Keys to Healthy Aging
Age Stereotypes and Aging

Peninsula Agency on Aging (PAA) is passionate about connecting our community to all resources available to support healthy aging. This information sheet was developed by PAA to inform seniors, their adult children and caregivers, about the resources available to them. If you would like to learn more about PAA, please visit our website at: www.PAAinc.org.

1. What are Age Stereotype and Ageism?

Stereotyping is a natural human behavior. It is the result of our need to process vast amounts of sensory information as we move through a complex world. Age stereotypes are broad generalizations about people based simply on their age. Stereotypes can be positive or negative, but they always involve making generalizations. You know you are stereotyping when you say (or think) “Old people are forgetful” or “Young people are selfish.” Although some older and younger people may fit these descriptions, it will not be accurate about all older or younger people.

Stereotypes can be a problem when they lead people to discriminate against others based on generalized (and often inaccurate) beliefs. Ageism is the practice of negative stereotyping and then acting on these stereotypical beliefs. The term ageism was first used by a geriatrician, Dr. Robert Butler, in 1968. Dr Butler was concerned about the disrespectful way older adults were often talked about and treated in the health care system. He likened age discrimination to racism and sexism, and thus called it “ageism”.

As well as stereotyping others based on their age, people sometimes stereotype themselves! Self-stereotyping occurs when we unconsciously assimilate behaviors associated with a stereotype. For example, claiming to have a “senior moment” when forgetting something is actually perpetuating a negative stereotype associated with aging that all old people are forgetful. Often we are simply distracted and not giving our full attention to the task at hand. Instead, people commonly fall into the trap of blaming a stereotypical negative characteristic to explain their inability to recall information.
2. **What does this mean to me?**

Stereotyping can be dangerous to your health and wellbeing! Studies have found that negative self-perceptions about aging can have long-term effects on health. This means that people who hold negative views of aging decline more significantly in health over time than those who hold positive beliefs about aging. In fact, research shows that people with negative attitudes about aging live, on average, seven years less than people who embrace their aging with a positive attitude. So start changing your negative self-stereotyping, embrace your individuality and focus on the positive aspects of aging.

Media and marketing in our society often exploit age stereotypes and perpetuate ageism through communications. They aim these messages to induce fear in younger populations about the aging process with the goal of convincing them to buy into “anti-aging” products and procedures. While our culture tends to emphasize negative stereotypes regarding the aging process, luckily there is evidence that the amount of age bias is decreasing. Since individual experiences and perspectives influence the process of stereotyping, we can fight age stereotypes and ageism by examining and challenging our own biases. Pay attention and challenge the messages that society presents about the aging process. Does it align with your own experience of the aging process? Share your experiences with others and start the conversation to combat ageism!

3. **Just beginning your search or need more information? Please contact the free resources below:**

- Peninsula Agency on Aging - In Williamsburg or James City County call 757-345-6277. In Hampton, Newport News, York, Poquoson call 757-873-0541
- Peninsula Aging and Disability Resource Network (PADRN) - [www.PADRN.org](http://www.PADRN.org)

Disclaimer:
"The information provided is for educational purposes only. It is not intended as a substitute for professional care, and should not be used to diagnose or treat a health problem. If you have, or suspect you have, a health problem, please consult with a qualified medical professional. This sheet includes links to web sites that are not under the control of Peninsula Agency on Aging. These links are provided for reference only, and are not intended as an endorsement of the organization by Peninsula Agency on Aging."

Compiled by Meredith Crumb, VCU Rev. 4/16