



Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements  
envers les aîné(e)s

## How Do We Get Past Ageism?<sup>(16)</sup>

### 1. Identify the myths and mis-information.

Recognize the myths about aging and negative attitudes about older adults. Start challenging the myths.

There are many erroneous beliefs in our society - e.g. that older adults' lives are less valuable and older adults are less deserving of having their rights respected; that older adults feel emotional pain less or do not have sexual feelings; or that older adults are largely responsible for growing health care or other social costs.

### 2. Go beyond the stereotypes of aging.

Recognize that a label like "elderly" or "seniors" tells us little about what to expect from the person. These labels do not tell us whether the person is kind or uncaring, healthy or her health is diminishing, mentally capable or mentally incapable, a reliable or an unreliable worker or volunteer. Labels do not tell us about the person's capacity for friendship or creativity or accomplishment.

Address ageism by highlighting older adults' individual, collective, and lifelong contributions to our society. <sup>(1)</sup>

### 3. Learn more about aging.

The better informed we are about aging and what to expect, the better we are able to evaluate and resist many of the inaccurate and negative stereotypes of aging.

### 4. Learn more about ageism and discrimination.

It is very common for older adults to face discrimination in housing, health, and other key services. They may be treated as burdens on services, excluded from or simply refused admission to services. Learn to recognize when "neutral policies" are not "neutral" in their effect on seniors. Also recognize how ageism intersects with other "isms" such as sexism or racism.

### 5. Listen to seniors who have experienced ageism.

They are in the best position to tell us how ageism affects their lives.

#### 6. Monitor media and respond to ageist material.

Changing the typically negative ways in which older adults are portrayed in news programs, commercials, films and television shows that reach millions of people on a daily basis is necessary if ageism is to be reduced. Write a letter to or e-mail the editor, TV sponsor or movie producer.

#### 7. Speak up about ageism.

When someone you know uses ageist language or images, tactfully let them know about the inaccuracy. Educate them about the correct meaning.

When someone disparages a senior, tells a joke that ridicules them, or makes disrespectful comments about an older person, we can let them know that this is hurtful and that as seniors or advocates we find the comments offensive and harmful.

#### 8. Watch our language.

Most of us, including health professionals, health advocates and consumers use terms and expressions that may perpetuate ageism. We depersonalize older adults by referring to them generically as "the elderly" or "our seniors".

#### 9. Talk openly about aging issues and ageism.

The more ageism and age discrimination remain hidden, the more people believe it is acceptable to act this way.

Show and recognize the heterogeneity of seniors. Older adults are not all the same. Let others see real older people - people who are resourceful, articulate and creative, who are familiar as valued friends or coworkers. Also include older adults who have conditions that may limit their abilities in some ways; they are not limited in other ways. People who do not fit the stereotype are a powerful way to fight ageism.

#### 10. Build intergenerational bridges to promote better understanding.

Ageism often builds in the context of ignorance. The more generations realize they are connected to each other throughout the lifespan and affect each others' wellbeing, the greater the opportunities for reducing negative attitudes against young and old, alike.

#### 11. Provide support for organizations that address ageism.

There are a number of organizations that advocate for better treatment and greater acceptance of older adults. Their influence and effectiveness depends, to some extent, on their membership size and the adequacy of their finances. Join. Be involved. Be part of a positive solution.

#### 12. Push for changes from your elected representative.

Policies that perpetuate ageism can be changed if enough people let the appropriate politicians know that they want this change. Keep informed on key aging issues and policies. Know the names of government officials to contact.