



Please don't call  
me "elderly"

Avoiding ageism in  
your writing

Stephanie M. Morrison, MPH  
Writer-Editor  
Office of Communications & Public Liaison  
National Institute on Aging

NIA is the part of the National Institutes of Health that conducts and supports research on aging and the health and well-being of older people.



Let's talk for a moment about birthday cards.

Have you noticed that a lot of cards tend to be rather...mean...about getting older?

So many negative messages about aging.

There's a card with basically every stereotype you can think of: You can't hear, see, drive...Happy birthday!

They may seem harmless...but they reinforce negative attitudes about older adults and aging.

Ageism is everywhere. It's not just greeting cards. We are so used to negative messages about older people that we often don't even recognize them.

Gerontology researcher Carol Cox called ageism ""the last form of discrimination that's widely accepted in our culture."

And unless we're aware of it, we're at risk of being part of the problem.



Let's dig into what ageism is.

This definition is from the World Health Organization's 2021 Global Report on Ageism

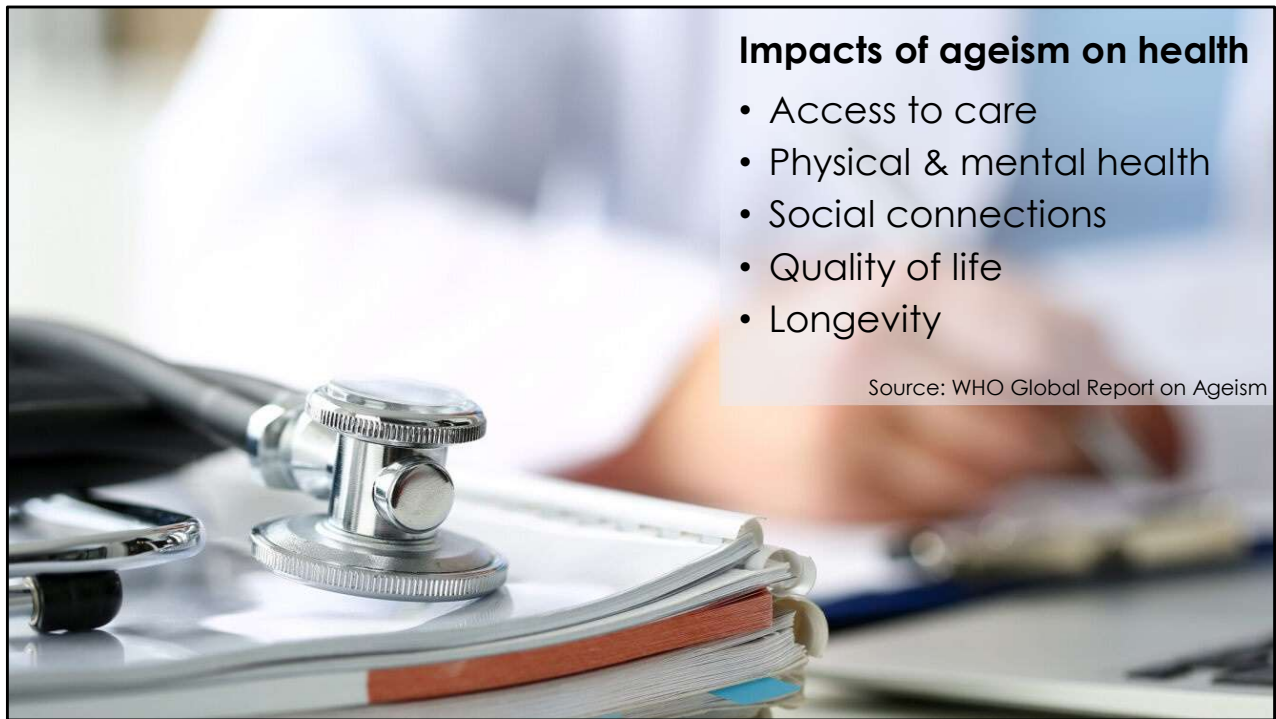
You can see that ageism is multifactorial; includes stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act)

Directed towards people on the basis of their age

Can come from outside or be internalized/self-directed

As I'm sure you're aware, ageism can affect people of any age, but I'm going to focus on the form that sees youth as more valuable than age.

Ageism can affect many aspects of older adults' lives. Let's focus on its effects on health.



Also according to the WHO report: ageism is a significant public health problem.

It impacts multiple facets of physical, mental, and social health, including health behaviors and access to care. It can even shorten lives.

These effects are seen all around the world.

The report concludes, “Even if interventions to reduce ageism were to have only small effects, they could lead to big improvements in older people’s lives.”

So what can we do as medical writers to avoid perpetuating ageism in health information?

Language  
+  
Images



I'm going to talk about two areas: the words we use, and the pictures we choose to accompany the words.

I'll share some practical ways to promote an inclusive, respectful attitude toward older people and aging, while still being descriptive and accurate.

First we'll look at language: Words to avoid and words to use when writing about and for older adults.

Then we'll turn to imagery.

If you're in a position to select or recommend images to go with an article, web page, or book chapter, I'll give you some tips for selecting images that are relatable and inclusive.



- ✗ elderly
- ✗ seniors, senior citizens
- ✗ geriatric
- ✗ “of a certain age”
- ✗ aging well, successful aging
- ✗ young at heart

Let’s start with terminology to avoid. The major style guides are quite consistent with their guidance on language in this area.

Avoid language that:

- Perpetuates stereotypes and has negative connotations
- Avoid “geriatric” when talking about people
- Euphemisms like “of a certain age” imply that there’s something shameful about aging and older people, and you shouldn’t talk about them directly
- Terms like “aging well” and “successful aging” create the idea that there’s a right way and a wrong way for a person to do aging
- “Young at heart” seems like a compliment, but it implies that being young is better than being old.

Now let’s look at some alternatives.

- ✓ older adults
- ✓ older population
- ✓ “us” instead of “them”

 Be specific!



You want to use these when there’s no more specific description available.

When possible, be specific. If you’re talking about research done in Black women between 65 and 75, say that.

When possible, use inclusive words like “we” and “us” instead of “them” when talking about issues that affect older adults.

Everyone in this room is aging. There’s no “them;” there’s only us.

In general, use language that’s descriptive, accurate, specific, and respectful. Note that this language will evolve over time.

Now let’s consider images that accompany your text. First we’ll look at what NOT to do with images.



These are some exaggerated examples of the kinds of images you'll want to avoid using.

Avoid: Images that perpetuate negative stereotypes of older people, caricatures. (Feeble, fragile, incapable, helpless, bad drivers)

Avoid going too far in the other direction: Images that provide unrealistic depictions of "super seniors" (skydiving, waterskiing, motorcycle riding).

Although there are older people who do more "extreme" activities, it's not going to be true to the experiences of most people, and they won't identify with this kind of image.

Now let's look at some better options for images.



Instead: Choose images that are relatable, respectful, and realistic. Represent the audience you're writing about and for.

Follow best practices for any images in honoring diversity in age, race/ethnicity, sex, gender identity, ability.

- Older people doing the things people do, being active and engaged
- People with limited mobility having competence and ability
- Use images to actively combat stereotypes: Older people using technology confidently and accurately

I'm not suggesting that we ignore the challenges and limitations that come with aging. But recognize that these aren't the same for everyone; older adults have a range of experiences.

You want your readers to come away thinking that they can “see” themselves and their loved ones in the imagery you select.

We can help create a more positive and inclusive view of aging.



Here's the bottom line: As medical writers, we can help people of all ages think more positively about aging.

Start by becoming aware of your own attitudes toward aging and the language you use and hear every day.

And recognize what does and doesn't represent the diverse range of life experiences that older adults can have.

Once you're aware of the issue, you can choose words and images that promote more positive attitudes toward aging.

I hope you'll think about these the next time you're writing for or about older adults.



And I hope you'll also think about this the next time you're at the drugstore selecting a birthday card for someone you love.

Instead of a message like, "Happy birthday, you old fogey," choose one that celebrates getting older for the gift that it is.

Thank you very much!