

FACT SHEET: Ageism & Age Discrimination

The term "ageism" refers to two concepts: a socially constructed way of thinking about older persons based on negative attitudes and stereotypes about aging and the tendency to structure society based on an assumption that everyone is young, thereby failing to respond appropriately to the real needs of older persons.

Ageism is often a cause for individual acts of age discrimination and also discrimination that is more systemic in nature, such as in the design and implementation of services, programs and facilities. Age discrimination involves treating persons in an unequal fashion due to age in a way that is contrary to human rights law. The Ontario *Human Rights Code* prohibits age discrimination in: employment, housing accommodation, goods, services and facilities, contracts and membership in trade and vocational associations.

Age discrimination is often not taken as seriously as other forms of discrimination. However, it can have the same economic, social and psychological impact as any other form of discrimination. To combat ageism, it is necessary to raise public awareness about its existence and to dispel common stereotypes and misperceptions about aging. Aging is a highly individual experience thus it is not possible to generalize about the skills and abilities of an older person based on age, any more than it is possible to make assumptions about someone based on any other aspect of their identity. Human rights principles require people to be treated as individuals and assessed on their own merits, instead of on the basis of assumptions, and to be given the same opportunities and benefits as everyone else, regardless of age. It is important to recognize that older persons make significant contributions to our society and that we must not limit their potential.

At the same time, ageism can be combated through inclusive planning and design which reflects the circumstances of persons of all ages to the greatest extent possible. The Supreme Court of Canada has recently made it clear that it is no longer acceptable to structure systems in a way that assumes that everyone is young and then try to accommodate those who do not fit this assumption. Rather, the age diversity that exists in society should be reflected in design stages for policies, programs, services, facilities and so forth so that physical, attitudinal and systemic barriers are not created. Where barriers already exist, those responsible should identify them and take steps to remove them.

Finally, it is important to remember that the experience of ageism and age discrimination may differ based on other components of a person's identity. For example, certain groups of older persons may experience unique barriers because of their age combined with their gender, disability, sexual orientation, race, color, ethnicity, religion, culture and language.

Source: The information in this fact sheet has been developed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and can be found at the following web site <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/issues/age>

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