



# Being on guard to ageism

Clinicians need to stay alert to the impact of ageist and disempowering attitudes on their clients, writes FELICITY CHAPMAN.

The way our Western society views ageing can be less than complimentary.

If we, as a society, do not warmly embrace the concept of ageing or decline then it is not too much of a jump between this and having unhelpful (explicit or implicit) attitudes toward those who are ageing and declining.

We might, justifiably, pride ourselves on our ability to have a non-judgemental approach to humans of all shapes and sizes, of all ages. But even the most saintly among us lives in a broader context and, in counselling, this translates to an awareness of the multitude of ways that ageist attitudes can be affecting your client – and even the counselling process itself or how you view your work.

Staying interested and satisfied in work related to older adults is also about understanding the cultural milieu that surrounds you. What messages about older adults infiltrate the media, policies and general discussion? What social attitudes or beliefs might sap desire instead of fuel it?

Being forewarned is to be forearmed. When we are able to see clearly through the mist of ageism we can be more alert to stories of prejudice or disempowerment and help our clients find a way to position themselves against such dominant discourses.



Felicity Chapman

The following are five forms of ageism or attitudes that I suspect exist in our Western society:

- Ageist attitude #1: Urgh!
- Ageist attitude #2: "O" is for obsolete.
- Ageist attitude #3: It's not worth it.
- Ageist attitude #4: What do you expect?
- Ageist attitude #5: Where's the progression?

## AGEIST ATTITUDE #1: URGH!

I loved opening up the Weekend Australian magazine one lazy Saturday morning to find local Byron Bay identity "Feather" staring back at me in a skimpy bikini proudly displaying nearly every bit of her weather- and life-worn 78-year-old body. She was photographed by Natalie Grono for the 2015 National Photographic Portrait Prize and made her way as a finalist. Feather (and Natalie) did not end up winning the Portrait Prize but she won my heart.

I am sure I was not alone in my appreciation of the way Feather stared self-assuredly down the camera lens but my family brought me back to the real world. "Urgh!" my 14-year-old son exclaimed as he spied the picture, "That's ugly!" and he pleaded for me to spare him the image that was spoiling his breakfast.

Had Feather been a 20-something Ferrari model I am sure his response would have been somewhat different. So, what teenage boy would want to see an old lady in a bikini, I hear you say. True. But is his reaction representative of a general distaste for "old"?

In Buddhism an old person is believed to be a heavenly messenger. Why? Because, as the teaching goes, one is reminded of how unhelpful it can be to feel shocked, humiliated or disgusted at such a sight for this will one day be their destiny.

To deny the inevitability of age is to stay locked in a state of suffering; trying to hold onto a Peter Pan life of "forever young" when reality speaks of something else. Perhaps the "Urgh!" is less about the older person per se that we see and more what they represent, the confronting truth of our own destiny?

Feelings of repulsion may also fuel negative stereotypes about seniors. What might start as a reaction to something "old" becomes a blinkered appraisal for all in that category.

Advanced seniors can be lumped into one large melting pot of "Urgh!" without an interest to offset negative attitudes with positive ones. One study that examined the judgements people make about older adults discovered that negative stereotypes were more commonly

Feather and the Goddess Pool. Photo by Natalie Grono.



"You can be on the lookout for how your clients might become entrapped with disempowering attitudes about their age and stage in life."

societal judgements are enlarging feelings of despair or self-disgust when this need not be so?

Third, you can actively challenge any internal recoil at the idea of exploring the intimate – the sexual. True, members of "the lucky generation" may not be leaping into a conversation of this type but how much space are we creating for this in our transactions? Perhaps an initial "Urgh!" can become a more neutral and curious "Oh?"

And finally, you can pay extra attention to seeing your clients as individuals instead of succumbing to polarisations of "dotty and difficult" or "sweet and lovely". These groupings can blinker workers to important nuances of positivity or discourage clients to step outside of limiting identities.

What is important is to be cognisant of how society's values can affect our own, and can come unbidden into our therapeutic encounters or be present in how our clients view themselves. ■

**Felicity Chapman is a mental health social worker who specialises in working with older people in both community and residential aged care. This is an edited extract from her book *Counselling and Psychotherapy with Older People in Care: A Support Guide*, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.**

associated with those over 80 than for those in the younger senior age group.

Attempts to offset unhelpful stereotyping can be seen in the creation of new frameworks for working with seniors. These models aim to view adult development in more positive terms than the more traditional loss-deficit model of ageing.

It encourages a closer look, an appreciation of many nuances, that can make up the experience of an older adult. And the tenets of positive psychology further fuel an interest in turning around feelings of despair or disgust so that panoramas of hope and appeal come into view.

The process of ageing can then be seen

as fruitful: of gaining wisdom, of being clear about one's identity, of thriving despite physical decline, of making the most out of any situation, of taking life firmly by both hands and never letting go until your time is up.

Counselling can also be an avenue to turn the "Urgh!" inclination around. First, you can be on guard against any attitudes that may undermine what you do and actively appreciate the significance of working with a senior cohort.

Second, you can be on the lookout for how your clients might become entrapped with disempowering attitudes about their age and stage in life. Could it be that



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