

One ^{very} Old Man

Realism About Old Age is Not Ageism

[MICHAEL B. FRIEDMAN](#)

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Refusing to hire someone for a job which they are qualified for just because they are old is, of course, discriminatory, illegal, and morally wrong. *Ageist*. Refusing to hire someone who is old who is unable to do the job because of inabilities they have developed in old age is not ageist; it is the intelligent thing to do.

To believe that people who are old are inevitably “over the hill” and are doomed to sad, disappointing lives is also ageist. To believe that older people are likely to have lost important abilities and to face difficult challenges to having satisfying lives is not ageist. It is realistic. “The thing about aging,” my 99-year-old friend Alice has been saying for some time, “is that it’s not good for your health.”

For example, I am 82 and have a multitude of chronic conditions, some of them painful. Diabetes that’s never quite under control. Gout that flares painfully from time to time. A spinal cord injury that produces constant leg pain. Vision loss, hearing loss, memory loss, and more.

That said, I was active as an advocate to meet the needs of people with mental health conditions and older people until earlier this year. 50 years of advocacy, some of it effective. I look back with a little pride.

As time has gone on, I have become the oldest person in the room.

And more and more I hear younger people talk hopefully about the opportunities of old age. Work, creativity, contribution to society, love, sex, and more. If you just have a positive attitude. They cite examples of remarkably successful people. A news special a few years ago cited a 90-year-old woman who had recently run a marathon and played Rachmaninoff piano concertos. Ok, there are people who are 90 or even 100 who are “sharp as a tack,” as they say.

But do you know where most 90-year-old people are? They are dead!

And most people who are alive at 90 are disabled to some extent. It is not ageist to say that no one is the same as they used to be. That’s just the way it is.

Ah, but maybe they are better, wiser, less overwhelmed by stress, better at relationships, more creative, better able to deal with crises. For example, there’s evidence that during a disaster older people who retain fundamental living skills are better able to manage their emotions and to cope than younger people who simply don’t have as much experience with adversity.

And it is probably true that people who exercise, eat well, sleep well, have meaningful relationships, engage in satisfying activities, and manage stress effectively are more likely to grow old in better physical and mental health than people who are lonely, inactive, stressed out, and don’t take very good care of themselves.

So, yes, it is ageist to deny that people can age well or that they can have lifestyles that will make life better for them.

But it is not ageist to recognize that healthy lifestyles are difficult for most of us to maintain. It is not ageist to note that loneliness is more likely as the people we care about die or even just lose memories of us. It is not ageist to note that some degree of cognitive impairment is common in old age. No big deal, we are told, just an age-related phenomenon. Normal. But that’s the point, isn’t it?

Abilities tend to decline in old age. That's not ageist. It's a fact.

And above all, it is not ageist to note that loss of health and living with pain become increasingly common in old age.

By all means, let's oppose ageism. But let's also be realistic about the expectable trials and tribulations of growing old.