Bias Against the Elderly Creates a Negative View of Aging

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American society in general glorifies youth and fears or even despises old age. This is not the case in many other societies where age is associated with wisdom, knowledge and special status.

We see evidence of this bias towards older Americans especially in the media. In films and on TV old people are very often depicted as weak, indecisive, bumbling or even comic. We laugh at their misdeeds and forgive their mistakes knowing in the back of our minds that they are old and can't help themselves. We view them not as capable as younger people. It is rarely that we see older people depicted as decisive, strong or as leaders. We see this same attitude with large corporations and government employers. At a certain age, employees are encouraged or expected to "retire" to a new phase of their lives where they are not required to work for a living any longer. Retirement is presumably a reward for many years of dedication and hard work, but the underlying philosophy is more likely based on the idea that older workers are no longer productive or useful.

As Americans age we fear the deterioration of our bodies and the possible lack of security due to low income—a byproduct of old age. Some people in our country fight old age through cosmetic surgery, use of supplements, aggressive weight loss programs or through overzealous physical training programs. Other people accept old age gracefully and adapt as well as they can. Still others refuse to grow old and resist aging by adopting social strategies such as denial, refusal to participate in life or becoming belligerent. (The angry old codger image).

Instead of taking the role as leaders in their families or in the community as is the case in some countries, the elderly in our country, even after successful careers in earlier years, simply become invisible. They waste their prodigious talents traveling, entertaining, socializing, watching TV or playing golf. They are rarely asked to assume responsible roles in the community. And unlike other cultures, older Americans often abandon themselves to control by other people, often their children and their health care providers. Instead of taking responsibility for their own decisions, they will rely on children or others to make decisions for them. Many of them seem to enjoy the role of becoming dependent on others. And it is all too often the case that family and others pander to this submissive role of the elderly and we begin treating them like children.

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This generally accepted perception of aging in our country has resulted in the elderly themselves and in the community at large regarding older people as less valuable than younger people. The assumption is that the elderly have lost the ability to think clearly, to learn new things and they are generally incapable of any physical activity other than walking or sitting. This attitude also carries over into the health treatment that older Americans receive.

Older Persons' Attitudes Towards Their Health
Many elderly buy into the notion that they themselves are no longer useful and as a result make little attempt to keep themselves healthy and active. After all, they are getting closer to the end of their lives and have no desire to try new things or to challenge themselves or to eat or exercise properly.

There is a great deal of anecdotal and research evidence that demonstrates older people can learn, can retain memory and can be actively involved in business and in the community. The lack of physical exercise, social involvement and mental stimulation in older Americans often leads to these people losing the ability to use their minds and their bodies. The older person’s negative attitude towards aging becomes self-fulfilling.

Many reason that they have missed their opportunities in life when they were younger and it’s too late to start over. As a result, many older people are intimidated by new ideas or by technology such as computers, not because they are incapable but simply because of their attitude. The idea of not being able to “teach an old dog new tricks” is in most cases an excuse. Obviously this mind-set of failure and inability to perform becomes self-fulfilling. Not surprisingly, depression and suicide are more common in the elderly than in the younger population.

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The negative attitude towards aging on the part of an older person has a direct impact on that person's health. Many studies show that people who are physically active have less joint pain, lower blood pressure, less depression, fewer heart attacks and a lower incidence of cancer. Proper nutrition also has the same effect on the aging process; it delays the onset of debilitating illness or disability.

According to James S. Marks, M.D., M.P.H., director of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion:

"Research has shown that poor health does not have to be an inevitable consequence of growing older. Death is inevitable, but for many people, it need not be preceded by a slow, painful, and disability-ridden decline. Our nation will continue to age—that we cannot change—but we can delay and in many cases prevent illness and disability."

A study in 2000 from the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society reports that inactive women at age 65 have a life expectancy of 12.7 years whereas highly active, nonsmoking women at 65 have a life expectancy of 18.4 years. A report from the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] indicates that very few older Americans get 30 minutes or more exercise for five days a week or more. The report states that up to 34% of adults age 65 to 74 are inactive and up to 44% or almost half of adults age 75 are inactive. A study from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force reveals that regular exercise can reduce life-threatening falls in the elderly by 58%. Another study showed that regular exercise reduced pain and increased function in joints of older Americans suffering from osteoarthritis.... Yet another study found that strength training was as effective as medication in reducing depressive symptoms in older adults. Other studies from the Department of Health and Human Services support the idea that older people who are responsible for their own health and their own health decisions are healthier than people who rely on others to make decisions for them.

Further Readings

Books
• Daniel Callahan Taming the Beloved Beast: How Medical Technology Costs Are Destroying Our Health Care


• Olga Brom Spencer *New Frontiers in Aging: Spirit and Science to Maximize Peak Experience in Your 60s, 70s, and Beyond*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008.


**Periodicals**


• Patricia Ahern "End of Life—Not End of Story: With the Number of Seniors Rising, Hospice Care Needs Greater Attention," *Modern Healthcare*, June 18, 2007.


• Patricia Leigh Brown "Invisible Immigrants, Old and Left with 'Nobody to Talk To,'" *New York Times*, August 30, 2009.

• Stephanie Clifford "Online, ‘a Reason to Keep on Going’," *New York Times*, June 1, 2009.


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