

## **The Aging Population**

### **Ageism - Video 2**

Dr. Amy D'Aprix:

When we think about discrimination and prejudice, prejudice is about how we think about someone and discrimination is our behaviour. So when we look at what's discriminatory behaviour against older adults, we're seeing it at lots of levels. Elder abuse is a really hot topic and there's a lot of awareness growing that there is abuse of older adults that's pretty rampant. And it can run from - you know, we think of physical abuse which sometimes occurs, especially in a caregiver situation; financial abuse is really key, and a lot of it happens in families - and not just, we think it's just nursing home-based. But discrimination is a level before that even that we see happening. So discriminatory behaviour that I see as pretty common, how we think about older adults, just, you know, walk through your neighbourhood and watch how people just walk around older people. They may ignore them. And this is what, in survey after survey older adults say: you get to a certain age and it's like you're invisible. That's discrimination, you know. And when we stop seeing people as being people, and we stop looking them in the eye, and we stop treating them with respect, that's discrimination. In healthcare settings, it happens all the time. Again, talking to people in very paternalistic ways; ignoring them; not hearing their viewpoints; not recognizing that they have a right to state what they want for their lives and their healthcare treatment - all discriminatory behaviour.

Dr. Kerry Bowman:

I think western society and North American culture, anti-aging is actually growing. I think if you look to the media you can see very quickly that aging is the worst thing that could possibly happen to you - is the message that you're bombarded with constantly. That, you know, looking and acting old is incredibly problematic. And you know we're absorbing these things in ways that we're not even conscious of. And having worked a lot internationally, aging - not all, but in many societies in other parts of the world - is highly valued, and in fact a person is very respected rather than isolated, and their opinions are sought out because they are older and they, you know, are considered in many cases to have more wisdom. And I think we're losing that in our society. I think there's something very, you know, dehumanizing about this language of aging. And, you know, if you look at a term like 'the

grey tsunami', the kind of language we use - tsunamis are very destructive forces. This isn't - you know these metaphors can be incredibly negative without us even realizing how much we're putting out there and how negatively we're teaching society and even other healthcare workers about this.

Aynsley Moorhouse:

So I think we live in a very ageist society and we can see that with, for example, all of the anti-aging creams and techniques that we see out there. And of course we're trying to - we're trying to age well, which is fine and good, but intrinsically in anything that's anti-aging is the idea that we don't want to get older. And the fact is we're all getting older, we're all going to get - I mean, if we're so lucky - we're all going to become older adults ourselves and I think we're terrified of that because we - we tend to hide older adults away, outside of the world that we live in, in nursing homes and retirement homes and what not. We also use - we also think that older people can't learn anything new, and I think that's an intrinsically ageist assumption. We frame older adults oftentimes as being grandparents, which is lovely, and often older adults are grandparents, but to be - to be just defined in relation to the younger generation, I think, is ageist. Because they are also just a person, and not just in relation to, you know, a 20-year old or an eight-year old. And sometimes if we're on the road and we're driving and we see someone driving badly or driving really, really slowly - someone might be inclined to assume that it's a - that it's an older person driving. They might say, "Come on Grandpa", but that's mean, and a horrible assumption.

Dr. Don Melady:

There's the idea of ageism, like any prejudicial attitudes about any identifiable group - and we can think of older people as an identifiable group - but by having prejudicial attitudes to them where you believe that you know something about them before even encountering them - it's very dangerous and harmful. Not only to the person who is receiving those attitudes, but by the person who is holding those attitudes, the person who has the ageist attitude is losing a lot because they're not allowing themselves to be open to the reality of that other person. And that person is a great person; they may be - they may not be a nice person or a fun person, but they're a great person, they're - just as we all are. And, you know, there's a lot written about the personhood even in dementia where we always say that people who are demented have lost their personality and that there's no person there. But I think many people who work with people with dementia

strenuously disagree with that perspective; that there's always a core of personhood there.

So I don't think it's a very good way to live your life, by cutting yourself off from as many people as you can. I think it's a better way to live your life by being in contact - real contact - with as many people as you can. So yes, I think ageism, ageist attitudes, really is very harmful to the person who has them. You're losing contact with, or excluding, a whole large segment of the population - and interestingly, a segment of the population which in many cultures and through most periods of human history has been the segment of society that is the most valued because it is - has always been believed to be the segment of society that has the most to offer and contribute to society. They're the people with wisdom, with life-experience, with knowledge. So losing - writing those people off is something that you do at everybody's peril, I think.

Dr. Kerry Bowman:

Aging's a joke. I mean, look at every birthday card after a 30th birthday is, you know, those cards in the store. I mean it's always about the horrors of aging. And you know these messages are just endlessly so negative that I think we're internalizing a lot of them. And you know when I see healthcare workers, whether it's rehab or medicine, the amount that want to go into neurosurgery, transplantation, genetic research is significant. The amount that actually say "I want to work with older people" is much, much less, you know. And the amount of people over the course - if you look at something like neurosurgery, I don't know the percentage but it's a small percentage of people that will ever need neurosurgery in their life. The amount of people that are going to grow old and die - well, that's much higher! It's all of us. Well, we don't all grow old, but we all die.

Susan Blight:

The position of the elder - again, I can only speak from the perspective of an Anishinaabe person; I can't speak for all of the indigenous nations in Canada - but in terms of Anishinaabe culture the elder is really seen as somebody who carries knowledge. They are given the utmost respect for that reason, so it's a bit contrary to what I would call, I guess, Canadian culture in that Anishinaabe people really view the elder and the child as being the closest to the spirit world. So we believe that because children are younger they're closer to the spirit world, and therefore they have knowledge, and so in our culture they are really valued as teachers and respected as teachers. We are really meant - if you're following the Anishinaabe way of thinking - you're

really supposed to listen, and honour children because they have something to teach you. And then as well, elders, because they've lived a long life, have a kind of knowledge that people perhaps my age don't have. So we really kind of look at that as - as a kind of honour to have lived that long. Beyond that, we also understand that all people are valuable - so at any age, all people are valuable, and no life is more valuable than any other life. So we kind of view our elders that way too, and in our culture it would be a huge, huge lack of cultural protocol to treat an elder with anything other than the utmost respect. So, for instance, at our ceremonial feasts an elder would eat first. That's just one of the ways that we honour them, so, you know, you would usually take care of them, whatever they need, get that for them, those kinds of things. To treat an elder in any way other than with utmost respect would be seen as very, very wrong.