

# What is Ageism?

**Ageism is bias or discrimination on the basis of age.**

While most people are familiar with terms like racism and sexism, many are unfamiliar with the term ‘ageism’--or don’t believe that it exists. In fact, discrimination and bias on the basis of age are pervasive in US society. Ageism manifests both as discrimination against older people (and sometimes younger people as well), and as a privileging or idealizing of youth.

Ageism operates at several levels, which are described below.

## **Systemic ageism is age-related bias across society.**

Systemic ageism is like the air around us--invisible, often unnoticed, but we’re always breathing it in. It includes:

- **Messages:** the cultural messages that bombard us every day, idealizing youth and dismissing or making fun of older people, or simply rendering them invisible. Messages come from media, stories, news, television and movies, books, comments, jokes, workplace attitudes, family stories, and much more.
- **Resources:** the choices that our society makes about the distribution of the things that people need to survive and thrive--from tangible things like health care, housing, food, or transportation, to intangible resources like safety, work opportunities, or social networks. Distribution of resources to older people is often inadequate or unfair.
- **Rules:** the laws, social norms and institutional policies that marginalize, exclude or discriminate against older people.

Systemic ageism ‘trickles down’ to influence every person’s thoughts and beliefs, to affect our interactions with other people, and to shape the institutions that serve us.

## **Internalized ageism lies *within individuals*.**

Internalized ageism comprises our private beliefs, stereotypes, assumptions, and biases about aging and older people, including our own older selves. These may be conscious or unconscious, attitudes that we have absorbed from the society around us.

## **Interpersonal ageism occurs *between individuals*.**

This is the bias that occurs when individuals interact with others and their personal beliefs or attitudes affect their social interactions.

## **Institutional ageism occurs *within institutions and systems of power*.**

This refers to the unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions (health care organizations, workplaces, etc.) that routinely produce inequitable outcomes for people on the basis of age.

**Ageism has its most severe impacts when it intersects with other systems of bias, such as those around race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or living in a rural area.**

© 2021, Maine Council on Aging.

Compiled from concepts by the World Health Organization, OpenSource Leadership Strategies, and Race Forward.