

# Marin Independent Journal

Thursday, October 17, 2024

## Marin Voice

# When we are addressing ageism, what we say matters

By Kristi Denton Cohen  
and Lisa Brinkmann

As a community, we're working hard to raise awareness and address inequities around race, gender and disability. But National Ageism Awareness Day on Oct. 9 reminded us we are only beginning to grasp and address the inequities around age.

Ageism is ubiquitous, no matter how old you are. It refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) toward people based on their age, just like the other "isms" we encounter every day.

It operates similarly to other forms of discrimination, where stereotypes and biases dictate the value and capabilities of a person based on a single characteristic — in this case, their age. It denies people the right to fair treatment, equal opportunity, and the ability to fully participate in society, regardless of their stage of life.

Ageism is one of the most

prevalent forms of discrimination. Studies by the World Health Organization have found that ageism affects more people globally than racism or sexism, with older adults being stereotyped and discriminated against in both public and private life. A 2020 National Poll on Healthy Aging found that 82% of older Americans reported experiencing ageism on a regular basis.

And unlike other forms of bias that target specific groups, ageism can affect us all. National Ageism Awareness Day reinforces our awareness of an issue that should exist throughout the year.

Job discrimination, infantilization or just not being taken seriously can happen to younger and older adults. As the fastest growing demographic in Marin County and, increasingly, throughout the world, many older adults are deeply impacted by ageism.

Ageism impacts our health, our well-being and even our financial stability. We face barriers to employment, longer peri-

**By consciously choosing words that affirm the dignity of older individuals, we can help dismantle the ageist attitudes that permeate our culture.**

ods of unemployment, and fewer professional development opportunities compared to younger workers.

In health-care settings, discrimination based on age is a pervasive issue affecting millions of older adults worldwide. While health care is meant to ensure the well-being of all individuals, ageist attitudes often undermine the quality of care that older adults receive. These biases can result in delayed diagnoses, inadequate treatment options, and an overall lack of attention to the needs of the aging population.

According to the AARP, ageism cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$850 billion in lost economic gains due to involuntary retirement, unemployment and underemployment among older

adults. Financial security and self-esteem are some of the first things to go when caught up in this cycle. The impact on our physical health follows close behind. Isolation and loneliness have created a public health crisis.

Language is powerful. By consciously choosing words that affirm the dignity of older individuals, we can help dismantle the ageist attitudes that permeate our culture. This can also impact how we perceive our own aging process throughout our lives.

"Old far," "geezer" and "over the hill" are clearly ageist descriptions. When someone says "Gee, you don't look your age," it's not much of a compliment. Just think about what we might be telling ourselves when we

apologize for having "a senior moment."

Being more mindful of these descriptions will improve how we think about each other. If we refer to each other as "older adults" instead of the more frail or dependent word "seniors," we move away from the downward spiral of negativity, lose the stereotypes and support positive images of each other — and ourselves.

Diversity, equity and inclusion includes people of all ages. This movement has done a tremendous job in advocating for other marginalized groups, but it is incomplete without addressing ageism.

By raising the awareness of ageism — toward ourselves, in our workplaces and throughout the community, we can treat everyone with the dignity and respect we all deserve.

---

*Kristi Denton Cohen, of Mill Valley, is chair of the Marin County Commission on Aging. Lisa Brinkmann, of Mill Valley, is program director for Marin's Aging Action Initiative.*