Aging, Ageism, and Ableism

Beliefs, Myths, Research, and Action

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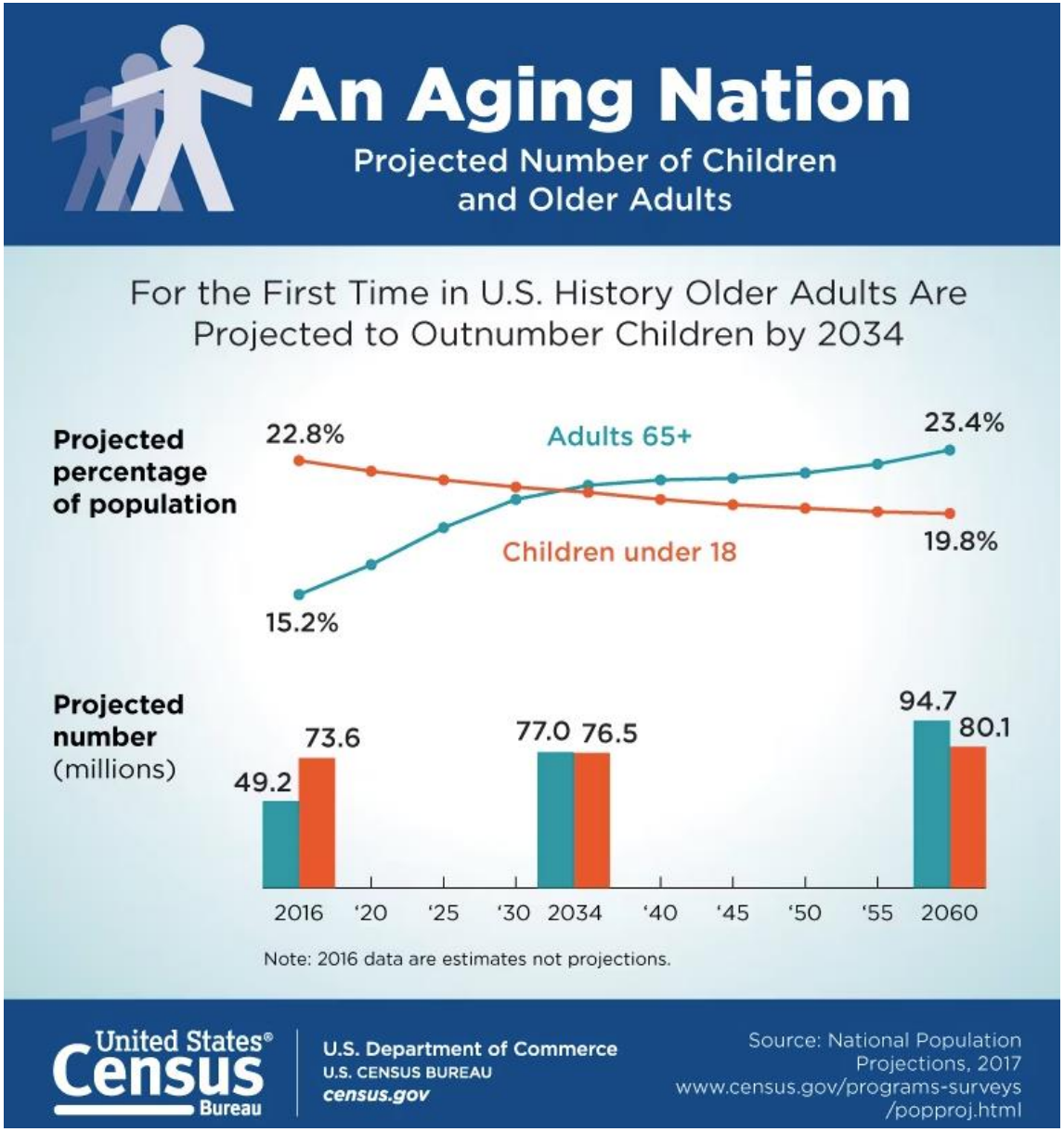
Agenda

Consciousness raising
Find commonality
Look at the landscape
Understand key terms
Dispel myths
Highlight the research
Transforming our Perspective
Resources

Let's Reflect: Consciousness Raising

- When do you recall first noticing age differences?
- What beliefs do you have about aging and where did they come from?
- How do you feel about wrinkles? And, why?
- Have you ever been discriminated against based on your age?

The One Thing We Have in Common



Source:
US Census National Population Projections (2017)
Population Reference Bureau (PRB) Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States (2024)

Implicit Biases

are attitudes and stereotypes we associate with other people that exist without our conscious knowledge. Implicit biases may be positive or negative, but the key thing is that they are activated involuntarily and without our awareness or intentional control.

Source: VCU Gerontology, Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit

Ageism

is discrimination based on age.

Ageism impacts how we think (stereotypes), how we feel (prejudice) and how we act (discrimination) towards others or oneself based on age (WHO).

Source: World Health Organization (WHO)

Ableism

is the stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their physical and/or cognitive ability.

Source: VCU Gerontology, Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit

Elderhood

is the stage of life beyond adulthood, more commonly referred to as “older adulthood.”

“We talk about infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and then it’s just older adulthood. It's like this nebulous period that just goes on and on for 40 or 50 years. I think elderhood is important because it's a unique and distinct stage of life that offers different opportunities for growth and development. Elderhood to me is focused on a unique stage of life that is different from adulthood and involves positive growth, whereas when we talk about “older adulthood” – we think about it in more of a decline-only based way.”

Source: VCU Gerontology, Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit
Image: Tracey Gendron, PhD, leading researcher on elderhood taken by Tom Kojcsich VCU Marketing

Age and Ability Inclusion

is a way of organizing social worlds and physical spaces in which people of all ages and physical and cognitive abilities feel valued as unique individuals deserving of recognition, respect, and equal access to opportunities and resources.

Source:
VCU Gerontology, Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit

Identity Related Terms

Identity-related terms: Terms to avoid and suggested alternatives

Term to avoid	Suggested alternative	Comment
the elderly elderly people the aged aging dependents seniors senior citizens	older adults older people persons 60 years and older older population older individuals	Avoid language that promotes stereotypes that "other" older adults. However, please note that in certain cultures, the term "Elder" is considered an honorific.
geriatric pregnancy	advanced maternal age pregnancy at age 35 or older	Use person-first language to describe the age of a pregnant person. Older pregnant people may benefit from additional screening.
silver tsunami	age-related population changes age-related demographic changes	Use affirmative language specific to demographic information.

Source: APA Inclusive Language Guide (2021) https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines

Who is the person on the left?

Image: by Fred Sabine/NBCUniversal, via Getty Images

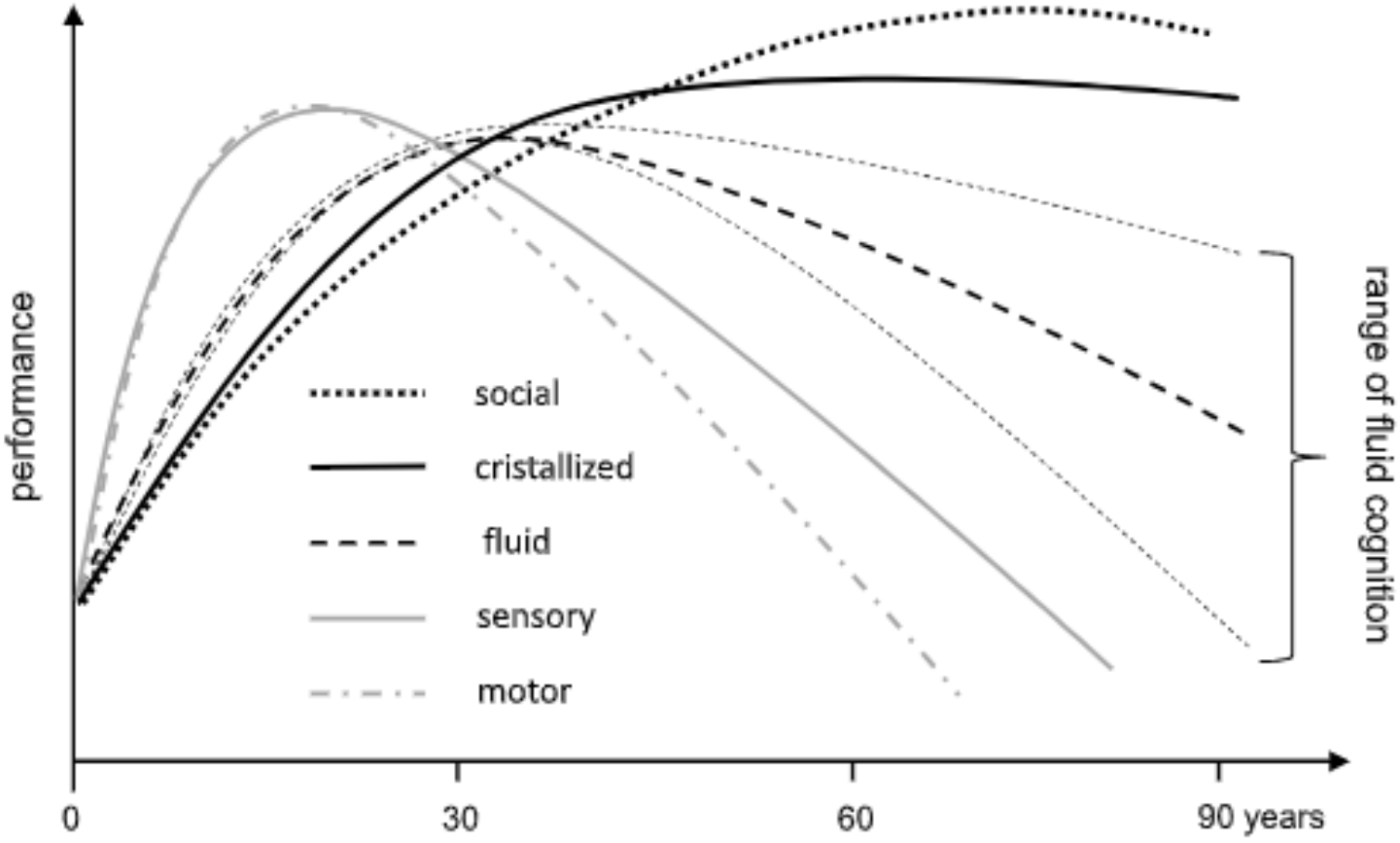
Maggie Kuhn on Myths About Old Age

"…'There are six myths about old age: 1. That it's a disease, a disaster. 2. That we are mindless. 3. That we are sexless. 4. That we are useless. 5. That we are powerless. 6. That we are all alike.'

If this is believed and internalized, we will feel it about others."

Source: Constant, B., (2023) Op-ed in *The Daily Progress*, https://dailyprogress.com/opinion/column/opinion-column-we-are-all-aging/article_5b197862-eab3-11ed-be6c-b3e1e54060e9.html

Research – Lifelong Growth



Source: Gajewski, P.D., Falkenstein, M. (2011) Neurocognition of aging in working environments. *ZAF* 44, 307–320. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12651-011-0090-6

The Mind Game is Strong

Participants with the most positive age beliefs were ***living on average 7.5 years longer*** *than participants with the most negative age beliefs.*

Sources:

Levy, B., Slade, M., Kunkel, S., Kasl, S. (2022) Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 83(2) 261-270. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.83.2.261. PMID: 12150226.

Levy, B. (2022) *Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long & Well You Live*. Harper Collins.

Levy, B., Slade, M., Chang, E., Kannoth, S., Wang, S. (2020) Ageism Amplifies Cost and Prevalence of Health Conditions, *The Gerontologist*, 60(1) 174–181, https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny131

Image: Becca Levy, PhD, https://ysph.yale.edu/profile/becca-levy/

Beliefs About Aging Can Change You

I am wise. I am alert.

- *People with positive beliefs have 30% better memory scores in older age than people with negative age beliefs.*
- *Those with negative age beliefs were more likely to develop biomarkers of Alzheimer's.*
- *People with negative age beliefs exercise less.*

Sources: ibid

Our Health Is Not Solely Up To Us

Figure 1

Social Determinants of Health

Economic Stability	Neighborhood and Physical Environment	Education	Food	Community and Social Context	Health Care System
Employment	Housing	Literacy	Hunger	Social integration	Health coverage
Income	Transportation	Language	Access to healthy options	Support systems	Provider availability
Expenses	Safety	Early childhood education		Community engagement	Provider linguistic and cultural competency
Debt	Parks	Vocational training		Discrimination	Quality of care
Medical bills	Playgrounds	Higher education		Stress	
Support	Walkability				
	Zip code / geography				

Health Outcomes

Mortality, Morbidity, Life Expectancy, Health Care Expenditures, Health Status, Functional Limitations

Source: Artiga, S. and Hinton, E. (2018) Beyond Health Care: The Role of Social Determinants in Promoting Health and Health Equity. Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF).

KFF
HENRY J KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

Transforming Our Perspective

- Challenge inner dialogue and confront ageist beliefs.
- Dive into educational resources to deepen understanding of aging.
- Bridge generational gaps by promoting meaningful interactions between older and younger people.
- Advocate for laws and policies that protect against ageism - and that enhance life at every stage.
- Demand a diverse portrayal of aging in media and society.

Source: VCU Gerontology. Community and Continuing Education Instagram on 02/07/2024

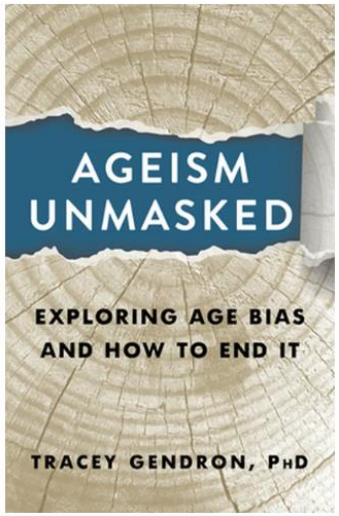
“I may be a senior, but so what?
I’m still hot.”

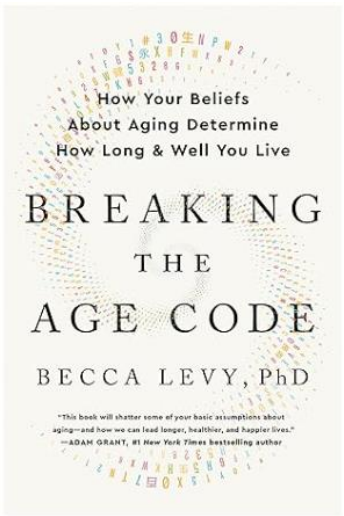
– Betty White

Let's Chat (Again): Consciousness Raising

- What do you like about being your age or older?
- What are you looking forward to? What's next?
- Why are you proud of yourself, your life experiences, and your age?
- What would a community that welcomes lifelong growth and embraces the wisdom of elders/older adults look like or feel like?
- Did anything you learn today change how you feel about aging?

Anti-Ageism Resources





Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse - https://oldschool.info/

American Society on Aging - https://www.asaging.org/ageism-awareness

becoming bOLDer podcast https://becomingbolder.podbean.com/

A Few More Important Resources

Elder Abuse: Do You or Someone You Know Need Help?
In Virginia, each local department of social services houses its own Adult Protective Services (APS) unit. You can find your local department here: https://www.dss.virginia.gov/localagency/index.cgi or call the toll-free 24-hour hotline at 1-888-832-3858.

No Wrong Door
A statewide system that connecting individuals and communities, to resources, tools, professionals and services related to housing, in-home services, transportation programs and more.
https://easyaccess.virginia.gov

Social Health Connector
This tool encourages you to consider social connections in your life. You'll receive a personalized Social Connection Plan based on your responses to a short questionnaire.
https://easyaccess.virginia.gov/about-soheco

Thank You!

Takeaways.
Comments.
Questions?