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## *Ending ageism - the prejudice against one's future self*

The world marks the United Nations Day for Older Persons on Oct 1. There have been discussions recently on race, religion, gender, ability and sexuality; old age should be added to this list.

Kanwaljit Soin

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Old age and the process of ageing tend to be construed in a negative light, leading to ageism in most societies around the world, including Singapore, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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Oct 1 has been designated by the United Nations as the Day for Older Persons. In Singapore, in a touch of irony, the same day had been celebrated as Children's Day for many years until 2019, when it was changed to the first Friday of October.

I am glad this has happened, and so now we can designate the first day of the month as the day for an age-integrated society. This may start us on a journey to make Singapore the best place to be born and live in without being discriminated on the basis of old age.

There are many reasons to celebrate old age, but instead younger people often associate it with disease, disability and dependency. Thus, old age and the process of ageing tend to be construed in a negative light, leading to ageism in most societies around the world, including Singapore.

Life expectancy is getting longer and old age is being extended. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), life expectancy globally has increased by more than six years between 2000 and 2019 - from 66.8 years in 2000 to 73.4 years in 2019. The longer we live, the more likely we are to live longer. Not only are we living longer but we are also living healthier, and this scenario will improve with future cohorts.

Singapore is on top of the charts for having one of the longest life expectancies and longest healthy life expectancies in the world.

In addition, for the first time in 2018, the number of older people over 65 was equal to the number of young people under 15. If we couple this with a decreasing fertility rate, we know what lies ahead - an ageing Singapore.

We must therefore address this issue of ageism, as older people are here to stay and younger people will join their ranks progressively.

# What is ageism?

WHO defines ageism as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination directed towards people on the basis of their age. Ageism leads to an age-segregated society.

To tackle ageism, we have to change how we think (stereotypes), feel (prejudice) and act (discrimination) towards others or ourselves based on age. Ageism is patterned on sexism and racism. All "isms" are socially constructed ideas that pit us against one another.

Prejudice relies on the concept of "othering" - seeing a group of people as other than ourselves - the other race, the other religion or the other gender. But the strange thing about ageism is that the other is us. So ageism is prejudice against our own future selves.

Ageism exists because of fear and denial that we will become the other person - the other older person - and we do not want to be old because we have been bombarded with negative messages that getting old means going downhill both physically and cognitively.

Another awful thing about ageism is that older people also internalise the issue and make it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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But we cannot dismiss old age as a territory we do not want to enter. We have to face ageing fully and keep a few salient facts in mind.

- We do not have a choice in the matter of getting older because it affects all of us, even though we might deny it. We cannot keep on slathering ourselves with anti-ageing creams, visiting aesthetic doctors or hiding our age from friends and family. It might be possible to slow down ageing with the right lifestyle and mental attitude, but time and the ageing process march on irrevocably.

- Old age brings some distinct advantages often forgotten in our fear of becoming a member of the old age club. It is said that people are happiest when they are young and when they are old - that is, it is a U-shaped curve. Also, although older people

may not be as fast as the young in learning and processing new information which requires fluid intelligence, the old have the advantage of being able to tap their lifelong experience, and the decisions they make are often more considered and wiser. Such decisions require crystallised intelligence which increases with old age, unlike fluid intelligence which peaks in early adulthood.

- Older people and their needs create and sustain the silver economy, and contribute to the country's GDP. This has a positive economic influence on societies. New jobs are created with the silver economy, stimulating many sectors including healthcare, biotechnology, robotics, insurance, housing, travel and retail. Singapore has been ranked first out of 15 Asia-Pacific countries by the Silver Economy Index, which measures silver industry market potential. Of course, the present pandemic has put a dampener on this for now.

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## **Integrating old age**

So what can be done in Singapore to make its society more inclusive and age-integrated? There have been discussions recently on race, religion, gender, ability and sexuality; old age should be added to this list, as this concerns everyone now or in time to come.

Here are a few suggestions on how the practice of being accepting of the old can be integrated into society in Singapore and in our lives as part of our human journey.

1. We can create a society divided into the young (below 18) and all the rest of us pooled together as adults, without being labelled as old at some designated point in time - like when we stop formal work, or when we become grey and wrinkled, or when we turn 65. Ageing is a heterogeneous and an individual process, and does not happen at the same age for everyone in the same way.
2. We must look at life in its entirety - the whole life course from womb to tomb - and make appropriate investments in both physical and mental health. We will then live a long, healthy life and die after a short illness - the concept known as

compression of morbidity. This will shorten the dreaded disability and dependency period of older age.

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3. Institutes of learning, with the old and young studying together, can become age-integrated. Senior care centres can also be student care centres, where both age groups look out for and support each other. This concept of age integration can be applied to our behaviour, our thinking, our policies, our media and other institutions.

The establishment of an age-integrated society will spur the formation of an inclusive society because older people are from different genders, races and religions, and of different abilities.

If we accept the old among us for who they are, without prejudice against them and our future selves, then the other "isms" will melt away from our consciousness.

- Dr Kanwaljit Soin is an orthopaedic and hand surgeon, a former Nominated Member of Parliament, and author of *Silver Shades Of Grey - Memos For Successful Ageing In The 21st Century*.

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