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# WHAT IS AGEISM?

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Ageism means discriminating against people because of their age. Many older people find it difficult to find a job and feel that employers are unfair. Older people point to their skills and abilities and greater experience which younger people do not have. But it is not only when people are looking for work that they notice ageism. Older people sometimes feel that they are left out of leisure and amenities provision because of their age, that there are not enough facilities to cater for their needs, and that more notice should be taken of them.

One of the biggest advantages that older people have is that they sometimes have more money saved up, and they have more time on their hands. Some advertisers realise this and provide special services like holidays for the over fifties. There are also training courses and University for the Third Age, (U3A), provision which is provided by local authorities. But for many older people they may not have much money and they still need all the things that younger people need and it is difficult to get by. Many older people believe that they are reaching their best years when they can offer more in work terms and instead of society taking advantage of their skills they are ignored and thrown on the scrap heap.

People are living longer and because of improved health care people are living a better quality of life into their old age. Older people see no need to define an age at which they are considered 'past it'. Many people are active into their 80s and think that the retirement age of 65 is no longer relevant.

## Exercise

1. What is ageism?
2. How have concepts of old age changed in the last 50 years or so?
3. How old do you think someone has to be to be considered too old?
4. What things do older people have difficulty doing? Make a list.

A stereotype is a general opinion about a person or group of people which assumes that the person or group can be typically identified and described in a particular way. The picture shows a stereotype of an old woman. The problem with stereotypes is that they are generally untrue but are sometimes popularly believed. We all tend to stereotype because it is an easy way to categorise people or groups.



The stereotype of old people is that:

- z They look very old,
- z They are unstable and unsteady on their feet,
- z They always talk of the war, (second world war), and very little else,
- z They are out of date and don't appreciate what's going on,
- z They are living in the past.

Some parts of a stereotype are usually true because we can probably all think of some older person we know who fits into one or two of the categories above. The problem with stereotypes, however, is that they assume everyone is like that and that all the categories are true and refer to all older people. Stereotypes do not allow people to be seen as individuals with separate identities, qualities, and potential.

When we study any group of people we should be very careful not to assume what they are like but instead learn from the evidence. For example, the stereotype about old people being unsteady on their feet may be true of some people but statistics from leisure and fitness centres show that older people are more active now than ever before, and participate in all sorts of sports and fitness activities. In some centres the demand is so great that separate sessions are made available just for older people.

## Exercise

1. Write in your own words what stereotype means.
2. Why do people use stereotypes?
3. Are some stereotypes true? Give examples.

There are many positive aspects to old age. In the past people usually used to retire at about 60 or 65 years of age. Today some people retire when they are 50. In any case retirement for many people seems to be earlier and earlier. This means they have more time on their hands and they are healthier so they can enjoy more aspects of the leisure industry. Older people today also tend to be better educated and more highly skilled so they can do more when they retire.

Some employers are also beginning to see the advantage of employing older people. Younger people do not have as much experience as older people and employing an older person who has skills is an effective way in which to train younger people. This type of employment is usually part-time which suits both the employer and the older worker.



With the rise in voluntary work many older people offer their services to charities and local activity groups. The largest age group of volunteers in the many charities are people over the age of 50. Another form of volunteering is looking after grandchildren whilst parents can go out to work. Often parents cannot afford childcare and so help from grandparents can be very useful.

More time is now spent by older people attending training and education courses. Many colleges provide University of the Third Age courses. These are not courses set up just for older people but mainstream courses which older people can also attend. There is support and advice for older people to help them get back into education.

The stereotype image of an old person is less and less true today. It is up to each person, but the opportunity is there for all people. Retirement today does not mean the end but instead is the opening up of new opportunities.

### Exercise

1. What positive opportunities are there for older people in work, and in retirement?
2. Find out what positive provision is made for older people in your area.
3. Is '**you are only as old as you feel**' a good way of looking at older age?

## NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF OLD AGE

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There are many problems faced by older people. The main problem is that when someone retires their income falls. The state pension in Britain is very low compared with average earnings. Many people do not have their own private pension arrangements and have to rely on the small amount they receive from the state. Along with losing their job older people also lose some of their self worth. They feel they are no longer in the mainstream of life and a feeling of worthlessness can make them depressed or ill.

When someone retires they lose some of the friends they had at work and lose touch with some of the activities they used to do. This does not mean that they cannot take up new activities but it requires a new effort to do so.



Older people tend to become more unhealthy once they retire because they no longer have to keep to a routine. When they are working, people have to get up at the same time, eat at regular times, and do certain things each day. In retirement people find they have lots of time but nothing to do and can sometimes 'let themselves go'. Some old people need to change their diet when they retire. They may need to take supplements in the form of vitamins, or change the type of food they eat in line with the reduction in their activity.

Sometimes people lose their partner and are left alone. They have been used to living together and making decisions together and now find themselves suddenly alone. This causes distress and sometimes depression and illness. Living alone requires a different sort of decision making than when two people are involved.

### Exercise

1. What sort of problems can old age and retirement bring?
2. What provision exists in your area for helping older people who lose a partner?

One thing that younger people don't understand is that just because someone is old they do not lose their need to love someone or be loved. Love and romance are not only for younger people. Older people usually have partners and they have been married for many many years. Sometimes in older age partners can be lost when one of them dies. This can lead not only to sadness but also to loneliness.

Older people generally have more stable marriages because they have lived together longer and at the time they got married people believed that marriage was for life. They are also used to each other and have a well established pattern of life. But even so there can be problems. If one partner who was used to going out to work is retired from work it can cause the normal balance of the partnership to break down. Usually it is the woman who runs the house and the man who goes out to work. If the man is at home all the time often conflict occurs because it is an unusual situation. Also, if the couple are used to looking after their children, once the children leave, the emptiness can cause problems.

When one partner dies the remaining partner often feels the loss even more than a younger person might because often older people do not have as much to look forward to. Their relationship is often the strongest and most important thing in their lives. It is sometimes difficult for other people to understand the loneliness of someone who has lost a partner. There are other implications as well. Sometimes one person cannot continue to live the quality of life on a single pension as two people could when they combine their finances. Often single older people end up living a low quality of life and sometimes neglect themselves.

There are opportunities for older people to find romance or get to know new people. Some dating agencies cater for older people and some entertainment and leisure provision is designed to appeal to older people. The biggest problem, however, is that older people are sometimes more set in their ways and find it difficult to adjust to new situations.



## Exercise

1. How do older people view relationships and marriage compared to younger people?
2. Do older people have the same needs as younger people in terms of love and relationships?

One important way to understand old age is to look at how other cultures treat people who are older. Traditionally in all societies older people were treated with greater respect. It was felt that they had more experience and knowledge and could guide younger people. Older people having had many years to find out about all aspects of life were seen to be perfectly positioned to advise.

In some cultures, especially Asian cultures, older people are the head of the family. In these extended families the grandparents are greatly respected and listened to. In agricultural societies the land is often owned by the oldest members of the family and passed down the generations. It is the duty of the younger members of the family to look after the needs and requirements of the older members. In ceremonies like weddings older people are recognised and given presents. Money and wealth is managed by older members and important decisions left to them.

One of the reasons why older people are not as respected today as they used to be is that people are no longer reliant on each other. The typical family in the West is of mother, father and children, with grandparents living elsewhere. When families are living in small units they make their own decisions and do not feel the need to involve a wider representation from the family. Especially when people earn their own living and are not dependent on older people they do not feel then that they have to ask for guidance or permission to do anything.

Even in traditional societies the role of older people is changing because people are earning money in different ways which may not involve the whole family working together. There are advantages and disadvantages of this arrangement. The advantages are that older people can do more things and have less responsibility for the younger members. The main disadvantage is that they feel left out and ignored.

### Exercise

1. How were older people treated in the UK in the past?
2. How does the way older people are treated in the UK differ from other cultures?
3. Give examples to show differences in how other cultures see old age.

For the first time in history the number of old people is increasing dramatically. There are many reasons for this. In the past the average life expectancy was much lower because medical treatment was not as effective as it is today. Fifty years ago people who reached the age of 65 or 70 were considered to be old, whereas today people of that age still see themselves as having many years ahead of them.

Older people contribute less in taxes than younger people because they tend to work less or not at all. Their needs, however, are greater and they utilise the National Health Service and other services much more than younger people. As the older generation increases in numbers and the proportion of people of working age decreases the burden on taxpayers increases. Older people require more medical treatment, have more long-term illnesses, and require special provisions.

Although young people may see older people as a burden, older people often feel that they have worked and contributed enough to the nation to be able to enjoy and have the right to enjoy a full and complete old age. If younger people do not have the time to look after their elderly relatives then the state has a responsibility. Day-care drop in centres, care homes and provision like meals on wheels are increasing rapidly in the UK today. There is a whole industry which is growing and is expected to continue to grow as the number of older people keep increasing. Much of the medical work is ground breaking because many people are now living to more than 90 years old and some to over 100 which was virtually unknown in the past.

Politicians have to take older people seriously because as their number increases they become politically more important. The 'Grey Vote' is beginning to organise itself. Before the 1997 General Election older people organised themselves and held demonstrations to protest about the lack of services and to ask for higher pensions. All political parties want to win the vote of older people. The main question is how much should the state provide for older people. Some people believe that older people should do as much as they can for themselves and should not rely on state help, while others think that the state could provide much more support.

### Exercise

1. Make a list of 'pressures' put on the State as the number of older people increases.
2. How politically important are older people?

For most people some sort of work is necessary in order to give them some self worth and meaning in their life. For older people who have been used to working for most of their life it is very difficult to accept that they have to stop working. There is no reason why older people cannot both take their pension and continue to work, but it seems that some older people believe that when they are of pension age they have to stop working. It is also a commonly held opinion of employers and they are not keen to employ people who are receiving an old age pension.

For older people there are some jobs, often voluntary, which they can do and are available. But many older people do not want to just do any work. Work must be meaningful if it is to have any value. Some voluntary work does not require much effort and people who have been used to working hard do not feel the same satisfaction from this work. Many men see the type of voluntary work available as being more suitable for women than men.

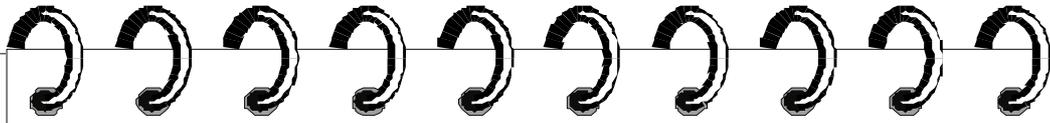
Work often also means that a person has some degree of respect and in some cases power. In retirement all the responsibility of work is suddenly removed and sometimes leads to a feeling of worthlessness. Many people have to lower their expectations and ambitions because they cannot do the sort of work they want to. But in themselves they feel as able as before and this leads to difficulties. No one likes to be told that they are not as useful as they used to be.

Some young people say that having lots of time on your hands is great because you can do whatever you want. But they are speaking from a position where they have a job and respect and do not understand what it is to lose it. It is not just a matter of having time to do the things you always wanted to, it is also a matter of losing many of the familiar things which made you happy.



## Exercise

1. What is meaningful work?
2. How and why does work give people a feeling of worth?



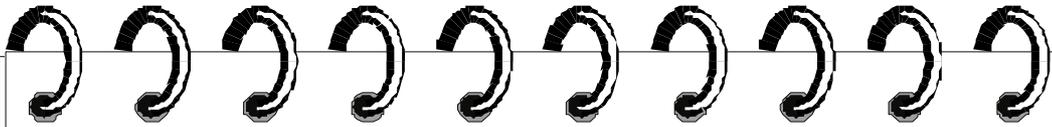
*One of the biggest difficulties which I have is that now I cannot afford to do the things which I was accustomed to. I have been used to earning a good wage and enjoying spending my money in the way I wanted to. Since I was made redundant I have found it very hard to find another job. I cannot afford to live on state benefits, and soon I will have to take the state pension. If I cannot get a job now I do not think I will be able to get a job when I am drawing the pension. People think that someone who is getting a pension is no longer able to work. But I feel fit and ready to work; all I want is the opportunity to show someone that I can work. And not only work but be very good at the job I do.*

*I know some people in their '70s who go dancing every night, and others who enjoy active sports like surfing and hiking. Some young people I know would not be able to keep up with them. Some young people cannot even wake up in the morning before 11 o'clock. I wake up at 6 am every morning and am full of energy.*

*It is too simple to pick an age and say that after that age a person is no good any more. I think some people are useless when they are very young whilst other people are still very useful to society even when they are 90 years old. It is ridiculous that someone somewhere has decided on an age without thinking about things carefully and has ruined the chances of millions of people to have a meaningful life in their later years.*

### Exercise

1. Why do you think older people are discriminated against when they apply for jobs?
2. Older people are allowed to work after they begin receiving a pension but why do so few do so?
3. Should older people have lower expectations? Shouldn't they be satisfied that they have had their best years, and retire gracefully?



*Well, I do feel sorry for some older people and I do not blame them for wanting to remain active in all aspects of life but what about the younger generation? Young people have all of their life ahead of them and should be given the opportunity to work and develop their careers. If they have a good job they can think about relationships, marriage, and children. Young people are the future of every society. We must give our young people priority in the jobs market because they are the ones who will create the wealth of the nation.*

*Older people do have rights as well but they have had many years to progress their careers and to make money. They have had years in which to settle down, have their children, buy their homes, and acquire things to make them comfortable in later life. In a society where the number of jobs is limited it is important to prioritise who does what. It would be better to reduce the age of retirement and let older people enjoy leisure and education pursuits whilst allowing younger people to establish themselves.*

*I think it is true that older people do not have many opportunities but that is something for the government to resolve. There should be more provision in education and leisure for older people, and maybe an increase in the amount of pension they receive, but it should not be at the cost of opportunities for young people. I know many old people who are happily getting on with their lives without moaning about their lot in life. Perhaps the ones who are complaining should just get on with it and not expect any special favours which other people do not receive.*

### Exercise

1. Should older people move over and let younger people have a better opportunity in life?
2. Should the retirement age be reduced so that more younger people can work and more older people can take it easy?
3. Do you think that older people have enough support in their old age? What more can be done for them?

