

Ageing Brains: How to Help Older People More Effectively

Never have I enjoyed youth so thoroughly as I have in my old age. I have drunk the pleasures of life more pure, more joyful, than ever it was when mingled with all the hidden anxieties and little annoyances of actual living. Nothing is inherently and invincibly young, except spirit. And spirit can enter a human being, perhaps better, in the quiet of old age and dwell there more undisturbed than in the turmoil of adventure - George Santayana

Stereotypes have a central role in social life. We are highly dependent on stereotypes to communicate and, in a complex world, they help us order potentially confusing experiences and impose some descriptive unity on them. The problem with stereotypes of ageing is that they don't do full justice to an individual who is labelled as old. Terms like senile, wrinkly, blue rinse brigade, grave dodger are openly derogatory and hostile, but are terms like geriatric actually worse? Geriatric refers to a branch of medical science concerned with older people and their illnesses. We don't call a woman who has had a hysterectomy an obstetric or a sick child a paediatric.

Stereotypes of older people are invariably negative and only occasionally positive - but can flip into a negative one if the illusion of perfection is shattered by illness. The image of senility, frequently encountered in everyday life, is a frightening vision of dribbling, drooling, incontinence, a lack of physical co-ordination and an inability to communicate coherently. The positive stereotypes create an idealised elder, who proves that, 'age is all in the mind', by the triumph of will and positive imagination over physiology. The outrageous stereotype also surfaces from time to time, stressing rebellion and non-conformity. Examples of this are a supergran who does a parachute jump at 80 or a University Degree at 85. Stereotypes are damaging to older people and build barriers between young and old. The roots of ageism in Western society are deep, and are based on a fear of death and dying (and the association of these with old age). The emphasis in Western culture is on youth, beauty and productivity.

Challenging Ageism

Attack it at its core through education and ensure that the Media reports the activities of older people fairly and effectively. Older people need to demonstrate productivity and enthusiasm. They need to fight blatant examples of ageism like insurance restrictions, compulsory redundancy and age discrimination in the workplace. Collective power comes through the ballot box.

Role Models

Michelangelo worked on St Peter's Basilica until he was 89. Monet started painting his famous large Water Lilies series at 76. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Guggenheim in New York at 90. Pierre Monteux was invited to become Principle Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra at 86, but only accepted when he was given a 25 year contract! Mary Wesley had her first novel published at 70. Nelson Mandela began his political career in South Africa in his 70s. Churchill became Prime Minister at 68, again at 78 and remained an MP until he was 90

Cognitive Changes in Later Life

Among the 65 to 75 year old age group, cognitive changes are still fairly small but older adults need more time to learn. They take longer to register a new piece of information, to encode it and retrieve it. A large part of age decline in memory can be accounted for by loss of speed and difficulty in focusing.

Dominic O'Brien, the World Memory Champion frequently uses mnemonics. He associates things he wants to remember with a familiar journey through a house or a landscape. For example, if he is teaching a stand-up comedian to remember a sequence of jokes, he might take him through a large building that the comedian is familiar with and associate the sequence of jokes he has to remember with different parts of that building, going from the top to the bottom.

Staying Sharp

Giving your brain new experiences, challenges and learning can help build better connected webs of brain cells. In one Chicago study of nuns and priests over 65, those who were more active doing crosswords, reading and visiting museums had a 50% reduced risk of Alzheimer's over a 5 year period, compared with their peers who were less mentally active.

Learning new skills, languages, a new belief system or community activities all boost brain power. The worst and most inaccurate cliché in life is "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." The secret of remembering faces, facts, figures, files or formulae is to link these new images to all the senses - sight, sound, touch, movement and taste.

How Society Needs to Change towards Older People

The cult of youth automatically creates an implicit ageism in any society. There is nothing wrong with such a culture, but it should not be permitted to lead to age discrimination. We all need to fight

Ageism allows those of us who are younger to see older people as different. We subtly cease to identify with them as human beings, which enables us to feel more comfortable about our neglect and dislike of them....Ageism is a thinly described attempt to avoid the personal reality of human ageing and death - Butler 1975

The above article is partly based on a seminar given by Dr Declan Lyons in Bristol a few months ago. The seminar was sponsored by MindFields College www.mindfields.org.uk

gerontophobic attitudes. Many of them are our fault. We were once in charge and we let it happen. Creating a new brand by using our intelligence is hugely important for all our futures. This has to be advanced by promoting grey power everywhere. Technology needs to be targeted more and more at the needs of older people, as many physical limitations could be easily overcome. Older people need to avoid casting themselves as victims and seeing every experience through the prism of old age.



Robert Graham