MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES OF AGING

The purpose of this section is to assist the learner in identifying myths and stereotypes about the elderly. Knowing the difference between a myth or stereotype and facts about aging will improve the care of residents living in adult foster homes.

KEY TERMS:
• Ageism
• Stereotyping

OBJECTIVES:
After completing this section the learner will be able to:
• Define ageism;
• Give examples of how stereotyping can affect the care of residents;
• Examine if their own ideas about aging are based on stereotyping.
MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES OF AGING

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT AGING?

Circle either “true” or “false” for each of the following questions:

1. In general, elderly people are alike. True  False
2. The majority of elderly persons are senile or demented. True  False
3. Elderly people have no more worries once they retire and start enjoying life. True  False
4. The elderly do not desire, and do not participate in, sexual activity. True  False
5. Most elderly people are set in their own ways and are unable to change. True  False
6. The elderly are unproductive and uncreative; they cannot work as effectively as younger people. True  False
7. The elderly are slow to learn, less intelligent and more forgetful. True  False
8. Elderly people are crabby and hard to get along with. True  False
9. The majority of elderly persons are socially isolated and lonely. True  False
10. Elderly people become more religious as they age. True  False
AN ESSAY ON MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES

The following is based on an article written by Nancy R. Peppard, Ph.D.

What is ageism?

The term “ageism” was coined by Robert Butler, M.D., in 1968. Dr. Butler is a geriatrician who saw that society had developed myths, stereotypes and misunderstandings about people as they age. Like “racism” and “sexism,” people who express ageism make general statements that are not true. Terms such as these imply that one group is inherently superior to another. We quickly see that denying a man a job because of his color is “racist” and saying women should never work outside of the home is “sexist.” Ageism makes judgments about the actions, character and desires of people based on their age. There is also a sense that old age is inferior to youth.

Ageism has developed over many years as our society as a whole has put a greater value on youth than on aging. Television, movies and the printed media tend to strengthen the idea that young is “good” and old is “bad.”

People who have little or no contact with elderly people are more likely to accept the myths and stereotypes of aging. People may visit their grandparents or see other older people while shopping, but many people never spend any time getting to know an elderly person as an individual. Young people who believe the stereotypes see no reason to become close to an old person as they are seen as having little to offer.

People may also believe the myths of aging because information about normal aging is scarce. As the size of the elderly population has grown, interest in research on aging has increased. Early research was found to be invalid due to the subjects chosen so, until very recently, reliable information about the aging process has not been available.
Can we eliminate ageism?

Butler felt ageism is a form of bigotry and that it is a very serious national problem. He felt that the myths and stereotypes of aging are so deeply ingrained in our society it will be very hard to change. Over the years a number of things may help reduce the prejudices of aging. The elderly population is growing rapidly in our nation. As the numbers increase, so will their power and influence over politics, society and economics. More youth will have contact with older members of society. The elderly themselves will then have the opportunity to help eliminate ageism.

Research may further aid in reducing ageism by providing scientific information to dispel the myths of aging. Circumstances in life cause everyone to age differently. Future research can look at how individual experience affects aging.

Are you stereotyping?

It is important for each of us to evaluate our own ideas about aging. To be able to increase our knowledge of aging we must be open to new ideas and to eliminating our own judgments regarding growing older. Let’s consider some of the more common misunderstandings.

Myth one: More alike

The idea that we all become more alike as we age is common, but false. We quickly see the uniqueness of a child but tend to group people together into “sameness” as we age.

Just the opposite is true. As we age, we become less like our peers than younger people. This uniqueness happens because, as years pass, people learn different things, face different things and respond differently to life’s occurrences. Also, the actual number of years lived affects people differently. Some people are “old” at 65 and others are “young” at 90. Everyone ages physically, emotionally and spiritually at different rates, so the longer we live, the more chance there is to be different.
Myth two: **Senile**

The word “senile” actually means to age or grow old. It has come to mean “dementia.” Dementia is not a normal part of aging. It is a disease that affects the brain and nervous system. “Alzheimer’s disease” is a type of dementia. Only 5 percent of those over 65 will develop dementia. *2011 Alzheimer’s Disease Facts and Figures data reports that one in eight adults has Alzheimer’s disease.*

Myth three: **Serene**

Many of us are familiar with the term “golden years” when referring to retirement. Not all older people view those years as “golden.” Many older people face poverty, isolation, grief, physical decline, loss of social stature and decreased control over their lives.

These stresses may be reduced by help from family, friends, churches, public agencies or community networks, but no matter how much help is given, some stresses cannot be avoided. Some people are not able to cope with their situation. Suicide rates are higher for people over 65 than for younger people.

Myth four: **Sexless**

There is a strong belief in our society that sex is for the young and that older people should not and/or cannot engage in sexual activity. Old and young people believe this myth. Many older people stop sexual relations because they have learned it is “bad” for them to continue. Elderly people who continue to have sex often feel guilty. Either way, it has a devastating emotional effect on them.

Research has found that sexual activity and enjoyment do not decrease with age. People with physical health, a sense of well-being and a willing partner are more likely to continue sexual relations. People who are bored with their partner, mentally or physically tired, afraid of failure or overindulge in food or drink are unlikely to engage in sexual activity. These reasons do not differ a great deal when considering whether or not a person will engage in sex at any age.
Myth five: **Inflexible**

Inflexibility means to be resistant to change and to be unable to adapt to new situations. People of any age can be inflexible. Increased age does not make a person inflexible. The opposite is true. Older people must adjust to changes such as retirement, disease, illness, death of family and/or friends and lifestyle. Without the ability to accept change, adjustment to these changes would be impossible.

Research shows older people may change their opinion slower than younger people, but most remain open to change throughout their lives.

Myth six: **Unproductive and uncreative**

This idea probably comes from the fact that society equates productivity and creativeness with employment and earning money. In reality, many older people have the freedom after retirement to really develop their creative side. People now have the time to be active as volunteers in all areas.

Many elderly people remain active and productive throughout their lives. We would all be missing a great deal without their creativity.

Myth seven: **Difficulty learning new skills**

There are differences in learning rates and styles between age groups, but it would be incorrect to say older people have difficulty learning. Preschoolers learn differently from children in grade school and they learn differently from high school students. We do not assume these differences are wrong. How older adults learn is different from younger learners, but that does not mean they cannot understand new information.

Myth eight: **“Cranky”**

Young and middle-aged people who are able to get along with others will be able to do so when they are older. People who are difficult to get along with when they are young will be difficult when they are old. How people adjust to change, accept and respect others when they are young will most likely be their style when they are old.
Myth nine: **Lonely**

Sixty percent of the population at large sees the elderly as lonely. Many people believe the elderly are usually abandoned by their family. Despite these beliefs, most elderly people are not abandoned by family and usually have close contact with one another.

When asked about loneliness, only 12 percent of the elderly felt loneliness was a problem. Family and friends largely determine whether or not an elderly person is lonely and rarely is an elderly person totally abandoned in our society.

Myth ten: **More religious**

Members of the present older generation did not become more religious as they aged, but grew up in a time when there was more formal religious training given to children. Their lives were often started on a more religious path that continued throughout their lives. It seems the difference is generational rather than age-related.