

The Plague of Ageism – A Story Time Interpretation

It is difficult to believe that only a few short months ago, I heard the word “ageism” for the first time. Since then, I immersed myself in online articles and wrinkled pages of tattered books to investigate this social phenomenon. After all of that, I believe the most appropriate manner to interpret ageism is how any other abstract, multifaceted concept might be explained. Grab a mug, pour in your favorite drink of comfort, and feel the heat permeate through the porcelain and into your palms. Now that you are toasty and cozy, it is story time.

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Beverly arrived home after an exhausting day out of the house. She swiped up the dog leash, hooked it onto Lucky’s collar, and begrudgingly walked out the door. The evening air was crisp and fresh, and she inhaled the cool air and felt her lungs accepting the winter chill. Her feet felt like cinder blocks, and her joints creaked and whined with every step on the cold concrete sidewalk.

Raising her gaze from the ash-colored ground to the horizon, she allowed herself to wander into the wilderness of her mind. She was mesmerized by the beauty of the tangerine sunset receding behind the Colorado mountains. The way the orange glow hugged the curves of the snow-speckled landscape reminded her of a child holding onto a waffle cone topped with orange creamsicle ice cream.

The sharp tug of Lucky’s leash from her hand awakened her. A small rabbit was bounding across the pavement towards the dense foliage with Lucky right on its cotton ball tail. Without thought, she scrambled for the leash loop, ignoring the bellyaching of her tired muscles. Her footing faltered, and she tripped and slammed into the damp grass. Beverly heaved herself off the ground as her body moaned in anguish. Craning her neck up, relief overcame her when she spotted Lucky scampering back to her after his hunting misadventure.

After the arduous three-story ascent back to her apartment, Beverly retired to her haven of fluffy pillows and blankets. The gentle warmth of the steamy shower was kind to her body—something that always soothed some of the aches and pain away. Once she cocooned herself into the soft blankets and Lucky snuggled into the nook of her side, she surrendered her breaths to the tune of a tranquil sleep.

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Now that you glimpsed a snippet of Beverly’s life, what age do you think she is? Perhaps she is a 75-year-old woman plagued with the pain of osteo-whatever. On the other hand, maybe Beverly is a 19-year-old woman with juvenile arthritis and looking forward to hushing her whimpering joints after returning home from community college. Both scenarios are very much possible, but the beauty of Beverly’s story is in the open interpretation of who you think she is.

What is ageism?

Essentially, ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, or discrimination toward people based on their age. Along with race and gender, age is one of the most prevalent factors utilized to swiftly funnel individuals into one category or another. Male and female, white and colored, young and

old. If this manner of thought is surface level, then we will need a jack hammer to unearth a deeper meaning of what makes a person an individual.

I urge you to not rebuff ageism as a mere societal construct. The public's fear of growing older has been adorned and nurtured for many years. Everyone has seen a flashy advertisement for a product guaranteed to smooth wrinkles, conceal grey hairs, and shelter bald spots. Ageism has become a profitable market over the years, but not without consequences.

The effect of ageism on health and wellbeing ripples through our communities. Research supports a strong correlation between age bias and mortality risk, poor functional health, and slower sickness recovery. When ageism seeps into the healthcare system, we start seeing a trend of reduced quantity and quality of care for these individuals. Furthermore, age discrimination has been deemed a "chronic stressor" for many people that, in turn, may further burden their health. If ageism can elicit a negative impact of the health of many, shouldn't minimizing its prevalence help the masses of those suffering in its wake?

Time is a valuable thing—we have an unknown yet finite amount of it. Age is something we all have that symbolizes our precious time on this Earth...so why is it something to be a target for others to gauge our worth? While we cannot control the thoughts of others, we can certainly be mindful of our own. Education on ageism is one step up the laborious ladder of social equity, but it is a big step. Returning to Beverly, do your thoughts now differ from when you first met her? Although Beverly is hypothetical here, she could be real out there. I encourage you to remember Beverly when age bias bares teeth.

By Arianna Armendariz, Doctor of Physical Therapy Student

Resources used in writing this blog:

1. Applewhite A. *This Chair Rocks: a Manifesto against Ageism*. New York: Celadon Books; 2020.
2. Burnes D, Sheppard C, Henderson CR Jr, et al. Interventions to Reduce Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Am J Public Health*. 2019;109(8):e1-e9. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305123