Unintentional age discrimination is widespread in society

AGE, the European interest group for older people and pensioners, is continuing its efforts to ensure equal treatment for older people. This is a priority for our organisation, and we urge the European Commission to adopt an action plan to combat age discrimination – also known as ageism – without delay.

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Discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, religion, skin colour, sexual orientation, age or disability is prohibited by law. Such discrimination and harassment, which are usually based on prejudice, should be opposed. Equal rights and opportunities should be promoted for everyone, regardless of age. However, the implementation of EU Member States' laws in this area is arguably inadequate.

I have drawn the following conclusions from the discussions in AGE on ageism:

For us older people, curbing age discrimination is of the utmost importance. Age discrimination can manifest itself in a variety of forms – temporary or permanent, conscious or unconscious harassment and attacks, lack of accessibility, and disparaging attitudes towards older people. The stereotypical labelling of older people as 'frail' or 'not quite of sound mind' is linked to age discrimination. It affects older people's well-being, dignity and rights.

An older person may experience age discrimination in daily life. It is often a matter of unintentional age discrimination, but discrimination nonetheless. The discrimination need not be explicit, but may instead be expressed through gestures, facial expressions, glances, body language, jokes or comments. This occurs relatively commonly in everyday interactions among relatives, friends and acquaintances – perhaps even within one's own family.

Unintentional age discrimination appears to increase in parallel with the progression of functional impairments in older people, such as declining muscle strength, impaired hearing and vision, increasing memory loss and cognitive difficulties, as well as other 'invisible' disabilities that may arise with age, including diabetes, coronary heart disease, chronic pain, neurological disorders and chronic fatigue.

In social interactions, an older person's increasing functional decline is often downplayed – those involved 'do not want to talk about it', while the older person may feel ashamed and attempt to minimise the decline, particularly in relation to increasing dementia.

Relatives and acquaintances may begin to feel irritated when spending time with older people (e.g. with repeated comments such as: "…can't you hear what we said…" or "…don't you remember we've already talked about that…"). These are examples of unintentional age discrimination. The older person may begin to feel uncomfortable, somewhat 'sidelined' – left out of social gatherings as it has become more difficult for them to actively follow and participate in an ongoing conversation, for example at parties, in club meetings or at the dinner table at home. This easily leads to increased involuntary loneliness and isolation, regret, and feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. In the long run, this can lead to depression and worsening mental health.

My conclusion from the discussions at AGE is that, yes, unintentional age discrimination does occur – and it is widespread. Many of God Tid's readers have probably experienced it themselves. Unintentional age discrimination requires attention and can likely best be addressed through open discussion among all those concerned.

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