

# Are young people's views on aging accurate?

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There is an inevitable increase in the older adult population nowadays due to the dropping birth rates and longer life expectancy (World Health Report, 2010). The rates of the aging population are growing rapidly, from 200 million people aged over 65 years in 1950, to 470 million in 2008 and to 1 billion in 2050 (Population Reference Bureau, 2008). This accelerated increase will be without a doubt related to a series of changes both at an individual and societal level. Despite the fact that many individuals see aging predominantly as problematic they should also keep in mind that there is more to aging and the aging process than problems and negative outcomes. Due to all of this changes, now, more than ever there is an urgent need for people to be educated about aging and the aging process (Cottle & Glover, 2007).

Although there are individuals who consider that aging and the aging process are something bad and should be avoided if possible (Macnicol, 2006), this does not mean that it is also true or that is it right to think that way. People can have different views on different concepts but the value of their truth cannot be that easily established.

People's beliefs about aging and the aging process are formulated mainly on societal knowledge (Lee, 2009). Individuals have a lot of misconceptions and myths about this process. Maybe one of the most common one is that it is best for old people not to engage in any demanding physical activity because their bones might break or other bad things might happen. Actually, studies have shown over and over again that exercises are very helpful for most people, even for the aged ones (Etgen et al., 2010). There are many other myths and misconceptions related to the

old people's health, cognitive abilities and behaviors. The majority of them perpetuate themselves from generation to generation and even though there is a considerable larger amount of people who live longer today than it was fifty years ago, they are still the target of negative attitudes. Studies have shown that these negative attitudes are very familiar for other age groups (Rees, King, & Schimtz, 2009).

The way older people are treated is very much related to the way they are seen by others. Children, youngsters, grow-ups and even old people might have negative views on aging and the aging process. These negative views often transform themselves into beliefs like: *old people are senile, they all have health issues, and they are boring, non-interesting, and unattractive*. By being seen as described above old people might feel socially devalued (Levy & Banaji, 2002). If people have these beliefs they will for sure avoid interaction with the aged. Most of the people will not even try to see if that is actually how older people are and behave, they will just avoid them as a safety measure, or so they believe. Now, one might consider that everybody has a negative view about aging and the aging process, but this is for sure not the case. As pointed before there are individuals who consider aging a bad thing, but there are other individuals who can see the positive parts of it.

Studies show that younger persons discriminate more against aging and the aging process when compared to older individuals (Lee, 2009). This happens primarily because young people perceive aging and the aging process as a decline in all aspects of life. Low productivity, low efficiency and lack of independence are amongst the most popular negative effects of the aging process (O'hanlon & Brookore, 2002). Considering that the young people's behaviors

towards the aged are guided by this kind of beliefs it is not difficult to imagine how hard it must be for the aging population. So, based on this, we might say that old people have to face these negative behaviors on a daily basis.

Other studies have shown that undergraduate students have passive and negative views towards the aged (Wurtele, 2009). They simply do not care enough to engage in interactions with older people and see how they really are. They prefer to do nothing about it because it is easier this way. The problem here is that younger individuals are inclined to accept age stereotypes automatically without inquiring their validity (Nelson, 2004). By doing so they are very likely to expand their knowledge base about aging and the aging process with untrue and unverified information.

It is very important to know how these beliefs perpetuate themselves and how they are learned by the young people. Some of the individuals might rely on what they see in the media, others might listen to stories told by different people or read information in different settings (Van Dussen & Weaver, 2009). There are very few courses on gerontology and most of them are taught only at universities for medical science. Education about aging and the aging process is much needed and should be implemented in more general settings.

Equally important are questions related to the development span of the aging beliefs. For instance, when do people start developing or learning about aging or how these beliefs are shaped or change over time. Are these beliefs learnt from birth or are the results of a continuous process over lifespan? Many of these questions are not well understood. There is however evidence that these beliefs do change as people get older. Studies comparing attitudes towards aging and the aging process between younger and older groups show that negative attitudes do change as people grow old (Cummings, Kropf, & DeWeaver, 2000). Even if younger people hold a negative view about aging and the aging process once they get closer to the age of 65 years old they start to see the

benefits. But this does not mean that everything changes, that all the negativity just disappeared. We should not forget that people had decades to strengthen their negative attitudes, from the time they were young, until they reached the older age, meaning that by the time these views and stereotypes have become relevant they have already been internalized (Levy & Langer, 1994). For sure, we can say that there is a need for accurate information about aging and the aging process to be taught early in education.

Due to the fact that in the near future the aging population will be double than it is today it is highly recommended to turn our attention to some relevant issues. This relevant issues are mainly represented by the negative behaviors young people can exhibit towards the aged and their negative attitudes. We also have to consider that from now on we will need more and more people who will have to work with the aged, but working with them seems to be the less attractive career choice among the youngsters (Ferrario, Freeman, Nellett, & Scheel, 2008). If youngsters will maintain the same negative attitudes about the aging population it will be very difficult to train new professionals for working with this population. Therefore it is important to begin promoting accurate information about aging and planning proper guidance and training services according to the identified needs. No one is saying that getting older has only benefits, but what is important to emphasize here is that it does not have only disadvantages either. That is why accurate and documented information is needed.

Besides early education there is one more thing that can be done in order to change those negative attitudes. Interacting with older people has great impact on the views individuals have about aging and the aging process. By interaction we understand: *spending time with older people, discussing ideas with them, getting involved in different activities together and enjoying daily moments.*

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