

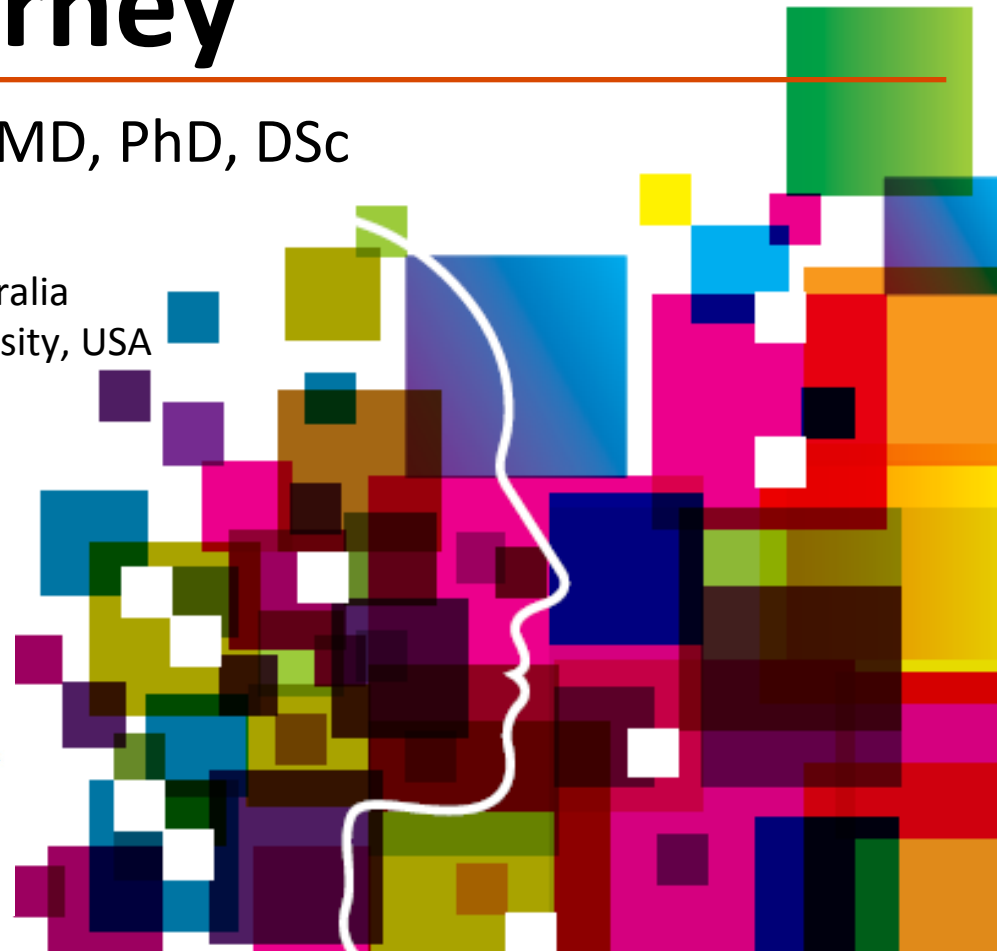
Determinants of Wellbeing in Late Life: A Long-Haul Journey

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Research

What we should fight





Age-Ism: Another Form of Bigotry

Robert N. Butler, MD¹

Volume 9, Issue 4_Part_1

Winter 1969

“Malcom X and a variety of other persons, events, and materials, have made the concept of racism familiar. Social class discrimination also needs no introduction. However, we may soon have to consider very seriously a form of bigotry we now tend to overlook: age discrimination or age-ism, prejudice by one age group toward other age groups. If such bias exists, might it not be especially evident in America: a society that has traditionally valued pragmatism, action, power, and the vigor of the youth over contemplation, reflection, experience, and the wisdom of age?” (p.253)





A widespread phenomenon

- Ageism is widespread.
- A study on global prevalence of ageism, carried out on 57 countries and 83,034 participants, found from moderate to high ageist attitudes amongst at least 50% of people studied (Officer et al, 2020).
- The COVID-19 pandemic has widened the crevices of health inequalities in older people (Ayalon et al, 2020).





A widespread phenomenon

The recently released *GLOBAL REPORT ON AGEISM* by the World Health Organization highlights that one in three individuals worldwide share ageist attitudes and recognizes ageism as a “global public health problem” (WHO, 2021).





GLOBAL
CAMPAIGN
TO COMBAT
AGEISM



Global report on ageism

18 MARCH 2021



World Health
Organization

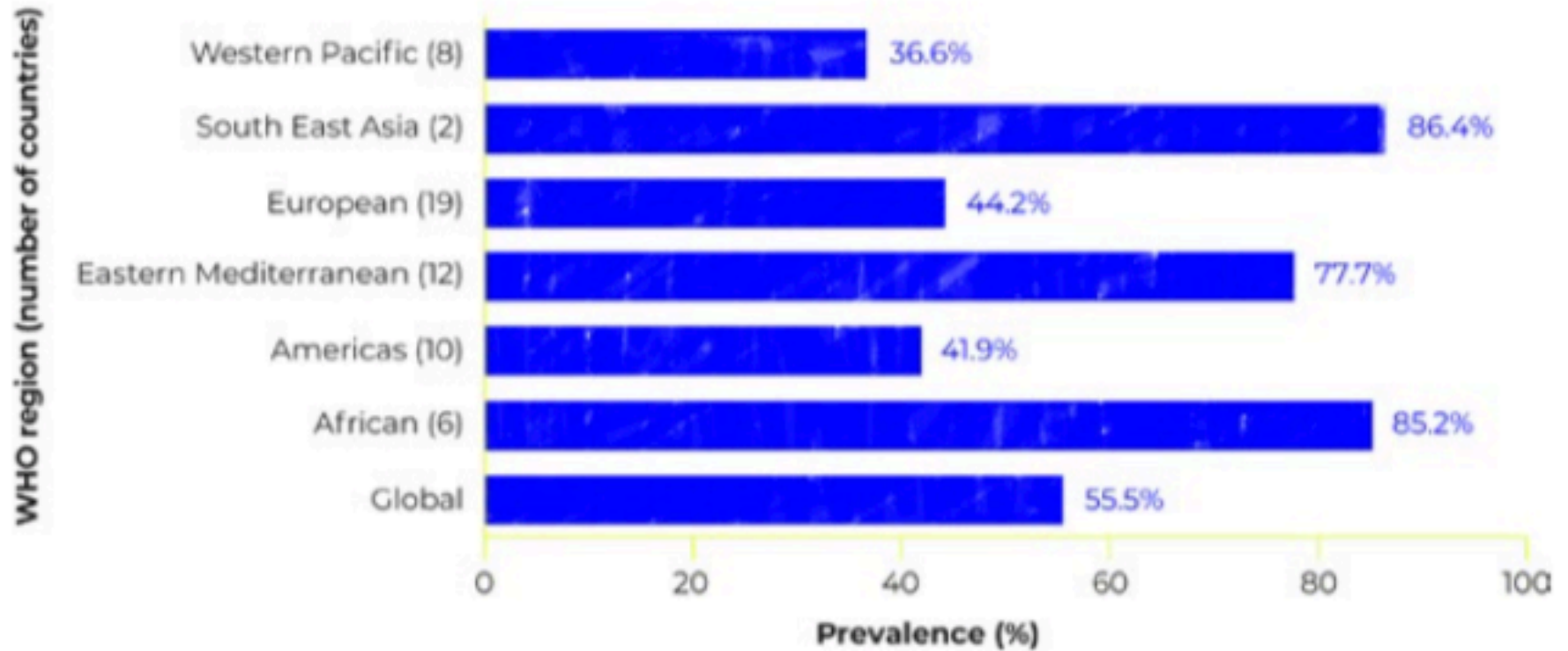


Ageism (WHO, 2021)

- Ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time. From an early age, children pick up cues from those around them about their culture's stereotypes and prejudices, which are soon internalized. People then use these stereotypes to make inferences and to guide their feelings and behaviour towards people of different ages and towards themselves.
- Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism. Multiple intersecting forms of bias compound disadvantage and make the effects of ageism on individuals' health and well-being even worse.



Fig. 2.3. Prevalence of population holding moderately or highly ageist attitudes by WHO region, from a further analysis of data in reference 102



(WHO, 2021)





The impact of ageism (WHO, 2021)

- Ageism has serious and far-reaching consequences for people's health, well-being and human rights.
- For older people, ageism is associated with a shorter lifespan, poorer physical and mental health, slower recovery from disability and cognitive decline.
- Ageism reduces older people's quality of life, increases their social isolation and loneliness (both of which are associated with serious health problems), restricts their ability to express their sexuality and may increase the risk of violence and abuse against older people.
- For individuals, ageism contributes to poverty and financial insecurity in older age, and one recent estimate shows that ageism costs society billions of dollars (Levy et al., 2020).



Forms of Ageism

Examples of **institutional ageism** include:

- policies in the health sector that allow care to be rationed by age; and in the labour sector, discriminatory hiring practices or mandatory retirement ages.

Examples of **interpersonal ageism** include:

- disrespecting or patronizing older adults, ignoring their points of view in decision-making or avoiding contact and interactions;
- using an overly accommodating tone and simple vocabulary and sentence structure when interacting with older adults (known as *elderspeak*). This type of speech, by assuming that older adults are less capable, infantilizes them and increases the likelihood that others will view them as incompetent and incapable, and treat them disrespectfully and impolitely;
- insulting older people by saying that they are worthless because of their age.

Examples of **self-directed ageism** include:

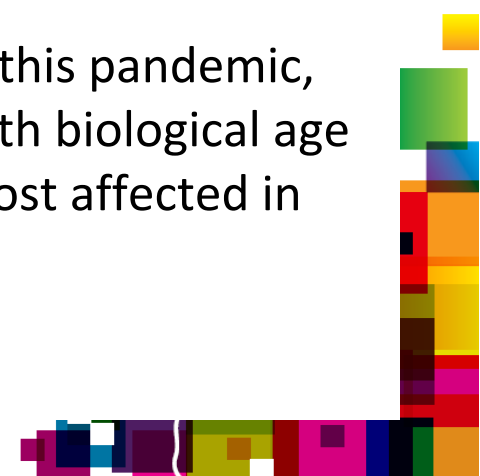
- older individuals who do not believe it is possible to learn new skills later in life and hesitate to enroll at university or take up a new hobby.



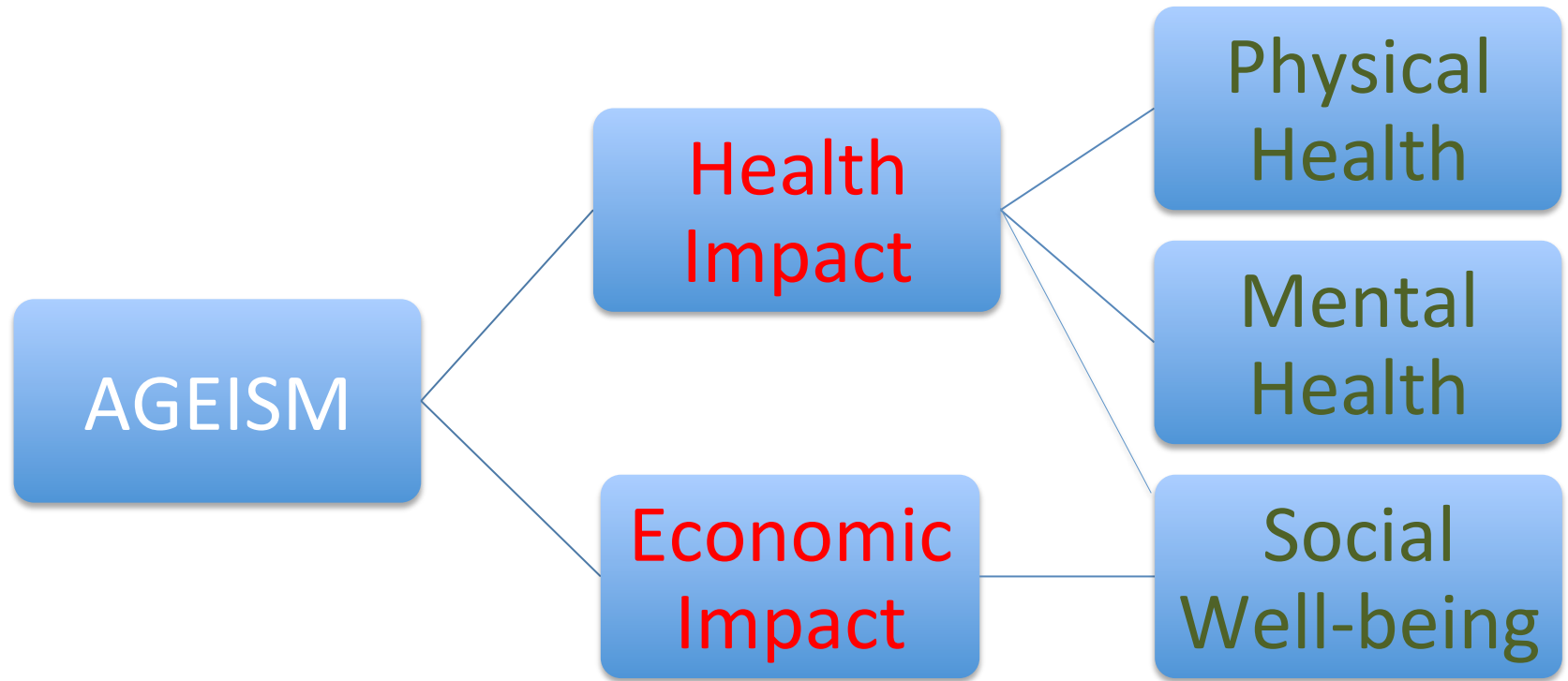
Nursing Homes or Besieged Castles? *(Trabucchi & De Leo, 2020)*

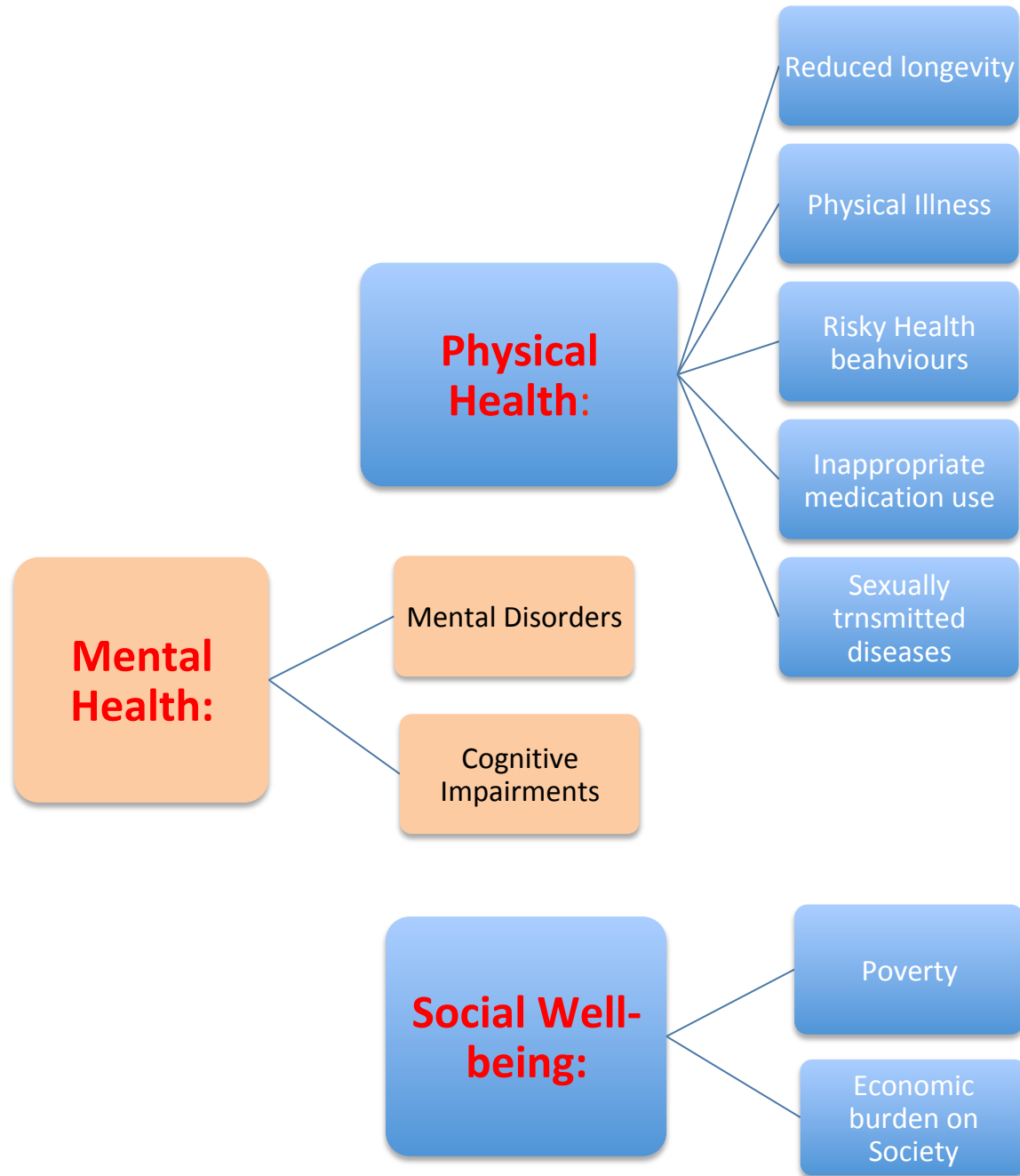
- This pandemic has not only taken a devastating toll on the lives of many older people around the world but also has exposed ageist stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against older adults.
- There have been reports of discriminatory practices in access to health services and other critical resources in several countries, especially among older people living in long-term care facilities.
- For example, in some contexts scarce resources, such as ventilators or access to intensive care units, have been allocated according only to chronological age.

This can be considered unethical and ageist in the context of this pandemic, given that chronological age is only moderately correlated with biological age or short-term prognosis, and that older people have been most affected in terms of severe outcomes in this pandemic.



Impacts of Ageism on Older People







Ageism across time

Age stereotypes related to older adults may have become more negative over time, as suggested by limited evidence from the English-speaking world (Ng et al, 2015; Mason et al, 2015). However, global data on historical trends in prevalence are lacking. A study based on an analysis of the 400 million word Corpus of Historical American English (1810–2009) found that age stereotypes have become more negative – in a linear way – during the past 200 years and that age stereotypes switched from being positive to negative around 1880.

Two main factors were associated with this switch:

- the medicalization of ageing, and
- the proportion of the population older than 65 years (Ng et al, 2015).





Ageism, Mentalism, Ableism.

- The “language of ageism” that portrays older persons as “weak”, “frail”, “negative” and “inherently vulnerable” continues to damage millions of older persons (Ben-Harush, 2016).
- Organisations such as the *American Psychiatric Association*, *Health Partners*, and *Everymind Older* have all pushed toward the adoption of terminologies that counter discrimination of persons with mental health conditions or physical disabilities (e.g., De Leo, 2022; Rabheru, 2021; Peisah et al 2021).
- Older people living with mental illness or disabilities are frequently marginalised, which leads to human rights violation, elder abuse and reduced access to healthcare (Rabheru, 2021). Ageism operates in the same negative manner.



| <i>Terms best avoided</i> | <i>Preferred terms</i> | <i>Why</i> | <i>Caveats and cultural exceptions</i> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| <i><u>Elderly</u></i> | Older persons/ older people | Often associated with negative connotations/ stereotypes Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, UN (1996) decided that the term “elderly” will be substituted by “older persons” in conformity with the UN Principles for Older Persons (UN GA, 1996) | <i>In Australian First Nation culture, “Elder” is an honorific term representing a unique social position in the Australian Indigenous community (Eades et al, 2021).</i> |
| <i><u>Senior/seniors</u></i> | Older people | The terms to avoid are belittling, tend to be associated with lower competency and carry a pejorative connotation. | <i>In certain South Asian countries, “seniors” translated in local language denotes respect and experience (Bergeron and Lagace, 2021) (Buzurg in Urdu, Afzal in Urdu, Bara in Hindi, Boyeshko in Bengali)</i> |



| | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <p><u>Senior citizens</u></p> | <p>Older persons/ older people</p> | | <p><i>While senior citizen has been nominated in American guides as best avoided (Lundebjerg et al, 2018), it was the most preferred term nominated by older Israeli adults in a recent study (also the official term used by the relevant Ministry in Israel (Okon and Ayalon, under review)</i></p> <p><i>In some Asian and African nations, "senior citizens" is used as a legal term for retirement policies and social benefits.</i></p> |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|



| | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <u><i>Geriatric/geriatrics</i></u> | Older people | Used in non-academic literature and media discourse, tends to 'other' the older people | <i>A recognized medical term</i> |
| <u><i>Over the hill</i></u> | | Associated with negative impact of ageing | |
| <u><i>The silver tsunami</i></u> | Demographic changes | The terms instigate fear and a negative connotation of a disaster | |
| <u><i>The aging tsunami</i></u> | Aging population | | |
| <u><i>The gray wave</i></u> | Increasing numbers of older people | | |
| <u><i>Demographic cliff</i></u> | | | |



“Addressing ageism is critical for creating a more equal world in which the dignity and rights of every human being are respected and protected.

This is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the world’s agreed blueprint for building a future of peace and prosperity for all on a healthy planet”.



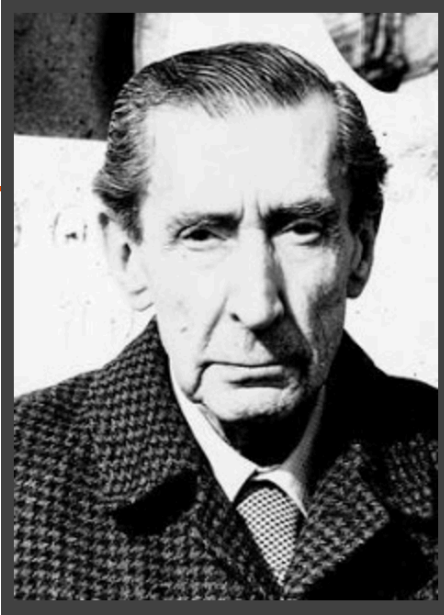
António Guterres

Secretary-General of the United Nations



Combating Ageism

Combating ageism and promoting the human rights of older persons, particularly those with mental health conditions, are urgent priorities for the International Psychogeriatric Association (IPA) and the World Psychiatric Association – Section of Old Age Psychiatry (WPA – SOAP) (Ayalon et al 2021; Peisah et al, 2021; Raberhu and Gillis, 2021).



Jose' Bergamin (1895-1983)

At sixty we can commit suicide, at seventy it is advisable, at eighty obligatory.





Ageism → **Loneliness** →
Depression → **Suicidality**





Ageistic views, depression, suicide

- Suicide in old age is frequently considered the result of a rational decision. Accumulation of physical illnesses, frailty, dependence on others, loss of partner and loneliness are often seen as reasons that might justify suicidal acts. Depression is an important risk factor for suicidal behaviour even at very advanced age. However, ageistic views tend to consider depression as a normal feature of the aging process.
- it is possible that the presence of depression can be overestimated or perhaps generalized more than necessary by making it the scapegoat of any situation related to suicide.





Ageistic views, depression, suicide

- Adopting an attitude that involves excessive simplification of problems, where everything is attributable to ‘depression’, can induce a rigid prescriptive approach, often limited to the indication of an antidepressant drug.
- In this way, the appreciation of the multifactorial nature of an individual’s crisis becomes too narrow and the chances of counteracting the complexities of a dangerous suicide progression too modest.





The Boston Globe

Murthy's message: 'Loneliness kills'

Freyer, Felice J . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]18 Jan 2018: B.1.

CFP MFC

CANADIAN FAMILY PHYSICIAN

• LE MÉDECIN DE FAMILLE CANADIEN

The official journal of the College of Family Physicians of Canada

Social isolation and loneliness: the new geriatric giants

Approach for primary care

Amy Freedman and Jennifer Nicolle

Canadian Family Physician March 2020, 66 (3) 176-182;

Australian Institute for Suicide
Research and Prevention
WHO Collaborating Centre for
Research and Training in
Suicide Prevention
National Centre of Excellence



Social Isolation



Loneliness






Loneliness in Cacioppo's View

Loneliness describes a negative emotional state experienced when there is a difference between the relationships one would like to have and those that one perceives to have in reality (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014).

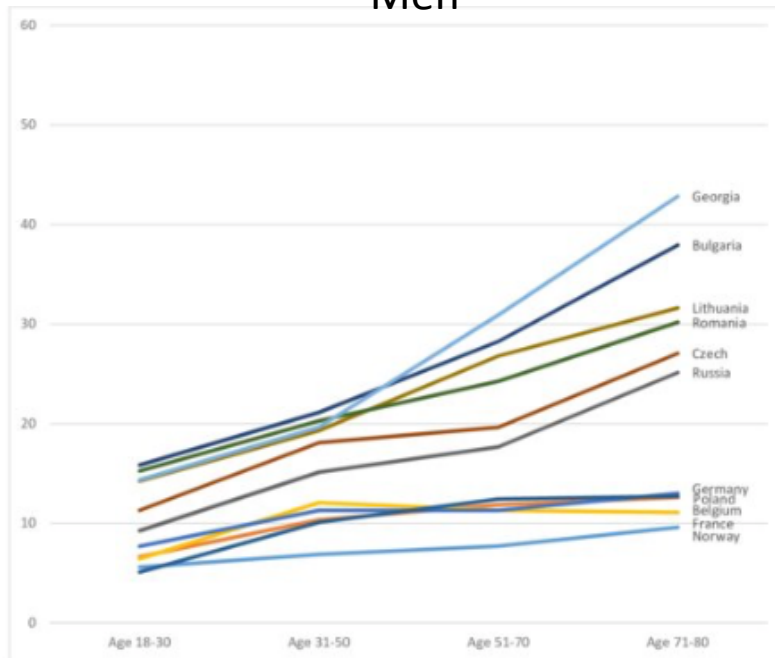
The unpleasant feelings of loneliness are subjective; researchers have found that loneliness is not about the amount of time you spend with other people or alone. Loneliness is more related to the quality of relationships, rather than to quantity.

“Lonely” persons feel that they are not understood by others and think they have no significant relationships.

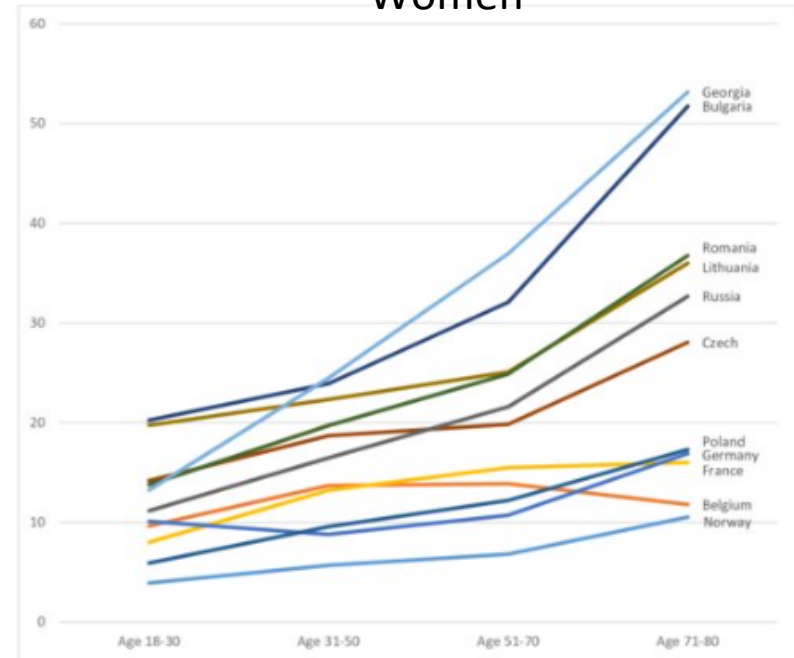


Loneliness in Old Age

Men

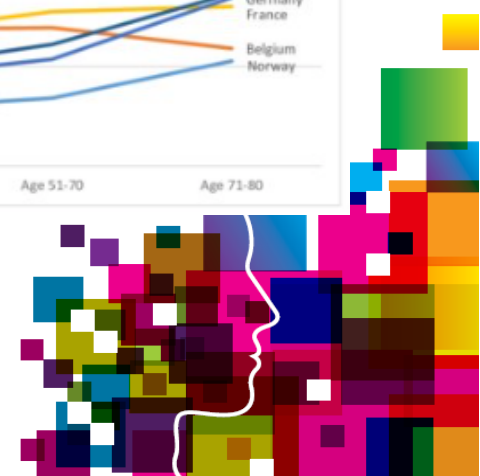


Women



Late-Life Loneliness in 11 European Countries: Results from the Generations and Gender Survey

Thomas Hansen¹ · Britt Slagsvold¹ (2016)





Consequences of Loneliness

- It has been discovered that loneliness is a risk factor for many physical health problems, from fragmented sleep and dementia to decreased cardiac output.
- A lack of social connections poses a risk of early death similar to physical risk factors such as obesity and smoking.



Data from UK



Over 9 million adults are often or always lonely.

(British Red Cross and Co-op)

More than **1 in 3** people aged 75 and over say that feelings of loneliness are out of their control.

(Independent Age)



For **3.6 million** people aged 65 and over television is the main form of company.

(Age UK)



GRANT Study

**The secret to live well?
Love and friendship are more
important than cholesterol levels!**



Relationships, relationships, relationships

“When the study began, nobody cared about empathy or attachment. But the key to healthy aging is relationships, relationships, relationships,” Vaillant says. Close relationships, the data indicates, are what keep people happy throughout their lives. The study found strong relationships to be far and away the strongest predictor of life satisfaction, and better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, wealth, fame, IQ, or even genes. That finding proved true across the board among both the Harvard men and the inner-city participants. And strong relationships are not only correlated with happiness, but with physical health, longevity, and financial success, too.



The 90+ Study

Initial participants in The 90+ Study were once members of The Leisure World Cohort Study (LWCS), which was started in 1981.

- People who drank moderate amounts of alcohol or coffee lived longer than those who had abstained.
 - People who were overweight in their 70s lived longer than normal or underweight people.
 - The "Superagers" reported having more satisfying and high quality relationships than people cognitively in the same age range.
- (Lee et al, 2016; Bullain et al, 2016)





Human aging, finite lives and the idealization of clocks

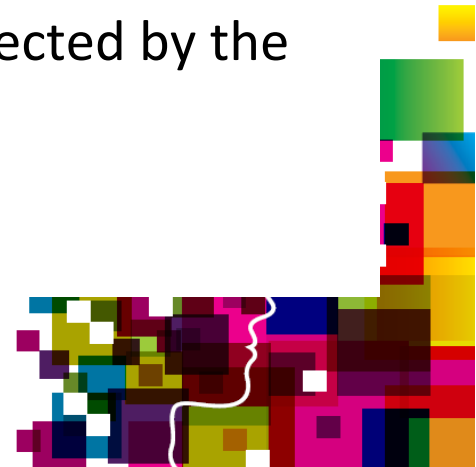
- Throughout modernity, time has increasingly been identified as clock time: perfectly fit to measure 'age' as time since birth but failing to explain 'age' as an indicator of aging processes and even less adequate to grasp the lived time of human beings.
- The instrumentalist culture of late modern society, has difficulties to relate to the elusive but inevitable limitations of finite life. This tendency is supported by outspoken approaches in biogerontology indulging in perspectives of infinite human lives; a message that is eagerly consumed by the mass media.





Aging: Learning to Live a Finite Life

- Although life expectancies have risen impressively, this has not led to much interest. Modern society has clearly difficulties to relate to the inevitable limitations of finite life. **Finitude is easily postponed and reserved for those who are "really old."** Indeed, a meaningful understanding of aging needs to include a process of learning to live a finite life.
- Aging is foremost a process of living through changes that are largely beyond our control although they require active responding. Unfortunately, aging, the most important experiential source of knowledge about what it is to live a finite life, is neglected by the same culture that needs its wisdom (Baars, 2017).





Conclusions

- Age-friendly environments can only be ensured through age-friendly terminology and attitudes. However, we need to be both respectful and realistic. Firstly, we need to be respectful of the variations in meaning of words across language and culture.
- Secondly, we need to be realistic in being persistent and patient in attitudes change promotion. Traditions and local culture have inspired both attitudes and behaviours and they may require continuing efforts and generational changes before showing significant modifications.
- If we want to change how we think, feel and speak about older persons for the better, we have to be prepared for a long-haul trip.

