

Why Care About 85 When You Are 25? ^A

plea to think about ageism before you get old.

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MAY 17, 2016

THE AGING ISSUE



In the past century, we have dramatically increased the average life span in the United States. According to [A Profile of Older Americans: 2014](#) released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “a child born in 2013 could expect to live 78.8 years, about 30 years longer than a child born in 1900.” This is truly an incredible feat, a result of the human-made medical, public health, and technological marvels from the last hundred years.

Nowadays, we can expect adults at age 65 to live, on average, an additional 19.3 years. Today, these individuals represent approximately 14.1 percent of the population, but by the year 2040, they are expected to be 21.7 percent of the population. Even more, the population of individuals over age 85 is expected to triple by 2040, from 6 million to 14.6 million. Many celebrate these projections, noting them as great accomplishments of modern society.

And thanks to these accomplishments, younger adults like myself can expect to live for many more years down the road than generations in the past. But what these numbers fail to highlight are the sociocultural realities of being an older adult and the experience of being old in our current society. Anthropologist Jared Diamond, professor in the department of geography at UCLA, points out that today, “[old age is in some respects more miserable than ever before.](#)” The [Radical Age Movement](#), a grassroots nationwide effort “that challenges traditional notions of ageing,” notes that our stereotypes of older adults are “making things worse” in our country.

[Ageism](#) is rampant in our society: comedians make fun of memory loss in older adults, doctors often ignore older patients instead opting to talk to their adult child, and commercials present older adults as being out of date with modern culture and technologies. Messages from

television and film lead viewers to see older adults as limited in their capabilities to contribute to the larger society.

In popular movies and shows, older adults are depicted as helpless, angry, and childlike. Neil Genzlinger for [The New York Times](#) writes that comedies like “The Millers,” and “2 Broke Girls” often make older adults the butt of jokes, while dramas, like “American Horror Story” and “Revenge” vilify them. “Where are the older characters who behave appropriately around children, who don’t grope young women, who aren’t racist or sex-obsessed, who know how to send email?” Genzlinger asks. They seem nonexistent.

It is not surprising then to learn that [evidence](#) points to a link between greater television exposure and having more negative images of aging. The combination of our [youth-centric Western culture](#) and [media’s “anti-aging” attitude](#) has made aging out to be something for many of us to dread. Even from a linguistic point of view, *anti-aging* sets us up to be *against aging*. Indeed, [Growing Bolder](#), a division of Bolder Broadcasting, Inc. warns that we are taught “[when our skin begins to wrinkle, our dreams begin to die.](#)”

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This is the kind of messaging that younger adults see, and these are the messages that young adults internalize. These negative messages inform their ideas of aging and their perceived understanding of older adults, many times even unbeknownst to them. Personally, I know I had not realized how much I had internalized these messages until a few of years ago, when I began my masters in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University.

Upon graduating Washington University, I relocated to New York City ready to start the next chapter of my life. New to the Big City, I knew that I wanted to live with a housemate, preferably someone who knew the area well, in an apartment nearby campus. With those criteria in mind, I ended up renting a room in Catherine’s apartment. My housemate, Catherine, was 79 years old at the time. Other than the occasional renter like myself, she lived alone like almost half of women 75 and older. But that did not inherently make her lonely I quickly came to see. In fact, she frequented religious services, sang with a music group, attended fitness classes, enjoyed trips outside of the city, and relished dining out in Manhattan. When I first moved in, I was quite taken at how active she was. I had imagined that given her age, she would be the opposite—sluggish, unenergetic, and dependent.

Catherine helped me get involved in a local choral group, reconnecting me to one of my passions growing up. Thanks to her, I discovered the best cheesecake in the five boroughs, and had my first dim sum in Chinatown. I will always remember the performance of

Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Central Park that Catherine, who woke up at 5 a.m. to stand in line for tickets, took me to the first night I moved in. That was also the first night she taught me how to navigate New York public transit.

We shared stories with one another. Catherine told me what it was like to meet chef and author Julia Child, and what it was like to live in Manhattan during September 11. I told her about my passion for clinical practice and disclosed my confusion about which career path to take after my masters program.

Throughout my year of living with Catherine, there were times she had to make adjustments to her activities, as age had taken a toll on her body. During harsh winter days, she stayed inside for fear of falling and injuring herself. I witnessed memory lapses from time to time and saw the frustration on her face when her loved ones "didn't have time to talk." Nevertheless, I could tell that Catherine was determined to continue living her life the way she knew and loved.

While Catherine was unknowingly helping me debunk ageist stereotypes about older adults, I was simultaneously learning from my new classmates in the masters program, many who were also older adults.

For the first time in my entire educational career, I shared the classroom with a cohort of peers whose ages differed greatly from my own. Just six months earlier, I had finished my undergraduate training at Washington University, where I spent the majority of my time surrounded by students 18 to 22 years of age, in a fairly age-segregated environment where children and older adults were infrequently seen. But as a student in the [Narrative Medicine masters program](#), I was suddenly surrounded by students with a diversity of age and life experience.

Few of my graduate classmates were similar to my age; most were already established professionals in nursing, medicine, social work, and journalism. Outside of being successful students and scholars, my peers were proud parents and grandparents, partners, caretakers, survivors and activists whose life experiences outnumbered my own. Thus, my narrative medicine education became a holistic and diverse year of learning, where I not only drew from my professors, assignments, and the works of acclaimed literary figures, but also learned an unprecedented amount from my fellow classmates who were accomplished in their own right.

I was moved by my older peers who came back to graduate school after decades of working. Their thirst for knowledge, desire for intellectual dialogue, and passion for clinical care and well-being were tangible, and in turn, they motivated me. Even more, they broke down my preconceived notion that learning and education ended after a certain age. Reflecting back on my experience now, I see just how much the older students' perspectives contributed to my development as a scholar and activist.

I remember one particular afternoon after class in the fall semester, sitting on a bench on Broadway and 112th Street, having a discussion with an older classmate over a cup of coffee. I listened to my classmate, who was in her 60s, reveal the way she prepared for class by reading and rereading texts, making lists of unanswered questions and additional readings, and

researching every single detail mentioned in a written work that was unknown to her. It was evident to me that she did not take this graduate program and the opportunity to learn for granted. I felt privileged to participate in classes with a peer of this caliber who was committed to learning.

Initially, I had actually feared that given [my younger age](#), my older peers would not take me seriously in the classroom. But my peers, many of whom I built friendships with, always treated me as an equal and made it known that my viewpoints and experiences were valid and appreciated. Having this kind of peer support helped me to continue developing my thinking. Even more, studying alongside such gifted writers, learning about their own journeys and struggles, allowed me to explore my path leading up to the program and how it informed my point of view.

The combination of my experiences living with my housemate, Catherine, and studying in the narrative medicine program contradicted much of what I had been led to believe older adults were like. It forced me to confront many of the ageist messages I had internalized growing up—that older adults were lonely, boring, and suffering. I came to see how much these individuals in my life had contributed to my own growth. No longer was “old” something inherently bad or unfortunate. These “a-ha!” moments, where I was noticing “[uncharacteristic characteristics](#),” characteristics out of the “norm,” helped me challenge my views on older adults and aging.

Even more, I began to observe some of the everyday discrimination that happened against older adults in my former community of Morningside Heights. I witnessed the farmer’s market vendor talking unusually slowly and loudly to the older adult behind me in line so that he could “better understand.” I overheard the infantilizing language a server used to address an older dining patron: “You should finish up that plate, young lady.” I made note of other subtleties too, seemingly complimentary statements like “you look good for your age.” I came to hear about similar microaggressions that some of the older adults in my circles had experienced, and the steps they took to avoid revealing their age for fear that they would be treated differently.

Toward the tail end of my masters program, I became further involved in learning about views of aging and another related topic, death. In the summer of 2014, I began working with award-winning filmmaker, [Helen Whitney](#), on a documentary uncovering the ways people approach the topics of mortality and impermanence. Similar to aging, death was a topic that I felt largely uneducated about and even scared to discuss.

Aging and death reveal our inherent vulnerability—that from the moment we are born, we all move toward the same fate. And that terrified me. As a younger person who had not experienced many deaths in her immediate circles, I did not know *how* to talk about death or even how to approach the topic.

This fear of mine partially stemmed from a lack of knowledge concerning how to have a discussion about a topic that society has largely deemed taboo. Death was not something I learned from school or the media to talk about; it seemed like an unnecessary issue for younger adults, even though in reality, death can take any one of us at any time or age.

Working on the film, I finally felt like I had an excuse to talk about death openly, to practice talking about death and work to overcome my discomfort. I remember one moment, coming back to my apartment after having finished my work on the documentary film for the day, and asking my housemate Catherine a question I would have never dreamed of asking her months ago.

“Have you thought about how you’d like to pass away?”

“Yes,” she replied calmly, smiling up at me, “I’d like to pass away in my bed, with my family and loved ones standing around the edges.”

I paused for a moment, giving thought to her answer. “That sounds very peaceful.”

Through the process of working on the documentary, I began to feel more comfortable discussing these “taboo” topics—aging and death—and I overcame a fear I had that bringing these topics up with people was somehow rude or insensitive.

Even more, my newly found openness to these topics led my parents and me to have an important conversation about their wills upon my return from my masters program. What started out as a slightly uncomfortable conversation around our kitchen table quickly morphed into a discussion about their passions and hobbies in life, financial goals, and medical rights. By the end of our hour-long conversation, I felt more at ease knowing that we were all on the same page concerning what each family member wanted and hoped for.

Interestingly, I have noticed having an easier time discussing issues like death and aging with older adults rather than younger adults. Perhaps this is because these topics are more “relevant” to older adults, thus they are more open to having them.

My experiences of bringing up these topics with peers my age have been mixed. For some of my peers, these conversations seemed completely irrelevant and out of place: “I just don’t want to think about that,” one woman told me after I asked her if she had ever given thought to death. For others, these kinds of conversations are met with disdain. “I feel like it’s not my place to talk about those things”—that is one of the most recent responses I heard from a young man regarding aging and its social justice implications.

On the other hand, I have had some exceptional conversations with friends of mine who are young adults. Some of them have lost a parent, while others have been gravely affected by a family member’s terminal illness. Another had served in the military and lost fellow service men and women.

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positive self-perceptions of aging lived 7.5 fewer years than those with more positive self-perceptions of aging!

I remember learning about the passing of one of my former freshman residents in July of last year. Even though it was a few years after I had been a residential advisor at Washington University, my former co-residential advisor and I, along with our previous supervisors, got in touch to discuss ways to offer support. I was able to reach out to a couple of former residents and check in with them. Now in their own senior years about to graduate, I know they have kept his memory alive and worked to support one another through an incredibly difficult time.

Having these kinds of conversations with others has given me the chance to take a step back and reflect on my own life experience: How do I want to contribute to my communities? What do I hope to leave behind? How can I be intentional about creating a life I want to live? Over time, my answers to these questions have shifted, and will probably continue to change. Nevertheless, I use them as a compass to keep me on a trajectory that feels authentic and true for me.

I would be lying if I said that death does not still scare me. It continues to unsettle me. But the difference is that now I am not scared to talk about it. What scares me instead is the societal-level silence we have artificially sculpted around death, and the disservice we do ourselves by staying complacent to the negative ageist stereotypes.

Even in the online social justice activist communities I am part of, I rarely see issues of aging brought to the forefront. When they are mentioned, they are usually brought up by activists who have experienced microaggressions and discrimination related to their age. But they never seem to rally the same level of outrage as other important -isms (racism, sexism) and topics (sexual orientation, reproductive health rights). As Michael North, assistant professor of Management and Organizations at New York University's Stern School of Business [explains](#): "Because there is no PC backlash again it, [ageism is] overlooked as a form of prejudice."

So, why should younger adults care? For most young adults, it is not commonplace to think about issues of aging. From time to time, a particularly bad virus, or element of pain will remind them of their body's fragility, but once the sickness or sensation passes, everything seems to return back to normal. Even more, younger adults can actually benefit from culturally embedded ageism and [age discrimination](#). They win when older adults lose. But these [short-term benefits](#) come with long-term costs.

The age stereotypes younger adults acquire [decades before](#) they become older adults [unknowingly drives their attitudes and behaviors](#), and can harm them in serious and significant ways.

One of the most [startling findings](#) I came across recently that sustains this point is from a study published earlier this year from Becca Levy, PhD and colleagues. The researchers found that negative age stereotypes held earlier in life predicted the development of Alzheimer's

disease-related pathological changes in the brain later on in life. Even more, according to Levy, assistant professor of Public Health and Psychology at Yale University, many older adults have internalized negative stereotypes [since they themselves were children](#), and the effects are serious for health. In one of Levy and colleagues' [longitudinal studies](#) published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the researchers noted that adults over age 50 with less positive self-perceptions of aging lived 7.5 fewer years than those with more positive self-perceptions of aging! Clearly, these findings have very serious public health implications. Not only can positive self-perceptions of aging [increase life expectancy](#), but they can improve overall [functional health](#). Aging is a topic that warrants discussion in the advocacy and activism arenas, and ageism should be treated as the widely prevalent social injustice that it is.

As I was thinking about what younger adults can do to move the needle on these issues, I was reminded of the personal finance course I took in the business school during my senior year of college. One of the main ideas I took away from that class was to invest for the long-term, and by investing early I could help ensure a successful and happy financial future even if the benefits were not immediately visible to me. Personally, I took this concept of investment and used it to help understand how my actions against ageism and negative age stereotypes now could help me cultivate the kind bright and hopeful future I would like to live in.

By engaging younger adults in conversations on aging today, we are investing for our future. It is vital to cultivate a practice of age positivity and proactively contribute to the creation of a culture and environment that supports, respects, and encourages older adults. Doing so, we begin to [swap ageism for age pride](#). Taking these steps now, we can help ensure and build a solid foundation for the long-term.

As [Robert Butler](#), president of the International Longevity Center, noted: “We all aspire to live to be old, and consequently we all must work to create a society where old age is respected, if not honored, and where persons who have reached old age are not marginalized.” If there is any hope for us, especially younger adults, to live a long *and* enjoyable life in the future ahead, then we must act now to address issues of ageism.

Younger adults should discuss what is at stake, not only because it affects those we care about, but because it will directly affect us in years to come. However, if younger adults do not get invested, then I am afraid it will be as Alice Fisher, co-founder of the [Radical Aging Movement](#) warned: we’ll be [“setting up a prejudice against our own future selves.”](#)

Aging happens to every single one of us; it is universal and inevitable. Yes, it is natural that our bodies undergo a biological aging process, but what is not natural is the negative sociocultural weight that we place on aging. Words like “elderly” and “senior,” perpetuate a culture in which older adults do not feel welcome. Infantilizing language—“young man,” “honey,” or “dear,”—degrades older adults, and a sudden change of tone to be more childlike is insulting to older adults who are far from being children. People should not have to live in shame of older age, and they should not have to hide their age for fear of being treated differently.

One of the few times I see popular media sources like [Mic](#), [Forbes](#), [Time](#), [Maxim](#), and [Oprah](#) making attempts to get audiences to “care” about older adults is when they publish the

advice and longevity “secrets” from the world’s oldest living people. At the surface, these articles seem inspirational and motivational; some people may even appreciate them. And I suppose they are an exception to the usual lack of attention on older adults.

We should move beyond objectifying older adults as “token” people with some kind of longevity “secret,” ... Where do we honor the struggles they have overcome, and where are the narratives that highlight their *real* wisdom and advice? These are the kinds of articles and dialogues that we need if we hope to break down the heavily embedded negative age stereotypes against older adults.

But those articles are problematic. The older adults mentioned in them are reduced to a number, their age, which is used as a shock factor to draw readers. And then, decades of lived experience are boiled down to single, tongue-in-cheek sound bite marketed as “advice.” More often than not, the advice is something related to diet, alcohol consumption, tobacco use (or lack thereof), physical activity, and sleep. Sometimes, these articles are accompanied by memes and “catchy” quotes from older adults—“*My secret to a long life has been staying away from men,*” or “*a lot of booze.*” These articles also send a message this is, ultimately, contradictory: I should strive to live longer, yet work to ensure that I do not look like I am aging. And so, I gradually internalize how awful it is to live longer, and come to terms with the fact that I will not be thought of much.

We should move beyond objectifying older adults as “token” people with some kind of longevity “secret,” because viewing them in this way creates distance between older adults and others. It runs counter to fostering genuine and honest conversations with older adults about their experiences. Where do we acknowledge these individuals as fellow human beings, more than the prophet-like figures they are made out to be? Where do we honor the struggles they have overcome, and where are the narratives that highlight their *real* wisdom and advice? These are the kinds of articles and dialogues that we need if we hope to break down the heavily embedded negative age stereotypes against older adults.

Let us leverage the power that we do have and start taking small steps to change these messages. We can demand that [media and marketing](#) incorporate the interests of older adult and represent older adults as the nuanced individuals they are. Let us encourage intergenerational conversations by [starting discussion groups](#) to learn more about ageism. Even more, we can check and challenge our own ageist tendencies by taking an [Implicit Association Test](#). Most importantly, let us stop pitying older adults and begin viewing them as peers and equals.

Fortunately, there are some individuals, organizations, and online media sources that are already taking steps to be more pro-aging, and by doing so, are reclaiming and redefining what it

really means to be “old.” Age activist Ashton Applewhite passionately debunks old age stereotypes and myths in her newly released book, [This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism](#) and runs a blog called [Yo, Is This Ageist?](#) which highlights everyday instances of ageism. Other blogs like [Advanced Style](#) showcase the fashion forward street-style of older women; even prominent fashion-houses have taken to [using models over 60](#) in their mass media print campaigns.

Recently, 56-year-old-model Nicola Griffin became the oldest woman to ever be featured in the pages of [Sports Illustrated](#) in an ad for plus-size swim retailer, Swimsuits for All. Griffin, who had never worn a two-piece bathing suit until the photoshoot for the ad, said, “It’s about time that women didn’t feel this pressure to be a certain size, or a certain look.” Setting aside for a moment that magazines like *Sports Illustrated* are problematic in the ways they objectify and hypersexualize women, this kind of ad sends a message to the mainstream that older women can feel good in their skin and [reclaim sexy in their own terms](#).

One of my favorite articles that challenges preconceived notions about older adults comes from an online Chicago neighborhood news source. Helen Lambien, a woman in her 80s, [started getting tattoos at age 75](#) as a means of expression and connecting with others in the younger generations. More than 50 tattoos later, Lambien says these tattoos were a way for her to break barriers and approach others; these tattoos were also for others to know “it’s okay, we can talk to each other.”

Social media influencers like [Baddie Winkle](#), an octogenarian with over 1.8 million Instagram followers, are finding novel ways to connect and relate to younger adults, and are breaking the mold. After losing her son and husband, Helen van Winkle made herself over into Baddie Winkle and thus, started a new chapter in her life. When “[somebody tells me I can’t do something](#),” says Winkle, “I’m going to show ’em I can.”

Organizations like Argentum, formerly known as the Assisted Living Federation of America, have formed initiatives like their [short-film competition](#) to promote the creation of art that changes social norms around aging. Their 2015 Short Film Competition winner, [Transforming the Perception of Age](#), directed by John Jeffcoat, is an honest and thought-provoking depiction of the experiences of two older adults, Art Schultz, 91, and Lydia Balk, 85. In five minutes, Jeffcoat captures the lived experiences of Schultz and Balk as older adults—the good and the bad, the triumphs and barriers, and their advice for others.

These examples are, of course, not without their own critiques. There is a lack of racial and ethnic diversity, as well as other identities, in these stories about older adults. We need to advocate for and showcase the stories that represent the wide range of older adults in the larger population. My work with [Adios Barbie](#), an online body-image activist site, has taught me just how critical it is to have an intersectional approach toward understanding social justice issues. With this perspective, we can begin to recognize the ways multiple identities have an impact on one another, and their interplay affects lived experience. Being old is complicated; being an older, black lesbian even more so.

My recent experiences have had a profound impact on my thinking. I am more aware of the issues affecting older adults than ever before. Living with Catherine, studying in the narrative medicine program with my older peers, working on the documentary on mortality, and taking note of microaggressions against older adults in my community—these are the experiences that prompted me to begin educating myself on issues affecting older adults. An interest in collective wellbeing is what continues to motivate me to talk about these issues and strive for positive change.

The Radical Age Movement commands us to stop “ignoring the potential value” of older adults and start seeing them as equal contributors to society, with great [interpersonal skills, expertise and knowledge](#). I could not agree more. As the population of older adults in the United States increases, and as younger generations are expected to live longer than ever before, I encourage you to join me in addressing ageism in our country. If we continue to view ageism as a problem for just older adults then we have failed—nothing will change. Ageism is a problem for all of us, whatever our age. Empathy is the key. If we share stories, take time to understand each others’ concerns, and question the status quo, then we can meet on common ground, across ages, and *lead together*.

<https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/care-85-25-plea-think-ageism-get-old/>