

## Categorically Speaking

An Op-Ed by Kahir Lalji, Provincial Director of United Way Healthy Aging  
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Have you noticed that when we discuss Seniors publicly, we tend to talk about them as if they were a just a *category*? Whatever the issue (and it's almost always one of decline or jeopardy), it appears to impact all seniors equally because they're typically described as one giant, indistinct group. *Categorically speaking*, seniors aren't a very uplifting subject.

Take the pandemic, for example. Seniors have been in the news regularly over the last year – and rightly so because they're disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Still, the storyline is always the same – they're at greater risk because they're older. While the statistics absolutely bear this out, it's not the whole story. No one is asking why the disease is particularly dangerous in older people – we just seem to accept that seniors are vulnerable to the disease, presumably because they are “infirm” and “weak”. But that doesn't describe *all* seniors!

Yes, from a research perspective it's necessary to group and classify people, but this kind of categorical thinking is harmful from a social perspective – and a human one. When we group people together in our thinking, based on just a few attributes (or worse, stereotypes), they become one-dimensional, and our appreciation and empathy are greatly diminished.

Older adults are not a simple demographic. They're a collection of diverse human beings that cross lines of class, race, gender, and more. Seniors are a lot of different things. Some of them are endearing and some are annoying – because that's how human beings are. So why does the world have so much trouble seeing variations and individuality of older adults? Simply put, it's because of our social attitudes about aging. Western mainstream culture tends to characterize seniors as “frail”, “out of touch”, and an “economic burden” – this despite evidence to the contrary. These stereotypes influence us consciously and unconsciously, and they negatively shape social attitudes.

The fact is, we don't automatically stop being contributing, capable and interesting human beings just because we get older. If those things happen to us as we age – *and they do* – it's largely because of how we're perceived. Aging makes us part of an indistinct, homogenous group of people, and this kind of categorical understanding is extremely superficial, making it easy to see seniors as “less than” – less valuable than other members of society. Not surprisingly, then, people see *themselves* as less valuable as they get older – less valuable than they *used* to be. That's agism. And it's agism, not *aging* that's the problem.

Agism – along with racism, sexism and other isms – can negatively impact one's health and well-being. If someone experiences discrimination throughout their life, it will become heightened as they age. Not all seniors are discriminated against, but those who are, feel it on a number of fronts. It's important to understand the intersectionality of agism. Age discrimination is one of several inequalities that a person might experience in their lifetime, and it's the intersection of these inequalities that pushes them to the fringes of society – alone and isolated, often living in poverty without the supports they need to thrive.

Sure, growing old brings with it difficulties but there are ways to mitigate the challenges – sensible things like staying physically active and socially engaged. There’s plenty of evidence that shows the importance of activities that stimulate the mind, body and spirit – and a direct line can be drawn between these healthy behaviours and the fact that people are living longer than ever before, and seniors are healthier than ever. The majority of older adults live full and interesting lives and are, in fact, busy doing things like getting married, starting new careers, writing novels, serving as mentors and teachers – you name it. Seniors are active and capable individuals. Here in B.C., for example, the vast majority of seniors over 65 (94%) continue to live independently in their own homes.

The thing about aging is that doesn’t just happen when we get old – it’s part of life. There’s a wisdom to valuing the changes that come with growing old, they are as natural as the changes associated with every stage of life. These are the seasons of our lives – and each season has its own vibrancy and texture.

What would change if we, as a society, started thinking about aging in deeper, more nuanced terms? What if we looked for the ways in which individual seniors are different one from another, or how people at different ages can have a lot in common with each other. What would we see? A world where everyone – at each and every age and stage of life – is worthy of respect and dignity? Imagine how that would make for a healthier, more caring society.

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