



Facing Ageism Later in Life

By Kathryn, M.A., CRS-A/D, Community Liaison, East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging

My mother retired from the workforce at age 75. It was a hard decision, but she felt pressure was on her to step aside for someone younger. I remember her saying "What will I do with myself?" and "I'm too old, who is going to hire me now." She would hear comments from well-intentioned friends and family such as "Don't you want to enjoy life?" and "Look at all the free time you'll have to do what you want." I suspect in retrospect what she wanted was to keep working the job she loved for a while longer. It provided her a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Robert Butler, who was the founding director of the National Institute on Aging, coined the term "ageism" in the late 1960s to describe discrimination against older adults. Butler defined "ageism" as a combination of three connected elements: (1) prejudicial attitudes towards older people, old age, and the aging process (how we think and feel); (2) discriminatory practices against older people (how we act); and (3) institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older adults (systemic actions). Was my mother guilty of and a victim of ageism? I should note that ageism can be directed toward people of all age groups, including Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. However, within our anti-aging culture, older adults tend to experience harmful age-based discrimination that can lead to faster decline in physical and mental health. Messages like "Over the Hill," "Past your Prime," or "Geezer" may be spoken with the intent to be funny, such as in a birthday card, but can perpetuate negative attitudes. Words like "Senior Citizen," and "Elderly" should be replaced with "Older Adult" as a more neutral and descriptive term to help address stereotyping or caricatures.

During the time my mother was retiring, I began to face up to my own prejudices against aging. Knowing how hurt and sad Mother was for leaving the workforce, I encouraged her to go to the local senior center and social gatherings for retirees at our church. Her response was, "That's where all the old people gather that have nothing else to do," and "I don't want to hang out with old people." I could have chosen my words more carefully. Instead, I believe my suggestion, while well-intended, may have hurt her feelings based on her reaction.

The truth is, we all are guilty of ageism at one point in our lives. In most instances, it is not something we do deliberately, but instinctively as a norm we have learned in our society. Ageism is one of the last socially acceptable prejudices. Do we understand how it impacts us and others around us? Recent research has shown that ageism against older people results in negative health outcomes for individuals and society. In his book, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* published in 1975, Dr. Robert Butler states, "We base our feelings on primitive fears, prejudice, and stereotypes rather than on knowledge and insight."

I started seeing a physical and mental decline in my mother once she stopped working. The first sign was seeing her become withdrawn, isolating herself from others. This was not normal. She was grieving a loss. She was healthy until after retirement. Her family believed she could live to be 100 at that time.

My mother began to deteriorate physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. She was diagnosed with chronic conditions such as COPD, kidney failure, beginning stages of dementia, and other ailments. She did not smoke, did not have high blood pressure or diabetes often associated

with these types of chronic conditions. I could see her withdrawing from life and no matter what I or others did to encourage her, she seemed determined to give up on life until her death at age 83. There is no evidence to support one action leading to the other. Or is there evidence?

Dr. Thomas Cudjoe, Assistant Professor of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, reports that 40% of dementia cases could be prevented by increasing a healthy diet, physical activity, mental activity, cognitive activity, and social connection. This can lead to decreasing chronic health conditions such as hypertension, high cholesterol, uncontrolled diabetes, and depression.

I remember someone at her visitation saying, "Your mom lived a good long life and that is a blessing." I have to now wonder if that statement was accurate. I struggle with the "what ifs" such as what if she continued to work, even if it was part-time, what if she stayed socially engaged, what if she found something equally fulfilling, what if she had moved into a retirement community where she would have more daily contact with others, and now what if she had not bought into the prejudices of growing older such as feeling invisible and insignificant.

I moved in with my mother the last few years of her life to care for her and that presented its own challenges. I did feel a sense of obligation and sacrifice to care for her based on my belief system. I also experienced those well-intentioned comments from friends such as "You need to live your own life," or "Why don't you move her into a facility." Upon reflection, what did those comments imply? It is easy to judge someone's intentions until one is faced with the same decision. I do not regret my decision.

One approach to address ageism is when interacting with others, no matter how old or young, is to listen without judgement based on our own thoughts and feelings, ask questions with compassion, and find common ground. It takes practice but over time can start making a difference in how we react to one another despite our differences.

Another approach is to engage with others, including people of all ages and backgrounds. Step outside your comfort zone. This can lead to opportunities to learn, create and exchange ideas and experiences.

As I begin to think about retirement, I must admit that I have my own anxieties about the future. I think, if we are all honest, this is a common concern. What will your third age look like after the age of 60? Many say it is the time for reinvention, learning, and discovering new purpose.

The East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging (ECIAAA) wants to know more about your aging experience. Our mission is to lead and advocate for inclusive resources and services that empower the optimal aging of East Central Illinois' diverse older adults, their care partners, and individuals with disabilities. If you are age 55 and older, we invite you to participate in a short survey to gather your thoughts as you are aging as well as on accomplishing the big dreams in your life. ECIAAA needs your input to improve our messaging to older adults. The information collected is anonymous and the data will be used to improve services to older adults in East Central Illinois. Thank you!


Log in at <https://agingbetterillinois.com> or use the following QR code:

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