

# Everyday Ageism and Health

July 2020

[www.healthyagingpoll.org](http://www.healthyagingpoll.org)

Ageism refers to discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping based on age. Age-based discrimination in employment, housing, and health care can negatively affect older adults' health and well-being. Older adults may also experience ageism in their day-to-day lives through interpersonal interactions and exposure to ageist beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes. These forms of *everyday ageism* may also be harmful to health. In December 2019, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50–80 about their experiences with different forms of everyday ageism, positive views on aging, and health.

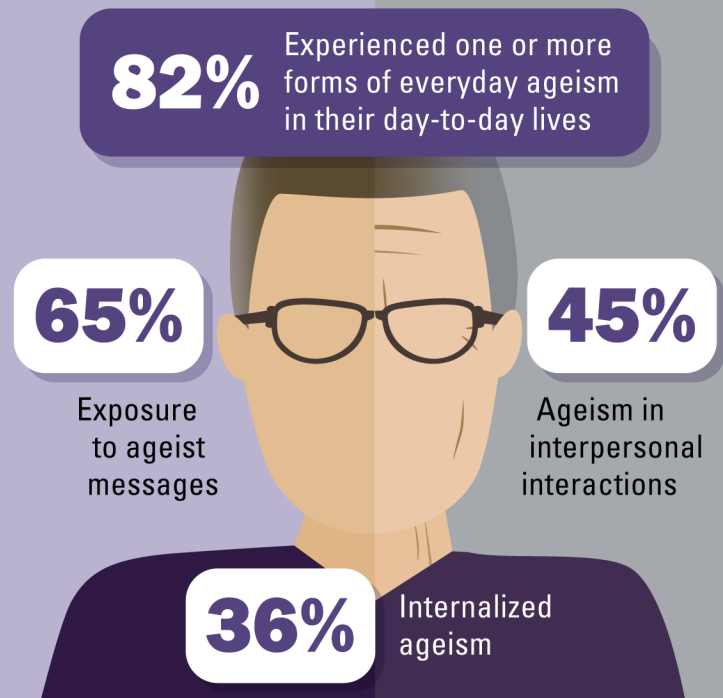
## What is everyday ageism and how common is it?

This poll examined older adults' experiences with nine forms of everyday ageism. These forms were categorized into three groups: (1) exposure to ageist messages, (2) ageism in interpersonal interactions, and (3) internalized ageism (personally held beliefs about aging and older people). Overall, 82% of older adults reported regularly experiencing at least one form of everyday ageism in their day-to-day lives.

Two in three older adults (65%) reported exposure to ageist messages in their day-to-day lives. This included often or sometimes hearing, seeing, and/or reading jokes about old age, aging, or older people (61%) or hearing, seeing, and/or reading things suggesting that older adults and aging are unattractive or undesirable (38%).

Nearly half of older adults (45%) reported experiencing ageism in their interpersonal interactions. Specific

## Experiences with everyday ageism AMONG ADULTS AGE 50–80



\*Note: Percentages reflect responses of either often/sometimes or strongly agree/agree to forms of ageism.

experiences included other people often or sometimes assuming that because of their age, they have difficulty using cell phones and computers (22%), hearing and/or seeing (17%), or remembering and/or understanding (17%). Some older adults also reported that others assume they do not do anything important or valuable (15%) or that they need help with tasks they can do on their own (15%).

Sponsored by



Directed by



In addition, 36% of adults age 50–80 endorsed at least one form of internalized ageism based on their agreement that feeling lonely (29%) or feeling depressed, sad, or worried (26%) are a normal part of getting older.

Two in five older adults (40%) reported often or sometimes experiencing three or more (out of nine) forms of everyday ageism. Experiencing three or more forms was more common among those age 65–80 as compared to those 50–64 (49% vs. 35%), women compared to men (43% vs. 38%), and those with annual household incomes below \$60,000 compared to those with higher incomes (50% vs. 33%). Being retired and living in a rural area were also associated with experiencing more forms of ageism.

### Connections to everyday ageism

Older adults who spent more time watching television, browsing the internet, and/or reading magazines were more likely to report three or more forms of everyday ageism. Those who spent more than 4 hours per day viewing media were more likely to report three or more different forms

of ageism than those spending 2–4 hours per day or those spending less than 2 hours per day viewing media (49% vs. 41% vs. 32%).

Adults age 50–80 who said they looked older than others their age were more likely to report three or more forms of everyday ageism than those who felt they looked either the same or younger than others their age (52% vs. 40%). One in three older adults (35%) agreed they invested time and/or effort to look younger than their age, with those reporting three or more forms of everyday ageism being more likely to indicate doing so (38% vs. 33%). Four in five (79%) agreed that they make sure to engage in activities they believe are important for their health, though this did not differ based on how much everyday ageism older adults reported.

### Everyday ageism and health

Older adults who reported experiencing three or more forms of everyday ageism in their day-to-day lives had worse physical and mental health than those who reported fewer forms of ageism. For example, older adults who reported three or more forms of ageism were less likely to rate their overall

## Positive views on aging AMONG ADULTS AGE 50–80

**88%**

Feel more comfortable being themselves

**80%**

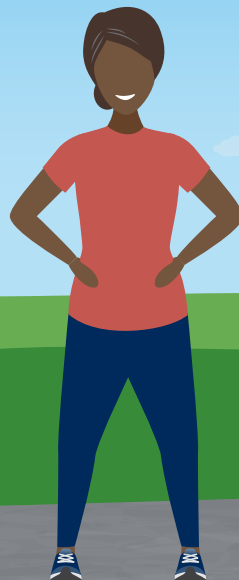
Have a strong sense of purpose

**67%**

Feel more positive about aging

**65%**

Think their life is better than they thought it would be



---

## Older adults who experienced more everyday ageism had worse physical and mental health.

---

physical health as excellent or very good compared to those reporting fewer forms (34% vs. 49%). Older adults who experienced more forms of ageism were also more likely to have a chronic health condition such as diabetes or heart disease than those reporting fewer forms (71% vs. 60%). Those who regularly experienced three or more forms of ageism were less likely than people who reported fewer forms to rate their mental health as excellent or very good (61% vs. 80%) and more likely to report symptoms of depression (49% vs. 22%).

### Positive views on aging

The majority of poll respondents agreed that they feel more comfortable being themselves as they have gotten older (88%) and that they have a strong sense of purpose (80%). About two in three older adults said that they agree that as they have gotten older, their feelings about aging have become more positive (67%) and that their life is better than they thought it would be (65%). Overall, the vast majority of older adults (94%) agreed with at least one of these four positive views on aging and 51% agreed with all four statements.

Older adults with positive views on aging reported experiencing fewer forms of everyday ageism and better physical and mental health. Those who agreed with all four positive views were more likely than those with fewer positive views to report being in excellent or very good physical health (55% vs. 30%). Similarly, older adults who agreed with all four positive views were more likely than those with fewer positive views to say their mental health was excellent or very good (84% vs. 60%).

### Implications

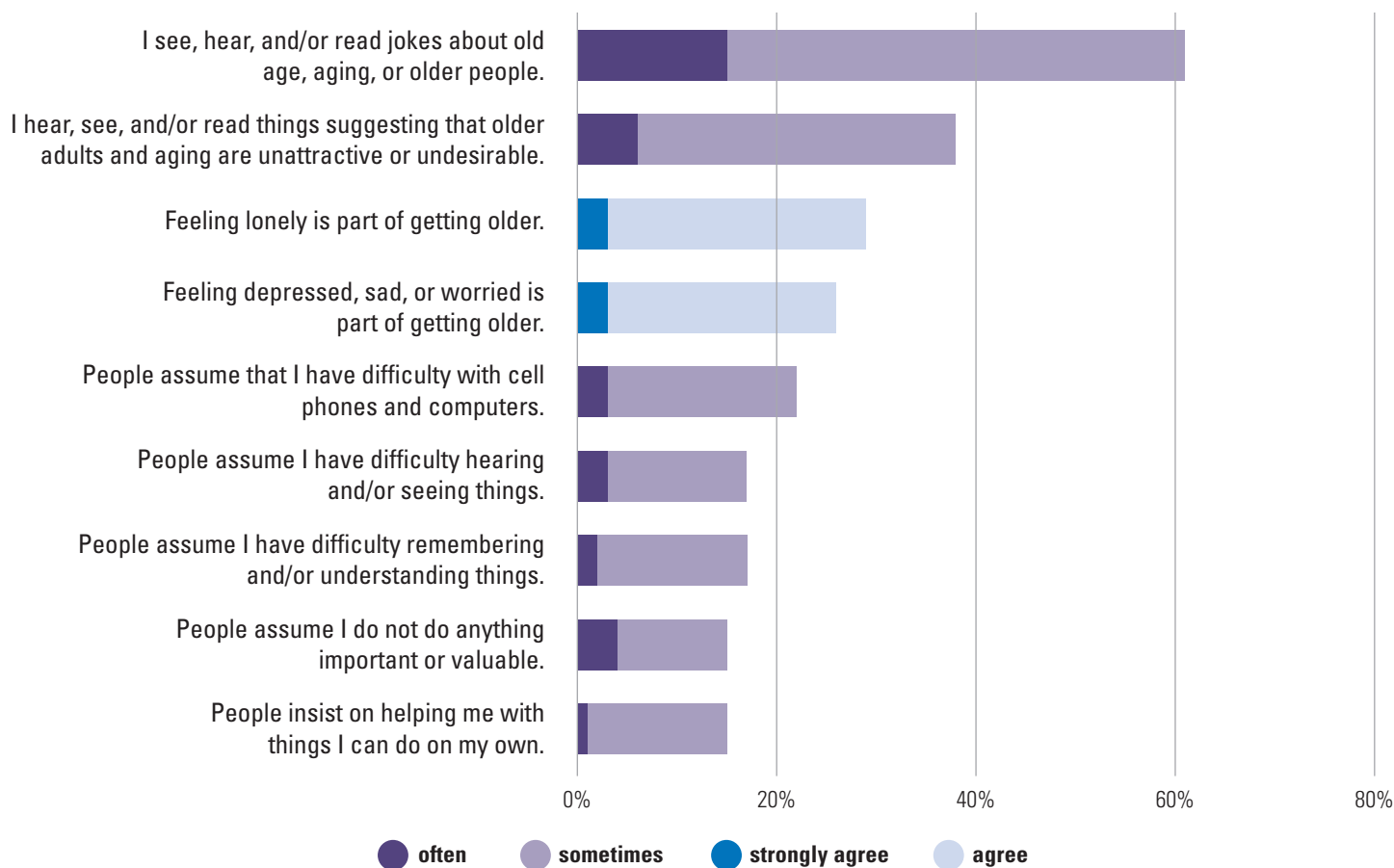
According to this poll, the majority of adults age 50–80 regularly experienced at least one form of everyday ageism in their day-to-day lives, and two in five experienced three or more forms. Many older adults reported exposure to ageist messages. Changing the media's portrayal of older adults could reduce this and potentially counteract the adverse effects of such messages. Older adults also reported ageism in their interpersonal interactions. While the statements and actions of others, such as providing unnecessary help, may be well-intentioned, they may not be harmless. Finally, some older adults themselves hold negative beliefs about aging and older people, which may partially explain why aging and aging-related changes are often feared and avoided rather than celebrated.

Older adults who regularly experienced more forms of everyday ageism were more likely to have worse physical and mental health. While the reasons why and how everyday ageism contributes to adverse health outcomes are not fully understood, the consistent relationships identified between experiences of everyday ageism and multiple indicators of poor health suggest that there is a relationship between these concepts.

Everyday ageism is prevalent. However, many older adults also hold positive perspectives about aging. Older adults who held more positive views on aging reported less everyday ageism and better physical and mental health. Emphasizing the benefits of aging and the many contributions of older adults in families, communities, and the media may promote more positive views on aging and help safeguard older adults from the negative consequences of ageism.

Ageism is a product of American culture that should be acknowledged, discussed, and addressed. Increased consideration of how negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination toward older people affect responses to major public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic could present a key opportunity to challenge assumptions that contribute to ageism. Addressing everyday ageism may have far-reaching benefits for the health and well-being of older adults.

## Supplemental Data: Forms of everyday ageism reported by adults age 50–80



### Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (“Ipsos”) for the University of Michigan’s Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. National Poll on Healthy Aging surveys are conducted by recruiting from Ipsos KnowledgePanel®, the largest national, probability-based panel in the U.S.

This survey module was administered online in December 2019 to a randomly selected, stratified group of older adults age 50–80 (n=2,048). The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The completion rate was 77% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ±1 to 2 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample and higher among subgroups.

Findings from the National Poll on Healthy Aging do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

**National Poll on Healthy Aging, July 2020,**  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/156038>

### National Poll on Healthy Aging Team

**Preeti Malani, MD, MSJ, MS**, Director  
**Jeffrey Kullgren, MD, MS, MPH**, Associate Director  
**Erica Solway, PhD, MPH, MSW**, Associate Director  
**Julie Ober Allen, PhD, MPH**, Research Collaborator  
**Dianne Singer, MPH**, Production Manager  
**Matthias Kirch, MS**, Data Analyst

#### The Regents of the University of Michigan

Jordan B. Acker, Huntington Woods  
 Michael J. Behm, Grand Blanc  
 Mark J. Bernstein, Ann Arbor  
 Paul W. Brown, Ann Arbor  
 Shauna Ryder Diggs, Grosse Pointe  
 Denise Ilitch, Bingham Farms  
 Ron Weiser, Ann Arbor  
 Katherine E. White, Ann Arbor  
 Mark S. Schlissel (ex officio)

The University of Michigan is a Non-discriminatory, Affirmative Action Employer.

© 2020, The Regents of the University of Michigan