step 2. Support institutions that are actively confronting age bias. We are for-

aging quiz

The statements are taken from Erdman B. Palmore’s book, “The Facts on Aging Quiz” (1998, Springer Publishing Company). Answer true or false

1. The majority of old people — age 65-plus — are senile.
2. The five senses all tend to weaken in old age.
3. The majority of old people have no interest in, nor capacity for, sexual relations.
4. Lung vital capacity tends to decline with old age.
5. The majority of old people feel miserable most of the time.
6. Physical strength tends to decline with age.
7. At least one-tenth of the aged are living in long-stay institutions, such as nursing homes, mental hospitals and homes for the aged.
8. Aged drivers have fewer accidents per driver than those under age 65.
9. Older workers usually cannot work as effectively as younger workers.
10. More than three-fourths of the aged are healthy enough to do their normal activities without help.
11. The majority of old people are unable to adapt to change.
12. Older people usually take longer to learn something new.
13. Depression is more frequent among the elderly than among younger people.
14. Older people tend to react slower than younger people.
15. In general, old people tend to be pretty much alike.
16. The majority of old people say they are seldom bored.

Answers: All odd-numbered statements are false. All even-numbered statements are true.



fortunate to have such an organization in Sarasota: The Institute for the Ages. (Full disclosure, I am a board member.) According to Tom Esselman, CEO of the Institute, one of its goals is to transform aging by recognizing the value of older adults and the insights they can provide. Many have complained about the intangible-but-real discrimination they feel.

“Our goal,” says Esselman, “is to evangelize positive aging, to promote the value of older individuals and help them maintain the image that ‘I’m a valuable human being. I matter.’”

Specifically, the Institute will engage a panel of people from every income and educational level, all ethnicities, and religions. By becoming part of this panel, their voices will be tapped as organizations want to find out how older individuals respond to new technology, new products and services. This will highlight the value of older individuals as valuable resources for companies. If you would like to be part of the panel, please call the Institute for the Ages at (941) 365-4243 or email Joan Haber at jhaber@institutefortheages.org.

Step 3. Be vigilant. Instead of berating ourselves because of our age, our wrinkles, our forgetfulness, we need to challenge ourselves: How can we face aging with verve, with style. It is time to resolve our love/hate relationship with age. It is time to make the most of the time we have left and to focus on new activities and possibilities that will excite and surprise us.

Martha, a 65-year-old physician living in Boston, went home to Little Rock, Ark., to be with her mother as she was dying. One day, Martha’s highschool boyfriend, who was close to her mother, came to call. He was a widower with two children; Martha had never married. They rediscovered each other and married. She ended her practice, moved to Little Rock and is working in public health there. She never expected to marry, never expected to live in Little Rock, and never expected to be so happy.

We need to keep in mind that life is full of surprises, many of which are happy ones. So don’t be afraid to look in the mirror. You might be surprised at what you see.

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