



We're celebrating seniors – or are we?

June is Seniors' Month in Ontario. But why do we need it? Special days and months draw attention to problems. We wear daffodils for cancer patients and cancer research. We turn out lights on Earth Day for the environment. Senior Ontarians do face problems: they need better health services, accessible housing and transportation, and financial support. But the issue underlying all these needs is *ageism* – discrimination based on stereotypes. That's the irony: We celebrate seniors while we still patronize, disparage, and discriminate against them.

Seniors throughout Toronto told the [Still Acting Out](#) project they feel invisible and disrespected. They are neglected, berated, and abused - often by their own families. They are accused of burdening the health care system. Politicians ignore them until election time, and the media portray them as stupid and a source of ridicule.

Ageism can also hide. Think about "successful ageing," "active ageing," "productive ageing," and reminders to remain "young at heart." Seniors are exhorted to eat well, exercise, and maintain an active social calendar. And if they eventually need health and support services, then it's their own fault for having failed at "successful ageing." It's a powerful message. What's particularly dangerous is that it places unrealistic pressures on all of us as we grow older. Ageing is a natural process and we can all expect, at some point, to become frail and to need some support.

What does hidden ageism look like?

- When Inez read the report of her clinic visit, it said she appeared "much younger than her stated age." This made her day. Were those cosmetics working, was she just eternally youthful, or did she simply not look and behave like a stereotype? Why was she flattered? Should she have been, or had she come to believe the negative stereotypes about ageing?
- Stella, a frail looking senior, brought a walker to her exercise class. The instructor jokingly said he'd heard she was 94 and asked whether that was true. She said it wasn't. He then pushed her to tell him her real age. She refused. Would he have asked those questions if she were 45? Should someone in the class have called him out about his ageism?

What can you do about ageism?

Large changes take time and effort. Here are some suggestions.

- **Name it and shame it.** When you see or hear ageism, call it out. Tell people why it's wrong.
- **Use an anti-ageism lens to analyze and question.** Talk with your doctor, pharmacist, or other provider. Ask your MPP (and copy your local councillor):
 - Why do long-term care homes remain shamefully understaffed?
 - Why is the provincial government reducing the budgets of organizations such as the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly (by 30%) and reducing low income seniors' access to public health clinical services?
 - Will the provincial government embrace a national pharmacare program that will reduce or eliminate co-payments for seniors? Will it support the proposed national strategy on appropriate drug use and prescribing? Nearly 2 million Canadian seniors regularly take at least one medication that's wrong for them, leading to falls, memory problems, hospitalizations, and even death.
- **Educate yourself about ageism.** Even senior citizens themselves believe many of the negative stereotypes. Enter "ageism" in your favourite browser and/or go to <https://carewatchontario.com/> for more information.