

Reframing Aging

Joe is very proud of everything he's earned in his lifetime. He worked for more than two decades for the same company as a chemical engineer, working his way up to middle management and a comfortable life for his family. He loved his job and planned to stay with his employer until retirement at age 65. However, his employer had other ideas. When Joe was 60, his team was downsized, and they sent him on his way to early retirement.

Joe wasn't ready to retire, so he started to look for another job. He quickly found that most companies were not interested in hiring someone at his age and income level. Joe was competing with much younger professionals. So he took a couple of part-time customer service jobs to earn money and keep busy.

Around the same time, Joe experienced health issues and had to find a couple of new healthcare specialists. He discovered that these specialists and their colleagues treated him differently than his long-time family doctor. They asked him if he had help at home and if there was someone he wanted to bring with him to doctor's appointments. They also ordered tests that seemed unnecessary for his diagnosis. In short, they treated him as if he was unable to make decisions or understand his own health.

Since he wasn't working as much, Joe started spending a lot of time watching television and reading magazines. He noticed many ads depicted people his age as feeble, fragile, and sick. The people in these ads did not look like him or act like him. He felt like he had a lot of life left to live and more to offer. But given all that had recently happened to him, he started wondering, is my life over?

Joe's experiences are all products of ageism. The World Health Organization defines ageism as "the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age."

Ageism is a part of our culture in the United States. It is embedded in our minds and our institutions. And just like Joe, ageism can impact our ability to work, our health, and our quality of life. The good news is that we can change our misperceptions of age. The first step is to understand where these biases have affected our lives.

Work

In a 2020 AARP survey of 1,000 working adults aged 40-65, 61% were concerned they could lose their job because of their age. Also, 44% of those looking for a job feared their age would negatively impact their job search.

Although illegal in the United States, unconscious or illicit age discrimination is real in the workplace. This is even though the world's 60+ population is growing 4x faster than the rest of the population. Employers need older employees right now. However, the factor of age seems to have escaped the current movement towards a more inclusive workplace. Another AARP study in 2020 found that 53% of global business leaders surveyed did not include age in their company's DEI policy. There is work to be done in the C-suite to recognize age bias and how that adversely affects business and the economy.

Here are some warning signs of age discrimination in the workplace to watch for:

- Layoffs or buyouts that target older workers
- No promotions for older workers
- Slower wage growth for older workers than for younger workers
- Different learning or growth opportunities available for younger workers versus older workers
- Older workers are left out of critical meetings and events
- Using coded language, such as letting a more senior person go because they no longer "fit the culture."
- Insults and jokes about age, such as, "You're over the hill now. When are you going to retire?"
- Incorrect assumptions about an older worker's abilities or health

Healthcare

The COVID-19 pandemic did not help us in overcoming ageism. The truth is that many older people died because of COVID. But not all older people were as vulnerable to the virus as others. Media messaging for the virus chose to depict a negative narrative about all older people, which was not entirely correct and furthered the misperception that all older adults are frail.

One study cited several examples of ageist language and actions during the pandemic. This included the phrases "Boomer remover," "The old ones spoil the statistics," and "Stay home, save grandma." In addition, many medical and aging professionals reported a significant increase in ageism during the pandemic, including making decisions to withhold life-saving treatment based on the patient's age and advising all older adults to stay in lockdown indefinitely, regardless of their health. This gross overreach and generalization of a large part of the population was inaccurate and dangerous.

Even before COVID, ageism impacted the health of many older adults. Studies show that it makes their physical and mental health worse and shortens their lifespan.

In addition, a recent [report](#) revealed the significant cost of healthcare caused by ageism. \$63 billion is spent annually on health care for older Americans. These costs were expressly due to ageism through age discrimination, negative age stereotypes, or negative self-perceptions of aging. Another [study](#) by the same researchers estimated that about 6.33 million older adults are experiencing depression globally because of experiencing ageism. Both of these studies deduced that addressing ageism could improve the health of many older adults and decrease global healthcare costs.

Culture

Like any form of bias or discrimination, ageism does not thrive in a vacuum; it is cultivated through social beliefs and cultural values. Ageism often occurs with other discriminatory views based on race or gender. But no matter where age-based discrimination starts, it depends on the culture to survive and even thrive.

Stereotypes of aging are pervasive in American culture. Mass media, common language, and popular trends promote negative images of aging and often depict older adults as frail, crabby, sick, and needy. These images negatively impact the lives of many older adults. A [2021 AARP survey](#) showed that 62% of consumers aged 50 or over agreed with the statement, “I wish ads had more realistic images of people my age.” And 47% agreed that “ads of people my age reinforce outdated stereotypes.”

Several reasons contribute to ageism in American culture. First, we value youth, beauty, and vitality over things like experience or wisdom. The aging process is viewed as something to avoid at all costs. We think aging means getting sick and not being able to care for ourselves. And, of course, dying. This makes us fear getting old and use negative language and feelings when talking about it. Once we hit that 50th birthday, we hear we are “over the hill” or an “old geezer” or “past our prime.” These not-so-funny jokes are our culture’s way of minimizing the process of aging and the ever-present fear of dying.

Ageism is harmful to people at every age, to our communities, and to our culture. However, groundbreaking research by the [FrameWorks Institute](#) shows that we can shift how we think about aging by “reframing” our thought processes. That includes acknowledging that there is bias, consciously changing our word choices when talking about aging, and avoiding the common traps that reinforce the stereotypes. Above all, we can end ageism when we work together to redirect the narrative.

Here in Colorado, our partner, [Changing the Narrative](#), is leading the effort to change how we think, talk, and act about aging and ageism through evidence-based strategies and innovative public campaigns. We are dedicated to working with them to end ageism in all its forms.

Changing the Narrative is strategic communication and awareness campaign to increase understanding of ageism and to change how people think, talk, and act about growing old in America. Ageism is prevalent in our culture and our institutions and impacts our health, ability to work, and economy. Changing the Narrative addresses these issues through community education, community organizing, awareness campaigns, and policy research and advocacy. Please join us in breaking the bias of aging here in Colorado.