

Ageism reduced by education, intergenerational contact

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Researchers at Cornell University have shown for the first time that it is possible to reduce ageist attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes through education and intergenerational contact.

Ageism is the most socially acceptable prejudice on the planet, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Discrimination against a person because of their age is more normalized than even racism or sexism. The WHO, which recruited the Cornell-led team to do the study, will use the research to inform its anti-ageism strategy.

According to the team of researchers, programs that foster intergenerational contact, combined with education about the [aging process](#) and its misconceptions, worked best at reducing ageist attitudes. The interventions had the greatest impact on women, teens and young adults. Their study was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"The most surprising thing was how well some of these programs seemed to work," said co-author Karl Pillemer, professor of human development at

Cornell and gerontology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine. "If we teach people more about aging—if they're less scared of it, less negative about it and less uncomfortable interacting with [older people](#)—that helps."

Macro- and micro-aggressions, such as workplace discrimination and ageist jokes in movies, can have serious negative effects on the mental and physical health of older people. Physicians with ageist attitudes may misdiagnose their [older patients](#) or exclude them from particular treatments.

Older people tend to adopt society's [negative attitudes](#) toward aging—and those who do are more likely to experience psychological distress and physical illness. They even die 7.5 years sooner on average than those who have a more [positive attitude](#) about aging, Pillemer said.

Researchers analyzed 63 studies, conducted between 1976 and 2018, with a total of 6,124 participants. The studies evaluated three types of interventions that aimed to curb ageism: education, intergenerational contact, and a combination of the two.

The most successful programs combined both education and intergenerational contact. Importantly, Pillemer said, these interventions are both low-cost and easy to replicate.

"Volunteer organizations and after-school programs should think about involving some of these methods to reduce ageist attitudes because they actually seem to work," he said.

The WHO will use the research to create an upcoming global report on ageism.

"We know from past experience that these reports can be particularly effective at raising awareness, generate more political will on a topic and provide an evidence based framework for global and local

action," said Alana Officer, who leads the WHO's campaign against [ageism](#). "I hope that the Cornell-led research will help change the world for the better."

More information: David Burnes et al, Interventions to Reduce Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *American Journal of Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2019.305123](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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