



Ageing Well

WP3/ A1 Training Programme

Module 1

Awareness of age discrimination/stereotypes

INFODEF





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Introduction to the Module

This module introduces the concept of age discrimination and stereotypes, focusing on how they negatively impact older adults in various settings. It raises awareness of both overt and covert signs of ageism and provides strategies for recognising and addressing these biases to foster more inclusive and respectful interactions with the elderly.

Objectives

1. Define age discrimination and age-related stereotypes.
2. Identify both overt and covert signs of age discrimination in various contexts.
3. Understand the negative effects of ageism on older adults' mental health and well-being.
4. Recognise common age-related stereotypes and challenge them with facts.
5. Develop strategies to prevent and address age discrimination in personal and professional interactions with older adults.
6. Foster a more inclusive and respectful attitude toward ageing in their communities and workplaces.



1. Definitions of age discrimination

Age Discrimination

Age discrimination refers to treating an individual unfairly due to their age. While it can affect individuals of any age, it is most commonly experienced by older adults in various spheres of life, including employment, healthcare, social services, and even within family settings. This type of discrimination can manifest overtly through explicit exclusion or subtly through negative assumptions and stereotypes about an individual's capabilities based solely on their age. Age discrimination is both a social and legal issue, addressed in many countries through policies that protect older adults from being unfairly treated.

Age Stereotypes

Age stereotypes are oversimplified generalisations or assumptions about individuals based on their age. Common stereotypes about older adults include beliefs that they are less adaptable, slower, more forgetful, and resistant to technology. These stereotypes can be deeply ingrained in societal attitudes and can shape how older adults are perceived and treated. Importantly, these stereotypes often do not reflect the actual abilities, characteristics, or desires of older individuals and can limit their participation in societal, professional, or familial roles.

2. Types of age discrimination

Direct Discrimination

- Occurs when someone is treated less favorably due to their age.
- Examples include refusing a job because someone is considered "too old" or making derogatory comments about their ability to contribute.
- In professional settings, this could involve limiting opportunities like promotions or training, based on assumptions that older workers are less competent or unable to learn new skills.

Indirect Discrimination

- Involves policies or practices that appear neutral but disproportionately affect older adults.
- For example, a company might have a physical fitness requirement that excludes older employees, even when the role doesn't require such fitness.
- This form of discrimination is less obvious but can still cause significant harm.



Institutional Ageism

- Refers to practices and policies within institutions (e.g., healthcare, government, businesses) that marginalise older adults.
- Examples include healthcare systems providing inadequate care to older patients, viewing them as less valuable or productive.
- The media often portrays older adults in stereotypical ways, reinforcing negative societal views and influencing everyday treatment of them.

2.1. Signs of age discrimination/stereotypes

Recognising signs of age discrimination and stereotypes is key to addressing and mitigating their effects.

Signs of Age Stereotypes

Stereotypes about ageing are often deeply embedded in societal attitudes and can manifest in both overt and covert ways. Common signs include:

- **Assumptions About Health:** Older individuals are often stereotyped as being weak or sickly, even when they are in good health. This stereotype might lead to unsolicited advice about health or fitness based on assumptions rather than actual health conditions.
- **Perception of Cognitive Decline:** There is a common stereotype that older adults are less mentally sharp or slower to learn new things. This stereotype can manifest in the form of people speaking more slowly to older adults or assuming they don't understand complex topics.
- **Social Invisibility:** Older adults, especially women, may experience "social invisibility," where their opinions, contributions, or presence are overlooked in social or professional settings because they are perceived as less relevant or valuable.
- **Belief That Older People Are Resistant to Change:** A widespread stereotype is that older people are set in their ways and resistant to change, whether it be in the workplace, technology, or social dynamics. This assumption can be covertly used to justify exclusion from innovation or decision-making processes.

By recognising both overt and covert signs of age discrimination and stereotypes, individuals and organisations can take proactive steps to address and dismantle ageism, ensuring that older adults are treated with respect, dignity, and equality.



Overt Signs of Age Discrimination: Overt discrimination is direct and often easier to identify because it is expressed openly and explicitly. Common examples include:

- **Derogatory Comments:** Making negative remarks about an individual's age, such as "You're too old for this job" or "At your age, you should retire."
- **Age-Based Jokes:** Regularly joking about someone's age in a demeaning way, such as calling someone "ancient," "grandma," or "old timer."
- **Discriminatory Hiring or Promotion Decisions:** Refusing to hire or promote someone explicitly due to their age, or openly stating that younger employees are preferred. This might include job advertisements that specify age limits or include phrases like "young and energetic."
- **Forced Early Retirement:** Pressuring older employees to retire earlier than they would like, often with the justification that younger employees need to take over or that the individual can no longer keep up.
- **Exclusion from Training or Advancement Opportunities:** Older employees may be told directly that further training or opportunities are "not worth it" for them due to their age,

implying that they don't have much time left in their careers to benefit from them.

Covert Signs of Age Discrimination: Covert discrimination is subtle, indirect, and often harder to identify. Examples include:



- **Assigning Less Challenging or Demeaning Tasks:** Older employees might subtly be given less important or less challenging tasks, pushing them out of key roles without explicitly saying so.

- **Being Passed Over for Promotion Without Clear Justification:** Older workers might be overlooked for promotions or higher-level positions without any direct explanation.

- **Subtle Exclusion from Decision-Making:** Older adults may be excluded from important meetings or decision-making processes, under the assumption that their ideas are outdated.

- **Assumptions About Technology:** Employers or colleagues might assume that older individuals are not capable of learning or using new technologies. These assumptions often result in fewer training opportunities or less access to technological tools.

- **Performance Evaluations Based on Stereotypes:** Older employees might receive lower performance evaluations based on assumptions about their stamina or adaptability.



- **Unconscious Bias in Workplace Culture:** Workplace culture might favour younger employees in subtle ways, such as celebrating youth-oriented achievements (e.g., marathon running).

2.2. Myths and Facts About Ageing

Myth 1: Older adults are always sick and frail.

Fact: Many remain healthy, active, and independent well into old age. Advancements in healthcare, nutrition, and fitness mean that ageing is not synonymous with sickness.

Myth 2: Older adults are not capable of learning new things.

Fact: Cognitive decline is not an inevitable part of ageing, and many older individuals continue to learn and grow through education, hobbies, and professional work.

Myth 3: Ageing means a loss of productivity and value to society.

Fact: Older adults contribute to society in many valuable ways, including through paid work, volunteerism, mentorship, and caregiving. Many older individuals are active in their communities, passing down knowledge, skills, and experience to younger generations.

Myth 4: Older adults are lonely and isolated.

Fact: Many maintain strong social connections with family, friends, and community groups. Staying socially active and engaged in meaningful relationships is key to maintaining emotional well-being at any age.

Myth 5: Older adults are resistant to change and technology.

Fact: Many older adults embrace change and adapt to new technologies. Older generations are increasingly using smartphones, social media, and other digital tools to stay connected and informed.

Myth 6: Cognitive decline is inevitable with ageing.

Fact: Some cognitive functions may decline with age, like processing speed, but most older adults do not experience significant cognitive impairment. Cognitive decline can often be slowed through mental exercises, physical activity, a healthy diet, and staying socially engaged.

Myth 7: Older adults are not sexually active or interested in relationships.



Fact: While the nature of relationships may change with age, many older people remain sexually active and continue to seek companionship, affection, and emotional connection.

Myth 8: All older adults are the same.

Fact: Older adults are a diverse group with different backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. Just like younger people, older individuals vary greatly in terms of health, interests, capabilities, and life circumstances. It's important to avoid generalisations and treat each person as a unique individual.



MYTH AND FACTS

ABOUT AGING

Older adults are always sick and frail.



While some older adults may experience health challenges, many remain healthy, active, and independent well into old age thanks to advancements in healthcare, nutrition, and fitness.

Older adults are not capable of learning new things.



Older adults can learn new skills, adapt to technology, and acquire knowledge just like younger people. Cognitive decline is not an inevitable part of aging.

Older adults are lonely and isolated.



Many older individuals are active in their communities, passing down knowledge, skills, and experience to younger generations.

Older adults are lonely and isolated.



Many older adults maintain strong social connections with family, friends, and community groups. Aging doesn't necessarily mean social isolation.



MYTH AND FACTS

ABOUT AGING

Older adults are resistant to change and technology.



Many older adults embrace change and adapt to new technologies. Older generations are increasingly using smartphones, social media, and other digital tools to stay connected and informed.

Cognitive decline is inevitable with aging.



Although some cognitive functions may decline with age, most older adults do not experience significant cognitive impairment through mental exercises, physical activity, a healthy diet, and staying socially engaged.

Older adults are not sexually active or interested in relationships.



While the nature of relationships may change with age, many older people remain sexually active and continue to seek companionship, affection, and emotional connection.

All older adults are the same.



Older adults are a diverse group with different backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. Like the young, older adults vary greatly in terms of health, interests, capabilities, and life circumstances.



3. Effects of age discrimination/stereotypes on older adults' wellbeing and mental health

The impact of age discrimination and stereotypes on older adults is profound and multifaceted, affecting their mental, emotional, and physical well-being:

Mental Health Impact

Experiencing age discrimination can severely affect older adults' mental health. When they are consistently marginalised or subjected to negative stereotypes, older individuals may start to internalise these ideas, leading to decreased self-worth and increased anxiety or depression. Repeated exposure to discriminatory behaviour can cause feelings of helplessness, frustration, and isolation. Many older adults also feel disconnected from society because they are not seen or treated as active participants in it.

Physical Health Impact

The stress and mental strain caused by age discrimination and stereotypes can have direct impacts on physical health. Studies show that older adults who face discrimination are at a higher risk of developing physical ailments due to stress, such as cardiovascular problems. Moreover, some older adults may avoid seeking medical help because they feel they won't be taken seriously, leading to untreated health conditions and a lower quality of life.

Reduced Opportunities and Participation

Age discrimination limits older adults' access to opportunities in employment, social participation, and services. In the workforce, older employees might find themselves passed over for promotions or training opportunities, thus limiting their professional growth. In social settings, they might be excluded from events or activities, further increasing their sense of isolation. This reduction in opportunities can contribute to a decreased sense of purpose, a critical component of emotional well-being.

4. Strategies to manage age discrimination/stereotypes

Education and Awareness

- Raising awareness about ageing and dispelling myths around older adults' capabilities.



- Education programs aimed at both younger and older generations can bridge gaps in understanding.
- Encourages more positive societal attitudes and interactions.

Advocacy for Rights

- Empower older adults to advocate for their rights and speak out against discrimination.
- Encourage seeking legal redress when rights are violated.
- Support organisations that fight for older adults' rights, such as advocacy groups and unions.

Inclusive Communication

- Engage with older adults respectfully without making assumptions based on their age.
- Allow them to express their needs and opinions.
- Use language that respects their autonomy and avoids patronisation.

Promoting Intergenerational Interaction

- Encourage collaboration between generations through mentorship and community projects.
- Foster mutual respect and understanding by challenging age-based stereotypes.

Legal Measures and Policies

- Reinforce and expand laws protecting older adults from discrimination in employment, healthcare, and other areas.
- Advocate for stronger legal protections and accountability to reduce ageism in society.

5. Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, participants will:

- Understand the definitions of age discrimination and age-related stereotypes.
- Recognise different forms of age discrimination and the subtle signs of ageism.
- Be aware of the significant impact that discrimination has on the mental and physical well-being of older adults.



- Identify strategies to challenge age-based stereotypes and discrimination in their personal and professional lives.
- Develop skills to communicate effectively and respectfully with older individuals, promoting inclusivity.
- Advocate for the rights and inclusion of older adults in various societal and professional settings.

Age discrimination and stereotypes are deeply rooted in society, but by recognising and addressing them, we can foster a more inclusive environment for older adults. Through education, awareness, and positive action, it is possible to challenge these harmful perceptions and ensure that older adults are respected and valued for their contributions.

6. Further educational material:

6.1. Video – *TED Talk*

Let's end ageism | Ashton Applewhite

https://youtu.be/WfjzkO6_DEI?si=7yMHECtDE68qKtga

In this thought-provoking talk, Ashton Applewhite challenges the widespread fear and stigma associated with ageing. She highlights that it's not the ageing process itself that we should dread, but the ageism that exists in society – a prejudice that turns us against both our future selves and each other. Applewhite calls on us to confront and dismantle this socially acceptable bias, arguing that ageing is not a problem to be fixed or a disease to be cured. Instead, it is a natural and powerful process that connects all of humanity. Through this lens, she inspires a movement to embrace ageing and combat the harmful stereotypes that accompany it.

6.2. Case Study: Age Discrimination in the Workplace

Background

John, a 58-year-old project manager with over 30 years of experience in the construction industry, had an exemplary career. He was known for his leadership, strong problem-solving skills, and a consistent track record of delivering projects on time and within budget. Despite his expertise and success, John began to notice changes in his work environment after his 55th birthday. His younger colleagues started receiving more responsibilities, and he found himself excluded from important meetings and decision-making processes.



Incident of Discrimination

In his company, a major restructuring was underway, and several new positions were being created, including one for a Senior Project Director. John applied for the role, confident that his experience made him the ideal candidate. However, during the interview process, John felt that age-related biases were affecting the decision. His manager, who was much younger, subtly expressed concerns about John's "energy levels" and his ability to "keep up with new technologies." Despite having demonstrated adaptability to the company's tech advancements over the years, John was told that the company needed "fresh ideas" and a "more dynamic" approach.

A few weeks later, a 35-year-old colleague with less experience but who was perceived as more tech-savvy was appointed to the role. John wasn't offered any clear explanation for his rejection, except that the company was "looking for someone who can drive innovation." The new director quickly sought younger staff for key projects, further sidelining John, who found himself assigned less critical tasks despite his seniority.

Impact on John

John began to feel demoralised and undervalued. Although he was still performing well in his existing role, his confidence was shaken. He began to question his own relevance and felt as though his age was being held against him. The psychological toll of the experience was significant: John became anxious about his job security and started doubting his long-term prospects at the company. Over time, he reported increased stress, a decrease in motivation, and a growing sense of isolation from his colleagues.

Legal Action and Resolution

Feeling that he was unfairly passed over for the promotion due to age, John sought legal advice and filed a formal complaint of age discrimination under the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws in his country. After a thorough investigation, the tribunal found that John had indeed been discriminated against based on ageist assumptions rather than an objective evaluation of his skills.

The company was ordered to compensate John for emotional distress and missed professional opportunities. Additionally, they were required to implement training on age discrimination for all staff and managers to prevent future incidents.

Lessons Learned



Bias in Promotion: This case highlights how age-based biases can prevent older workers from advancing in their careers, despite having the qualifications and experience.

Subtle Ageism: Even subtle remarks about "energy levels" or a need for "fresh ideas" can be indicative of underlying age discrimination. Employers need to base hiring and promotion decisions on skills, qualifications, and performance rather than stereotypes about age.

Workplace Environment: This case also shows the importance of creating an inclusive workplace environment where employees of all ages feel valued and respected. Companies that ignore the contributions of older workers risk legal consequences, but more importantly, they lose out on the valuable experience and insights these employees bring.

Legal Protections: John's case underscores the importance of legal protections against age discrimination. Many countries have laws in place to ensure that employees are not discriminated against due to their age, but employees need to be aware of their rights and have the support to pursue them when necessary.

This case study demonstrates the subtle and overt ways age discrimination can manifest in the workplace and the profound impact it can have on the careers and well-being of older employees.

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