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For more information,
contact: Tara Solomon-Smith
Adult Development and Aging Agent, Wildcat Extension District
tsolomon@ksu.edu, 620-378-2167

Combating the Many Faces of Ageism

'I had a senior moment', 'Kids these days do not have work ethic', 'You don't look your age', she's too young to be a manager'. Does this sound familiar? You have probably heard, or even said one of these phrases, I know I have. Though some well-intended, these can be ageist and put down older (or younger) people.

We are all growing older and will likely be a target of ageism at some point in life. It actually begins in childhood and it is everywhere, taking many forms in media, healthcare, workplaces, and even schools. The World Health Organization, in its Global Report on Ageism, defines ageism as pertaining to the stereotypes (how people think), prejudice (how people feel) and discrimination (how people act) directed towards others (or ourselves) based on age.

Simply put, ageism refers to assumptions made about people based on age, and it has a significant impact on people and society. It shortens life expectancies, reduces access to health care, and causes higher rates of depression. Also in a National Institute of health study, 1 in 7 dollars spent on the mostly costly medical conditions in the US can be attributed to negative effects of ageism; that's approximately \$63 billion in health-related costs to older adults.

Dr. Erin Yelland with the Center on Aging at Kansas State University, provides a few ways we can help combat ageism.

- **Work toward changing your responses and reflect.** Be mindful of your actions toward older (or younger people) – even if that's yourself! Every time you have an interaction with someone older or younger than you, step back and reflect on that interaction. Did you treat them differently based on age? Did you treat them the way you would want to be treated at their age? What could you do to improve any ageist biases that slipped into your interaction?
- **Take a walk in someone else's shoes.** Think about what it would be like to be the person who is stereotyped. How would that make you feel and what can you do to make sure you are limiting that in our own behaviors and actions? Practice empathy – it makes a world of difference.

- **Purposefully increase your exposure.** When we surround ourselves with people who are different from us, we learn more about others and ourselves. Interact with older adults, even if it's just saying hello in the grocery store or going out of your way to have more meaningful conversations with older adults in your life. Perhaps you can even get involved in volunteering in long-term care facilities (when it is safe to do so), serving meals to homebound older adults, or engaging in other service projects. There's so much we can do to increase our exposure to people who aren't like us and help them out in the process.

Give one of these a try this week!

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