

Reflections on Ageism

By Nancy Hooyman, Board President



Ageism is the one form of discrimination we all experience. It's based on chronological age and the stigma that our society attaches to being old. It's problematic because it legitimizes and sustains inequalities between groups based on age. It occurs at the societal and individual level where we have internalized society's negative stereotypes about aging. It's subtle but insidious. Often we may not be aware of ageist behaviors or attitudes. We may not always be able to name it, but are uneasy when we experience it.

20 *Wider Horizons* members met via Zoom in June for a discussion of ageism with myself, **Bob Anderson**, and **Debbie Ward**. An energizing and thought-provoking discussion, addressing four questions, is summarized here.

A recent experience/interaction with ageism that members had with another person or social institution:

- Being spoken around or over based on perceptions of age.
- Being offered help without being asked if we would like it (though we agreed that accepting help with grace is part of positive or conscious aging). We need to differentiate ageism from a younger person being genuinely helpful.
- "You look so much more youthful when your hair is like that (e.g., dyed)."
- Categorizing people into three categories: youth, middle age and "Gee, you look so good for your age."
- Overall, members feel that *Wider Horizons* offers them a sense of purpose and a perspective of positive aging that helps them overcome many of the negative effects of ageism. There was a strong sentiment that "we should keep doing what we are already doing."

Instances of our own internalized ageism:

- Immediately noticing when we are the oldest person in the room.
- Not wanting to use a cane, walker or wheelchair because "that makes me old."
- Saying "I can't do that [activity] because I'm too old."
- Joking about senior moments.

What are the implications of ageism for *Wider Horizons*? Do you think it important for *Wider Horizons* to confront ageism? If so, what can we do individually or as an organization?

- Use the approach of thinking about all the advantages gained from being older.
- One member has created the term *Wisegagers* to reflect the positive attributes of aging, etymologically linked to words like wit, wiseacre, wisdom, and wizard. She has calling cards with the label that she shares with her older friends to use. She encouraged members to "have fun with their age."
- Within *Wider Horizons*, create more opportunities to experience purpose, which is central to conscious or positive aging.

- For some members, purpose is connected to contributing to others. However, it is important to recognize that purpose is an individual matter, not necessarily associated with a busy life of accomplishments, physical agility or heroics, but determined by each person to determine what is meaningful to them at this phase of life.
- Ask members to share specifically what they are doing to stay healthy intellectually, socially, and physically (e.g., specific exercise, where, when, cost, willingness to have someone go with them).
- In terms of intellectual health, offer a program similar to one started by **Ellen Berg** where people agree to read 3 to 4 short articles or watch short videos and have a structured discussion of them.

If you would like further opportunities to advance the conversation about combating ageism and fostering purpose within *Wider Horizons*, please contact Nancy Hooyman (hooy@uw.edu) or Denise Klein (denise@widerhorizonsvillage.org).