

Ageism—a conceptual review of wisdom

Abstract

Ageism is viewing the old as useless typified by stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.¹ This premise diminishes the wisdom of the old that encompasses an expert knowledge system.² Wisdom must be used to guide the younger generation that has not attained it.³ The attainment of wisdom also benefits the larger society though compromised by illnesses and maladaptive behaviours among the old.³ It was highlighted by the authors that substance abuse among the elderly is often unknown, unreported and hidden by their caregivers. Cognitive decline characterised by Alzheimer's disease and strokes represent an erosion of elderly wisdom.² A new mind set by the elderly will result in greater self-care and planning for future needs and also to resist the temptation of teasing others about their age.⁴

Keywords: ageism, wisdom, cognitive decline, pragmatism, future care

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization,¹ ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against people on the basis of their age. Ageism is a widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults. For older people, ageism is an everyday challenge. Those who have grown old can still meaningfully contribute to society's development. Craig & Baucum² provide a perspective from which an answer can be gleaned. Their take on it is that wisdom is an expert knowledge system focusing on the pragmatics of life that involves excellent judgment and advice on critical life issues, including the meaning of life and the human condition. Wisdom represents the capstone of human intelligence.

The foregoing premise and the tailored mechanisms that drive it must be applied to guide the younger generation who may not have yet attained wisdom. Wisdom applied pragmatically may be useful in addressing the challenges of life and finding solutions for them. It is important to note that aging adults view this process variedly; some have regrets about insufficient achievements in schooling, others wish they can reverse health concerns, yet others are quite contented with their lot in life and cope well.³

There is no doubt that a system based on applying wisdom throughout one's life can be beneficial to society. However, compromised health and maladaptive behaviours can wreak havoc on the lives of older individuals thereby averting the meaningful impact of the application of wisdom. One such under reported factor is substance abuse among the elderly. According to Stern et al.³ the extent of substance abuse problems among older adults is often underestimated. The authors went on further to state that many older adults live alone with limited social contact and the problem may go undetected. Family members sometimes cover up the transgression. The aforementioned fact is an impediment to deriving value from the wisdom of the old.

One of the most debilitating factors in giving the old a productive life and allowing society to benefit from their wisdom is cognitive decline.² According to the authors despite the retention of memory skills and the development of wisdom in many older adults, some individuals experience a marked decline in cognitive functioning often times driven by diseases such as Alzheimer's and strokes. Overall failing health may also be a contributing factor. However, as noted by

the authors cognitive decline is not intrinsic to the aging process. The wisdom of the old must be purposefully used and preserved. However, it cannot occur in a vacuum. Based on this assumption the elderly must not try to prove their worth. According to Fowler & Gasiorok⁴ their mental attitude should be influenced by:

1. Optimism about aging, a healthy mind and body equals an ongoing contribution towards life
2. When you can contribute age is not an inhibitor, do not allow yourself to be pushed into a corner
3. Be proactive in creating the future you want, exercising at ninety-five or perhaps completing your PhD
4. Maintaining a youthful mentality and body has nothing to do with using creams to appear younger
5. Do not fall into the trap of entering your senior years without the requisite planning as to how you are going to live for example spending habits, medical care, dietary needs, vacation etc.
6. If entrepreneurship is your forte continue doing it since the added advantage of wisdom is there to guide the process

Conley⁵ encapsulates the power of wisdom that the elderly possess in the following statement: "There is a generation of older workers with wisdom and experience, specialised knowledge and un-paralleled ability to teach, coach and counsel who could pair with these millennials to create businesses that are built to endure" (Final paragraph).

The fullest impact through the practical application of wisdom can be leveraged via inter-generational collaboration. Is there a better way to prepare millennials to effectively lead organizations? Working collaboratively with the elderly is the key. Wisdom combined with the technical savviness of millennials will better address issues of industry and the society that should contribute towards a better world for those reside in it.⁵

The following recommendations are presented:

Eat well from birth to adulthood

- i. Exercise as a way of life
- ii. Be medically examined and assessed as a routine throughout one's life

- iii. Have a system of respect that is a cultural feature in societies
- iv. Engage in reading, studying, thinking and doing throughout one's life
- v. Set up coaching and mentoring institutes throughout the world to train young people to lead organizations.
- vi. Research into Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia must be used to assist both the elderly and young person's as to the causes and what can be done to avoid or minimise its effects

The above is just a guide and not a panacea for solving problems among the elderly. It is important though that members of society be at least wise in ensuring that we can all benefit from the wisdom of the old. There is no place for ageism in an ideal world but the problem persists, as our world is far from ideal.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors of this manuscript have no competing interests.

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