

Ageism

is the ultimate malignant “ism.”

Because...Hopefully we will all grow old!

What is Ageism?

The term ageism was coined in the 1960s by Robert Butler to define the “widespread discrimination against the elderly based on prejudice rooted in the very fact of being older.”

“Ageism is discrimination on the basis of age; it is as serious and harmful as racism and sexism” (Magoteaux & Bonnivier, 2009).

In fact, ageism is the ultimate intersectional form of discrimination because it affects every single person on the planet. Fundamentally, ageism does not make sense—but has unfortunately taken root in modern culture, particularly in the U.S., driven by the corrosive fixation on financial gain as the ultimate driver of policy. An influential handful of the very rich want, above all, to stay rich and powerful, which has translated into capitalist values and policies going after the youth market.

Follow the Money

Younger consumers will presumably need to buy things, which are getting more and more expensive, for longer than older people, who increasingly just need to buy basics and tend to have lost interest in purchasing fancy new toys at every commercial holiday.

I applaud the many people still in their first or second acts (under age 60) who have conscientiously eschewed the capitalist creed of consuming as many resources as possible and are choosing to eat less meat, burn less oil, and have adopted commitments to reusing and recycling.

Thank You!

Meanwhile, the fastest growing demographic worldwide is over age 80 and numbers are expected to triple by 2050 to 426 million.

Age is undoubtedly a risk factor for chronic disease, cancer, frailty, and dementia and, thus, ageing has been associated with declining resilience.

However, lifespan is not equivalent to healthspan. Health systems across the world are working to find effective means of reducing disability, and to promote solutions to successful aging. Resilience is something we can continue to develop, even in the face of disease, declining strength, and dementia.

We must collectively move away from the highly prejudiced and dysfunctional concept of aging people being nothing but needy—“greedy geezers” threatening to suck away resources from future generations—which is short-sighted and inaccurate.

For One:

Us geezers earned our Social Security benefits.

For Two:

We represent a continuing repository of knowledge, skill, and evolved wisdom as we have the perspective of the long arc of the lifespan.

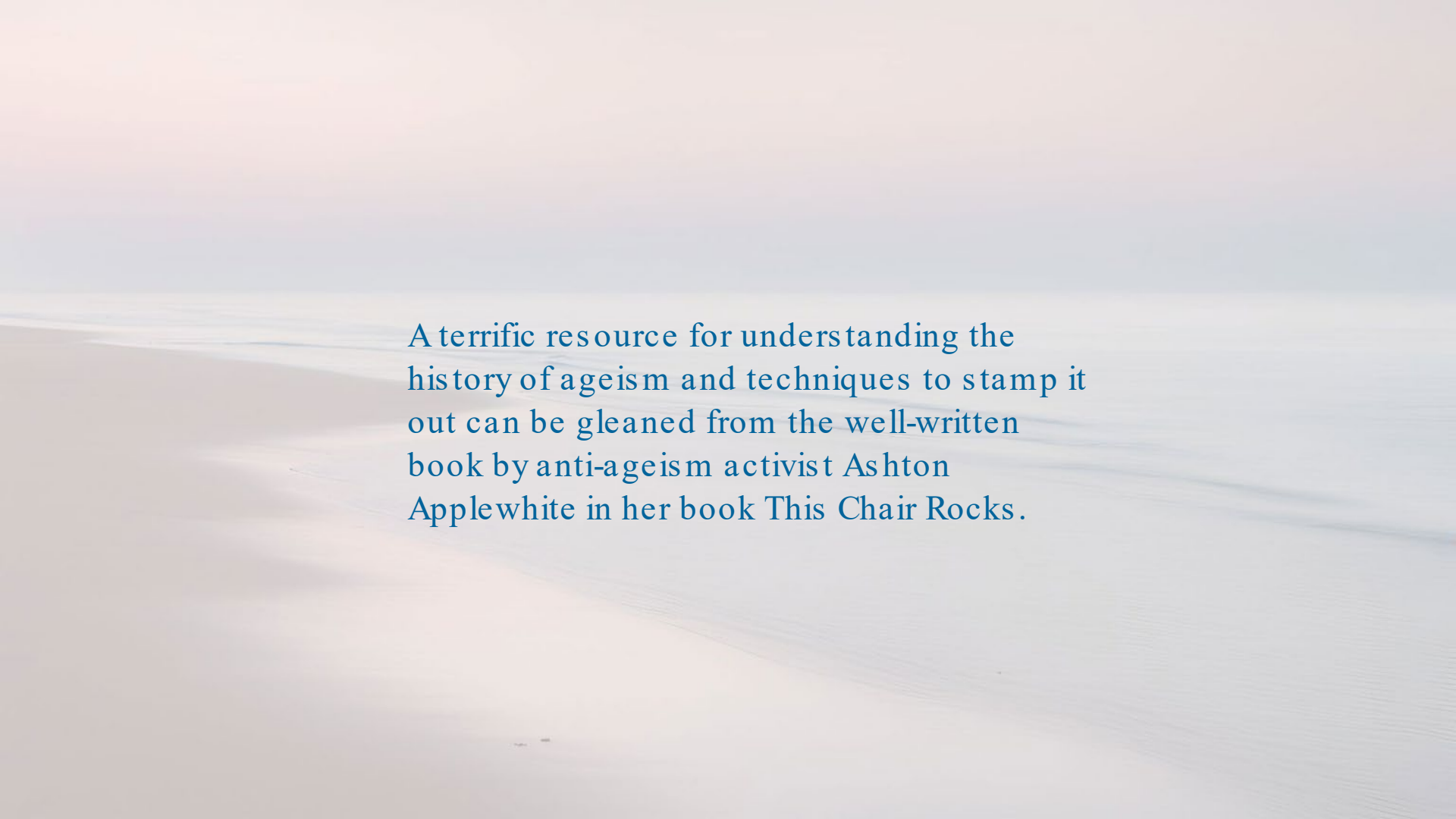
It is impossible to really understand being in one's 60s, 70s, 80s, and older at age 20 or 30. Remember how we used to call 40 "over the hill?"

Good grief—at 40, we are barely beginning to mature as sage, peaceable humans.

Let's face it: We have all been exposed to the concept of aging as an arc starting with youth, peaking in midlife, and then descending into decrepitude. (See Jane Fonda's 11 minute TED Talk "Life's third act.")

The reality is that most people on the planet are living, on average, 34 years longer than their great-grandparents. This is a whole other adult lifetime and this phase has been called "The Third Act."

Life is more correctly viewed as a staircase, which allows for continuous upward personal growth.



A terrific resource for understanding the history of ageism and techniques to stamp it out can be gleaned from the well-written book by anti-ageism activist Ashton Applewhite in her book *This Chair Rocks*.

Here's a quote from Ashton Applewhite:

“Why add another ‘ism’ to the list when so many, racism in particular, call out for action?”

Here's the thing: We don't have to choose. When we make the world a better place to grow old in, we make it a better place in which to be from somewhere else, to have a disability or be queer or non-white or non-rich.

Just as different forms of oppression reinforce and compound each other—that's intersectionality, a term coined by feminist and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw—so do different forms of activism, because they chip away at the fear and ignorance that all prejudice relies upon.

Ageism is the perfect target for compound advocacy because everyone experiences it. And when we show up at all ages for whatever cause tugs at our sleeve—save the whale, save the clinic, save the democracy—we not only make that effort more effective, we dismantle ageism in the process.”

A Few More Quotes from *This Chair Rocks*:

- We are all old people in training!
- The sooner growing older is stripped of reflexive dread, the better equipped we are to benefit from the countless ways in which it can enrich us.
- Children live in the moment because that's all they know. Olders do it because time is running out. And living in the present is what makes people happy.
- Accommodating older workers benefits all workers.
- Wharton professor Peter Cappelli and co-author of *Managing the Older Worker* says “Every aspect of job performance gets better as we age. Not one of the negative stereotypes that older workers confront holds up under scrutiny.”
- A 2015 study in the journal *Psychological Science* analyzed a huge trove of scores on cognitive tests taken by people of all ages. It found that four types of proficiencies didn't full ripen until people were in their fifties: vocabulary, math, general knowledge, and comprehension (a test that involved explaining why things are the way they are—for example why communities have zoning regulations).



RACISM

PREJUDICE PITS US
AGAINST EACH OTHER

NATIONAL

SEXISM

ABLEISM

We Are All Aging. Cool!

Something every single person on the planet is doing, together.

Study after study show that older people are happier (see Laura Carstensen's TED Talk, "Older People are Happier"). What this actually seems to mean is that older people are more accepting of "difficult" emotions like sadness. Older people can view injustice with compassion, instead of despair. This translates to greater satisfaction in life.

However, there is no doubt that the gross inequality of resource distribution means some are empowered to age gracefully while many cannot. Which creates a public concept of old people being needy.

Yes, of course, old people have needs. All people have needs!

Resilience

Elders contribute enormously to their families, communities, and to human society in general.

Elder adults have had more time in their lives to build resilience—a key strategy for aging well. Resilience is a pillar to successful aging (Merchant RA, Aprahamian I, Eoo J, Vellas B, Morley JE “Resilience and Successful Aging” J Nutr Health Aging 2022;26(7):652-656).

Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back after a stressful encounter or adversity in life. Older adults are a heterogeneous group and demonstrate variable response to stressors influenced by gender, ethnicity, generational difference, cultural variation, type and intensity of stressor, and outcome.

Resilience is a Dynamic Construct with Multiple Protective Factors:

- 1) Having a purpose in life
- 2) Better perceived health (this is an important concept: Self-perception is way more important in most cases than someone else's assessment of the quality of your life)
- 3) Optimism
- 4) Locus of control (the opposite of helplessness)
- 5) Social connectivity
- 6) Spirituality
- 7) Functioning independently
- 8) Exercise/movement on a daily basis
- 9) Open to a variety of environments (not pigeonholing yourself)

How to Build *Resilience*?

Several interventions have been found to successfully reduce ageism.

Primarily, these include a combination of education and intergenerational contact: Interventions that combine education about aging with intergenerational contact have demonstrated a strong impact on changing ageist attitudes and increasing knowledge about aging.

Increasing resilience has been associated positive mental health, quality of life, increased physical activity, improved pain threshold, better physical and rehabilitative outcomes.

The one-year cost of ageism in our healthcare system is estimated by researchers Levy et al. (2020) to be \$63 billion. The authors suggest that “a 10% reduction in the prevalence of ageism could lead to 1.7 million fewer cases of various health conditions.”

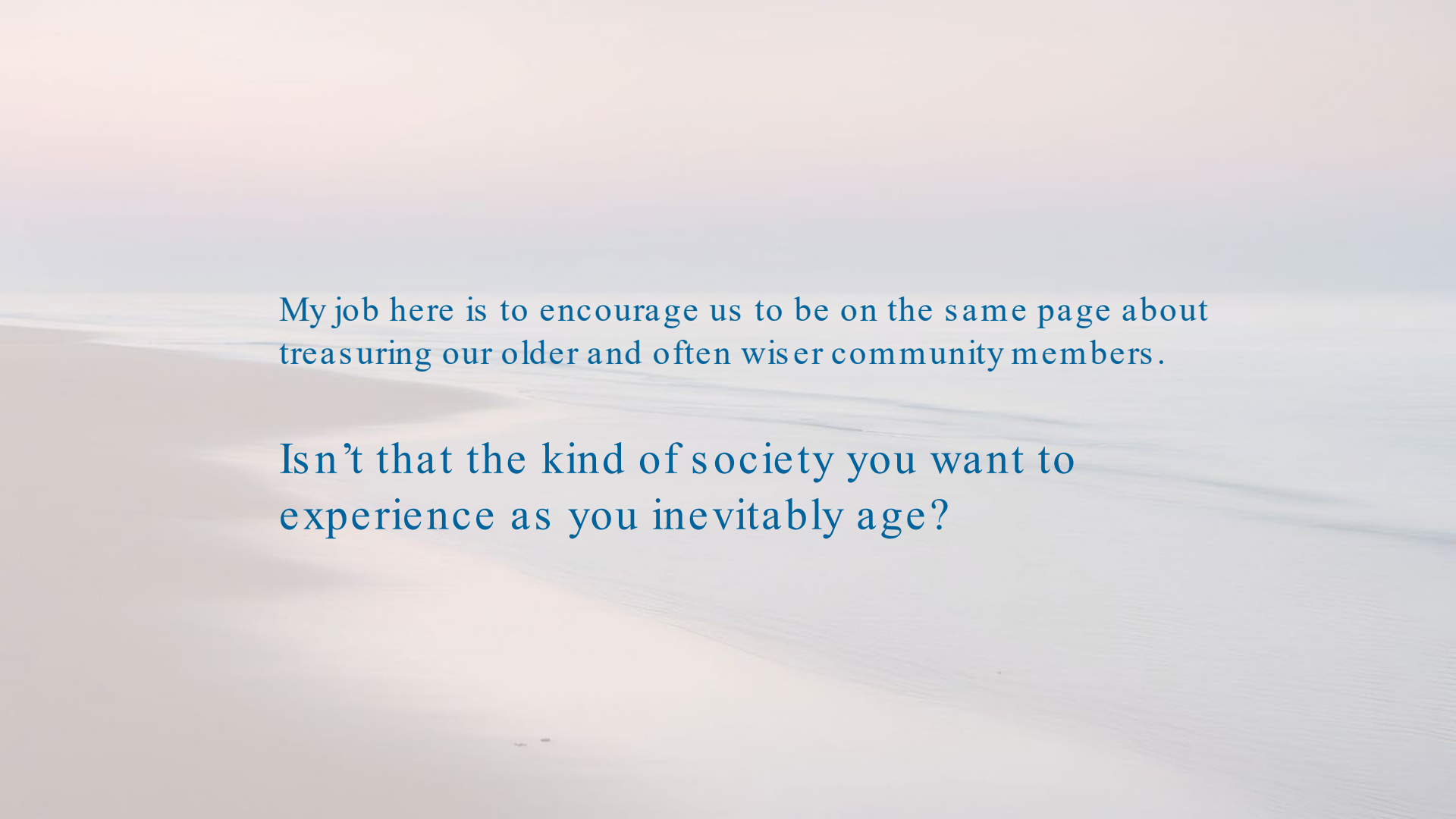
The universal human need for services does not need to be expensive. The remedy to reducing both the incidence and cost in providing services is prevention. One of best academic studies proving this point is ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale).

For example, a child who experiences homelessness or underserved mental illness (such as severe anxiety due to homelessness) is much more likely to become an adult with needs for social services.

Staying healthy, leveling the playing field, and providing appropriate resources should all begin as early as possible in the lifespan.

That just makes sense globally.

Like any other demographic, some seniors require significant resources to achieve quality of life.



My job here is to encourage us to be on the same page about treasuring our older and often wiser community members.

Isn't that the kind of society you want to experience as you inevitably age?

Quick Start Guide

Here is a guide for updating our language around the span of life, from the National Center to Reframe Aging:

Instead of these words and cues:	Try:
"Tidal wave," "tsunami," and similarly catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people	Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "As Americans live longer and healthier lives . . ."
"Choice," "planning," "control," and other individual determinants of aging outcomes	Emphasizing how to improve social contexts: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."
"Seniors," "elderly," "aging dependents," and similar "other-ing" terms that stoke stereotypes	Using more neutral ("older people/Americans") and inclusive ("we" and "us") terms
"Struggle," "battle," "fight," and similar conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences	The Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities."
Using the word "ageism" without explanation	Defining ageism: "Ageism is discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes."
Making generic appeals to the need to "do something" about aging	Using concrete examples like intergenerational community centers to illustrate inventive solutions

Ageism is All Around Us

They say we are too old and senile.

We all need to combat the narrative of ageing being unrelenting loss, grimness, fear, pain, and diminished competency. Research shows that older people are actually LESS likely to fear dying. One reason being they realize that their days and moments ahead are numbered and thus, increasingly precious.

I'm not trying to sugarcoat aging: people we know and love will all die; parts of our bodies will lose vigor and functionality. However, we ALL get older every day, so let's not be in denial. Let's build resilience together!

Avoid Elderspeak

This means talking in a high-pitched voice, addressing the person as “love” or “dearie,” and generally speaking to the person like they are a child.

This is patronizing and infantilizing for an older person, even if they have cognitive impairment.

Try this instead:

Always remember the person behind their current stage in life. It’s fine if the person needs you to speak slower than usual, but try to keep your tone of voice the same as with anyone else.

Some people may like being called “love” or “dear” but unless you know the person, it is usually best to use their name instead. This helps keep their dignity intact.

The Way Forward: Illuminate Ageism

Each of us, as individuals, must challenge our biases. Many of us have internalized negative concepts of our own aging, tolerating quips such as “over the hill,” “senior moment,” or “old and in the way.” Wow! Let’s agree to stop that.

Policy leaders must work toward local and national legislation to prohibit discrimination in old age. Existing laws require updating in most jurisdictions.

Become familiar with the universal prohibition against ageism published by the World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>

Consider this: Aging is a universal, fundamental human experience but it carries negative connotations, especially in youth-fixated cultures such as in the US.

What if we think of “aging” as “changing?” We begin to age in utero! Aging creates enormous growth. If we didn’t “age” we wouldn’t develop! We literally continue to repair and regenerate until just before death.

We also mostly retain the capacity to develop intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually throughout the lifespan. With good self care, we can stay healthy until the end.

Focus on good attitude, good nutrition and good lifestyle behaviors.

If self care is a challenge, consider working with a therapist to get into the subconscious, where poor decision making, which often stems from a history (personal or generational) of trauma or loneliness, can be remediated. Psychic hardships can be eased through self-awareness and self-compassion.

Older People Are *Happier*

Belying the stereotype of cranky old people, older adults actually appear to enjoy pleasant emotions and recall more positive images than do younger adults.

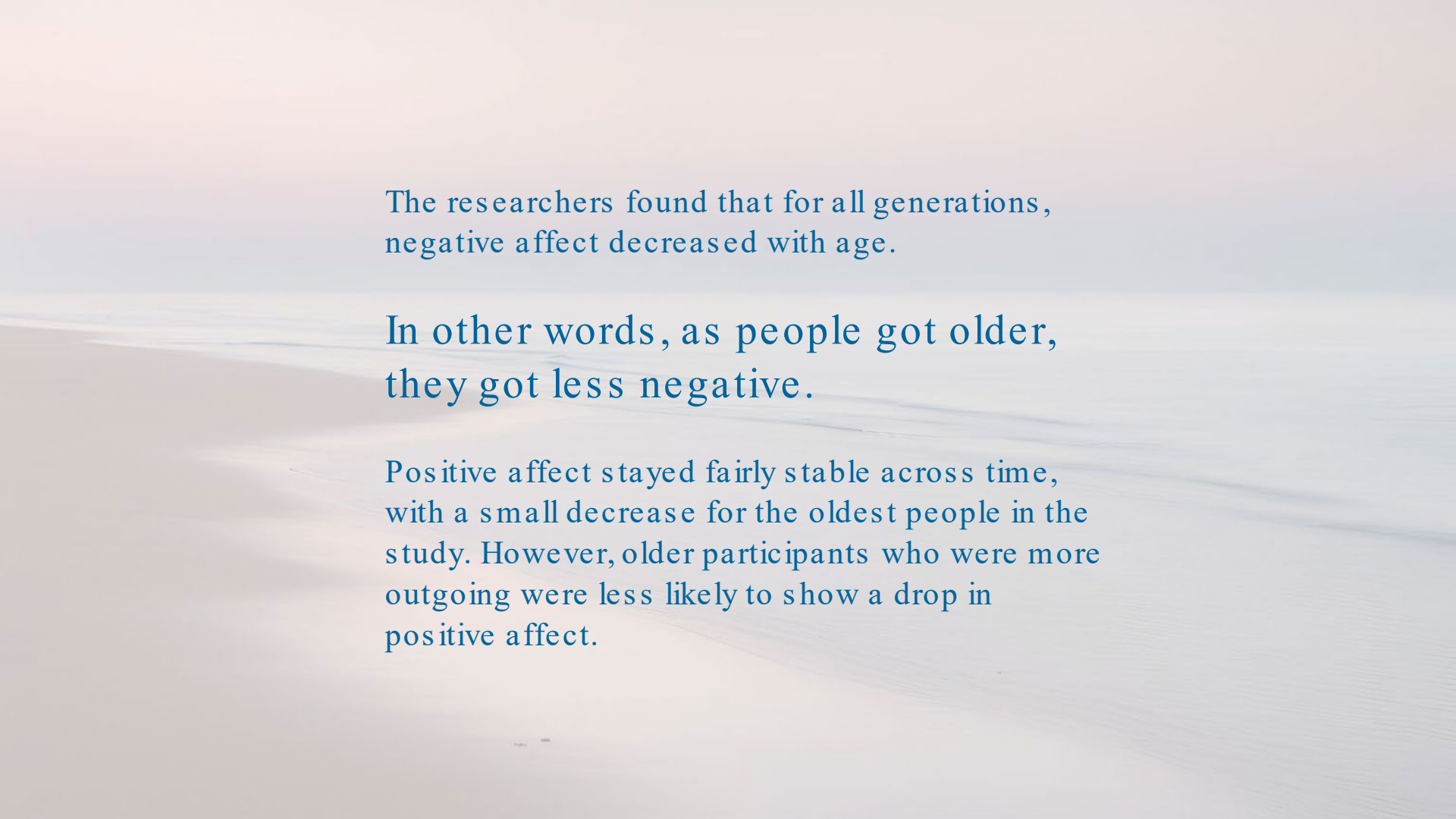
Ongoing psychological research is painting a new and reassuring picture about how older adults feel. The findings attest to a healthy degree of emotional fitness.

Attitude is *Everything*

In 2001, Susan Turk Charles, PhD, Chandra Reynolds, PhD, and Margaret Gatz, PhD, reported that the tendency exhibited by most people to have a positive outlook extends into old age.

A longitudinal study of 2,704 people in four generations of families, which ran from 1971 to 1994, asked participants “positive affect” (emotion or mood) questions, such as, “During the past few weeks, did you ever feel particularly excited or interested in something?”

They also asked “negative affect” questions, such as, “During the past few weeks, did you feel so restless that you couldn't sit long in a chair?”



The researchers found that for all generations, negative affect decreased with age.

In other words, as people got older, they got less negative.

Positive affect stayed fairly stable across time, with a small decrease for the oldest people in the study. However, older participants who were more outgoing were less likely to show a drop in positive affect.

Awareness is Crucial

More good news:

At a macro level, awareness of “age friendly communities” is almost universal; at both global (WHO) and local levels: Juneau recently became an AARP empowered All Ages Friendly City.

Just saying so isn't enough, but many resources exist to put the concepts into action and these largely focus on ensuring that all members of a community have appropriate housing, safe and affordable public transportation, opportunities to engage socially through friendships old and new, or volunteering, or employment.

Workplace Ageism

Don't assume that you or your workplace are 100 percent immune to age discrimination. Our brains work by relying on established stereotypes for faster processing and decision-making. Learn to recognize your own thinking patterns.

Challenge your assumptions. If you see signs of ageism that aren't directed at you, don't distance yourself by thinking that this could never happen to you.

We Can Grow Until the End

Invest in your continued growth and development.

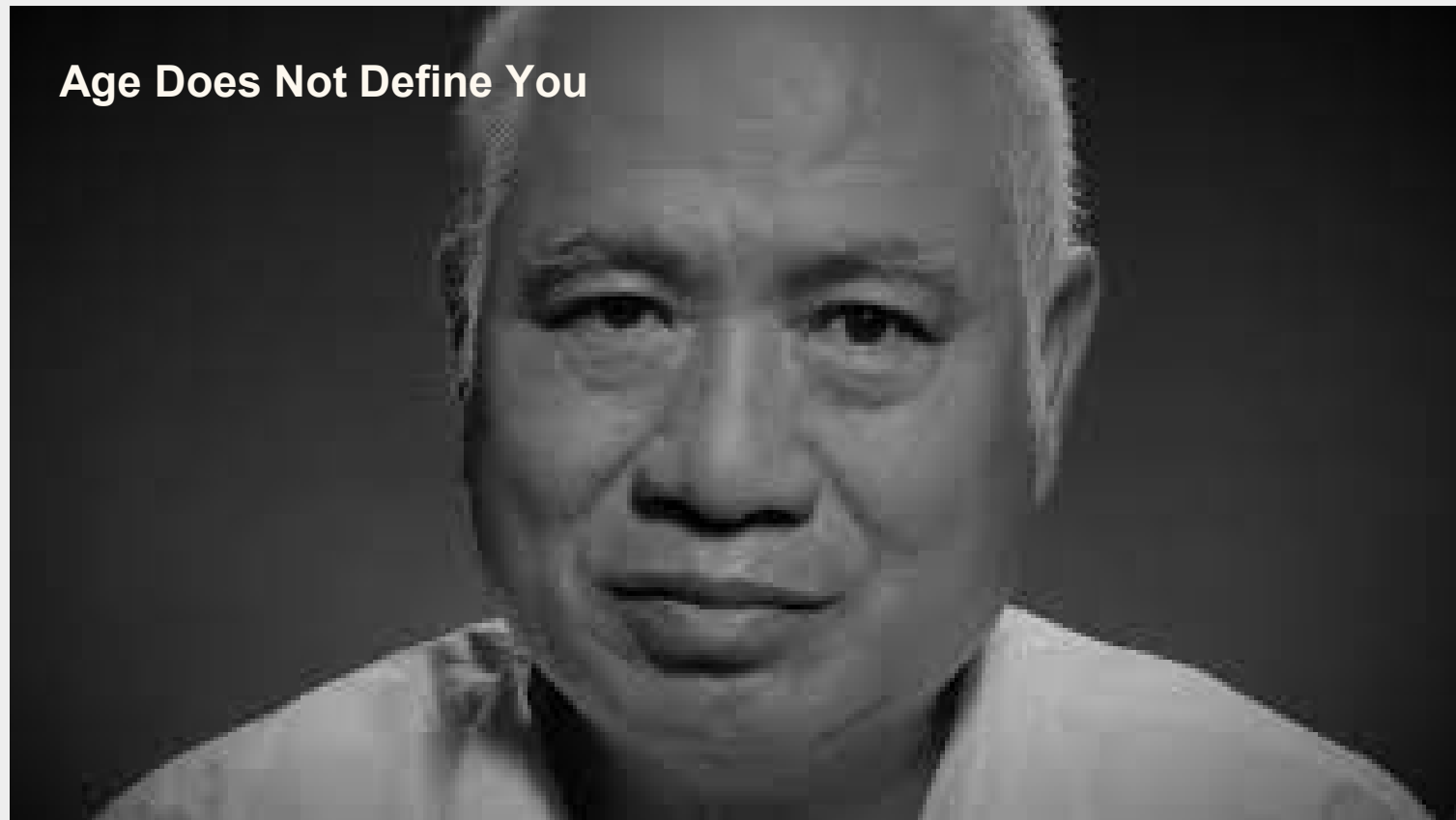
Read, stay up to date on trends and best practices, and push yourself to do better every year. Get a mentor, whether within your current company or outside, who is dedicated to supporting your success.



**Project the same level of polish
and professionalism as your
younger colleagues.**

Perhaps you are feeling secure in your position as an established contributor, but that's no reason to slack off in doing your best to represent your company.

Age Does Not Define You





**Do YOU want to age
successfully?**


Of course you do.

A first step in stamping out ageism is to recognize that we are all, every one of us, aging.

Together, we have a fantastic opportunity to restructure consciousness around aging.

We can all do our part in improving resilience for all the members of our community, which is in fact one of the ways to improve your own resilience.

RESILIENCE means the ability to recover from, or adjust easily, to misfortune or change. Those challenges are going to relentlessly keep on coming.



***Together we can do our best
to be kind, keep it light, stay
engaged and know we are *not*
helpless.***