

## **Part I. What Do You Believe about Older Women?**

### **Step 1. Associations**

Relax as deeply as you can. Close your eyes for a moment and take a few deep breaths. Now focus on the picture that symbolizes “older woman.” Imagine that you are this woman. See if you can “be” an older woman. Notice any resistance to being this person—and any willingness. Notice words, images, thoughts, and feelings that come to mind as you are “seeing and being this woman.”

### **Step 2. Negative Associations**

As you focus on the picture, allow negative opinions to come up, perhaps some that you typically hold about older women. Notice your *thoughts* as you see the person in this negative way. What *feelings*?

### **Step 3. Positive Associations**

Still focusing, allow positive opinions to come up, perhaps some that you typically hold about older women. Notice your *thoughts* as you see the person in this positive way. What *feelings*?

### **Step 4. Insights and Write-up**

Review this experience and write about it. When you first saw the picture, what thoughts and feelings came up? These may reflect your deepest responses to people from this group. Think about the differences in your thoughts and feelings when you consciously held a positive opinion versus a negative opinion. Write a few sentences about your feelings, thoughts, and insights. What traits are typical of older women?

## **Part II. What Do You Believe about Older Men?**

Repeat the steps in Part I, this time focusing on the image of an older man.

## **Self-Awareness Activity 14.2 What Do You Know about Older & Younger Persons?**

**Purpose:** To see what you know about the issues covered in this chapter

**Instructions:** Determine whether you think the following statements are basically true or false—and think about why. The answers will emerge in this chapter, and the summary at the end of the chapter focuses on these issues. Repeat this exercise after you finish reading the chapter.

1. Older workers are no more forgetful than younger ones.
2. Older workers have more difficulty adapting to change.
3. Older workers are prone to frequent absences because of age-related conditions and illnesses.
4. Older workers have fewer work accidents than younger workers.
5. Extensive training for older workers doesn't pay off because they don't learn as well and they will retire soon anyway.
6. The Age Discrimination Employment Act covers employees age 55 and older.
7. The Baby Boom generation is known for its focus on security and savings.
8. Generation X is the one that is most dependent on parents, schools, and corporate America.

## **Stereotyped Myths and Realities**

Betty Friedan and Steven Sandell surveyed a number of interesting studies of age discrimination. They found that most of the myths and stereotypes about older persons are either false or distorted, partial truths. In fact, most stem from the high value the

American culture places on youth and appearance and the tendency to avoid facing one's own aging and eventual death.

Remember, although stereotypes aren't identical to prejudice, rigid stereotypes about people usually lead to prejudice. For example, you have heard that people lose their mental abilities after a certain age. When older co-worker Joe forgets an appointment, you think "Uh-oh, Joe's losing it." But when younger worker Janet forgets an appointment, you think "We all forget sometimes. She must be really busy." Each time a "Joe" forgets, your belief is reinforced, and soon you develop a rigid belief that all older persons lose their mental abilities and become forgetful. The ultimate goal in becoming aware of myths and stereotypes is to refute those that are false or rigid and to move beyond them to appreciating each generation's unique value and contribution to the workplace.

### ***Myth #1. People quit learning when they get old***

One of the most untrue and degrading myths is "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," closely related to the myth that "Anyone over 35 is a technological dinosaur." It's common and career-devastating for management to ignore training for older workers—and for older workers to believe training won't pay off for them. In fact, while the most rapid rate of learning occurs at very young ages, the capacity to learn remains high throughout life. Older employees are not only trainable and retrainable, but also a unique resource (Federal 2004).

#### ***Reality #1: Intellectual Performance***

Intellectual performance remains robust throughout life for healthy people. From age 30 onward there is a slight mental slowdown in reaction time, but older workers compensate by increasing their speed on certain complex repetitive tasks. Other functions, such as vocabulary choice, get better with age, and the brain continues to develop throughout adult life. Some brain cells die each year, but connecting branches between them—pathways for the nerve impulses that create thought, feeling, and memory—keep sprouting and spreading, more than compensating for the loss of cells.

Actually, 92% of persons in the 65–75 group show no significant mental deterioration. Only about 8% have such symptoms as partial memory loss and slowing reaction time. Most aging adults experience a gradually widening focus of attention that makes it more difficult to latch onto just one fact, like a name or a telephone number. Although that can be frustrating, it is often useful. It may be that distractibility is not, in fact, a bad thing. It may increase the amount of information available to the conscious mind (Carson 2010).

A broad attention span may enable older adults to ultimately know more about a situation and the indirect message of what's going on than their younger peers. This characteristic may play a significant role in why we think of older people as wiser. There is a word for what results when the mind is able to assimilate data and put it in its proper place—wisdom. Recent brain findings are all very consistent with the context we are building for what wisdom is. If older people are taking in more information from a situation, and they are then able to combine it with their comparatively greater store of general knowledge, that gives them a nice advantage (Hasher 2007).

Research uncovered by author Betty Friedan also indicates that age actually brings some positive changes in certain mental abilities. The type of intelligence that involves experience, meaning, knowledge, professional expertise, and wisdom continues to increase even though speed in completing IQ tests may decline. Older workers bring a lifetime of experience to the learning situation. That's why they tend to be better at problem solving, to draw on more information for decision making, and to be good mediators.

Further, people do *not* deteriorate in either basic mental competence or intelligence, even in their eighties, *if* they remain healthy and continue to be physically and mentally active and stimulated. For example, through mental activity, people can continue to develop vital new brain connections, and even reverse deterioration, until the end of life. Yet the false myths of older persons may keep them from seeking or getting continuing education and the right kind of health care.

### ***Reality #2: Cyber Skills***

Younger employees who grew up on computers and cell phones tend to assume that older employees avoid such technology. In fact, members of the first batch of computer programmers are now seniors and are much more computer savvy than 90% of younger people. Also, people over age 50 were the fastest-growing part of the U.S. internet users 1997–2000, doubling in size from 19% to 38%. People from 50 to 64 increased their usage by 15%, and those over 65 by 28% (MediaLink.com 2001).

### ***Reality #3: Alzheimer's and the Nun Study***

Among people over age 65, only 8% have Alzheimer's, but the incidence rises to about half of those over age 85. A breakthrough long-term study of nearly 700 retired nuns is being conducted by researcher David Snowden (Lemonick 2001). He has linked the essays they wrote as young women entering the order to their emotional and intellectual capabilities and tendencies, which are in turn linked to the likelihood that they will develop Alzheimer's and similar brain disorders. Here are some preliminary suggestions about how to prevent the onset of these disorders:

**Thinking.** Encourage rich density and complexity of ideas—to stimulate and exercise the brain's connections. Engage in an active intellectual life, if possible beginning with a college education, that values creative thinking.

**Feeling.** Learn how to think and act in ways that trigger positive emotions, spending more and more time in ever more expansive emotional states such as joy and peace.

**Acting.** Engage in active mental work and play. Choose interesting and challenging work that you like (better yet, that you love), hobbies that are engaging, absorbing, and fun such as crossword puzzles, card games, mind games, and challenging craft and building projects.

**Learning.** Continually learn new information and skills, such as new languages, vocations, hobbies, avocations, teaching, tutoring.

**Relating.** Keep developing close relationships with family and friends and maintain close contact.

**Preventing.** Avoid head trauma by using helmets, seatbelts, airbags, etc. Check your family history for signs of Alzheimer's to determine if you should take more preventive measures than usual.

### ***Myth #2. Older workers are more rigid and dogmatic.***

Evidence indicates that dogmatic behavior is unrelated to age. What is related to age is a tendency to become more caring, accepting, and mellow. This means that older persons handle crises better than younger workers and to see the humor in life's slings and arrows.

### ***Reality #1: Nurturing, Accepting & Other Strengths***

People are more likely to mentor others and become more accepting of life as they age. Carol Ryff's studies indicate that men and women tend to change their behavior during middle age to focus more on mentoring younger persons, showing more concern for guiding the next generation, and feeling more of a sense of responsibility to younger persons. Beyond middle age, people tend to become more accepting of life, to adapt to the triumphs and disappointments of being human, and to view past events as inevitable, appropriate, and meaningful (Ryff 1985). While basic character traits tend to be stable, people's experiences and personal development become more varied with age.

Brad Edmondson (2005) cites research that indicates older employees typically contribute many other strengths; for example, they are more:

- Dependable, caring, experienced, and wise than most younger workers
- Likely to have a big-picture viewpoint and many life experiences, so they are good at spotting problems in advance and coming up with good solutions
- Motivated to perform well and to be fully engaged in their work
- Experienced, wise, willing to share their knowledge and accumulated life experience

***Reality #2: Appreciative of Respect***

An implication of the rigid stereotype is that older workers resent being told what to do by younger managers. In fact, no one really likes being told what to do, and younger workers are more apt to respond negatively. Older workers do appreciate receiving some respect for their years of experience. When managers get them on their side, they're less likely than younger workers to be vying for the manager's position, to quit, or to be disloyal. Their accumulated wisdom can be very helpful to managers and co-workers.

***Reality #3: Creative***

Also implied in the rigid stereotype is that older workers are not very creative. In fact, creativity and intellectual activity are still vital in persons older than 100, according to a Social Security Administration survey of such people. When creativity is encouraged and rewarded, and when the environment is structured to enhance it, older workers bring a greater richness of ideas, stemming from their abundance of life experience.

***Myth #3. Older workers are less productive, just coasting to retirement.***

In 1998 over 100 leading image consultants were sent pictures of gray-haired men—along with pictures of the same men with darker hair. Their reaction? While they assumed that 49% of the dark-haired men would be “very capable,” they gave only 27% of gray-haired men that rating. Scripps Howard News Service (1998) reported that researchers expected gray-haired women to fare even worse, due to gender bias. Gray-haired persons, and those who otherwise look older, are seen as less capable and less productive than they were when they were younger, but research refutes this myth.

***Reality #1:*** There is no significant performance decline that's caused by aging in the case of engineers, scientists, blue-collar workers, clerical workers, and production workers. And several studies suggest that older paraprofessionals and clerical workers outperform younger workers.

U.S. Department of Labor studies reveal that age has little effect on manual-labor workers through age 50, and declines in productivity after age 50 never exceed 10%, on average. A study of 1,700 managers working in diverse organizations showed that when managerial performance is measured in terms of such bottom-line indicators as return on total capital, growth of stockholders' equity, earnings per share, and sales growth, no significant differences in performance could be related to the age of managers.

A similar myth is that older employees are less energetic and enthusiastic. For some older persons, but not all, some age-related decline may occur in speed and accuracy of movement, perception, hearing, vision, and certain types of problem-solving skills. However, researchers have concluded that these declines would affect performance in only a few jobs requiring extremely high levels of sensory or cognitive skills.

***Reality #2:*** Workers older than 60 are functionally able to excel in nearly all occupations, drawing on years of experience and good judgment. Overwhelming scientific

evidence, reported in *Retirement Living* indicates that, compared to younger workers, older workers:

- enjoy higher morale
- have a greater sense of organization commitment
- are more involved in their jobs
- rate work as more important to their lives
- have the highest job satisfaction of any age group
- rate needs for job security as more important
- are less likely to report an intention to leave the organization
- are much less likely to leave the organization

Age stereotypes depict older people as frail and fragile, as having lost the vitality and energy necessary to make a full commitment to a career. Actually, large differences exist with respect to the health and well-being of persons in every age category. While some people remain very healthy in their eighties, and even in their nineties, others become mentally and physically old at 40. Recently, changes in lifestyles, dietary habits, and exercise patterns, along with the better medical interventions, have dramatically changed the health picture for older persons.

In summary, evidence on the performance of older workers and managers generally indicates that they perform as well as, or better than, their younger counterparts on almost all criteria. Chronological age is a poor indicator of a person's mental and physical well-being and an inadequate basis for predicting vocational performance. Individual differences within age groups account for much more variation in performance than does age. Managers should carefully assess each employee's capabilities with an eye toward matching them to job requirements.

#### ***Myth #4. Older people have higher absenteeism and accident rates.***

This myth is one of many that create career barriers for older persons.

**Reality #1:** The accidents myth is totally false. Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows that occupational injuries occur at a lower rate for older workers. In many instances older workers are better risks than younger workers across a variety of jobs even when risk exposure is controlled. Some studies indicate that their accident rate is less than half that of younger workers. All managers agree that older workers tend to be more careful.

**Reality #2:** The absentee myth is essentially untrue. Older employees' overall attendance record is much better than that of younger workers. According to the American Council of Life Insurance, workers older than 45 call in sick an average of 3.1 days per year, compared to younger workers' average of 3.8 days. For one thing, people older than 65 are less likely than those who are younger to suffer from the *acute* illnesses that require hospitalization and absenteeism. Also, younger workers are more likely to take days off for caring for family members, for dealing with love affairs, for going to the beach, and for other "mental health" reasons. Most older workers have outlived their responsibilities for dependent children and elderly parents and are free to concentrate on their careers.

The kernel of truth in the absentee myth is that older workers are more likely to be absent for unavoidable reasons such as illness. The older we get, the more likely we are to develop *chronic* diseases and to become disabled, primarily because of heart disease, arthritis, or cancer. However, medical breakthroughs are helping people to avoid and cope with these diseases. And nearly all older persons remain healthy until the last few months of their lives (Salzberg 2003); for example:

- 95% of persons older than 65 live independent lives
- 95% of age 70 persons have no serious disabilities
- 80% of age 80 persons have no serious disabilities

The absentee myth is based on an image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration, which in turn is tied to a dread of aging and of dying. It causes people to deny that old age even exists for them. And the more age is denied, the more terrifying it becomes. Prejudice and discrimination toward the elderly are actually created by the American culture's obsession with and idealization of youth and by our refusal even to look at the reality of age on its own terms. Subconsciously, we think that if we can keep old people out of sight, we can keep the illusion of eternal youth and rarely have to face the fact that we all age and die.

***Myth #5. Older workers are not as attractive to clients.***

This myth contains the kernel of truth implied by our discussion of the American tendency to be obsessed with youth and fearful of old age. However, it overlooks the truth that beauty is in the eye of the beholder—and it's only skin deep.

***Gender Differences***

Since women's value is more firmly tied to looks than men's, women stand to lose the most as they age. If a man is old, ugly, and wise, he's a sage. If a woman is old, ugly, and wise, she's a hag, a witch, a crone. But in pre-patriarchal societies the elder women were generally considered founts of wisdom, law, healing skills, and moral leadership, according to Betty Friedan's study. Their wrinkles would have been badges of honor, not of shame. By contrast, our society regards elder women as relatively unattractive and useless.

When men are considered in their prime, in their fifties and sixties, women have traditionally been considered "over the hill." The aging woman is often surprised and hurt by the unexpected hostility she encounters as she slips into old age. The combination of sexism and ageism turns older women into invisible citizens of the modern world. We make them invisible by rarely featuring them in films or television programs, and generally passing them by as social and professional leaders.

***Media and Advertising Stereotypes***

Older people are generally pictured as "ugly, toothless, sexless, incontinent, senile, confused, and helpless," and old age is so negatively stereotyped that "it has become something to dread and feel threatened by." These were the conclusions of the Gray Panthers' nationwide volunteer force called Media Watch, reported in *Advertising Age*. The sales pitches for products that promise to stop or cover up aging send the message that age is acceptable only if it passes for or acts like youth. A multibillion-dollar beauty industry exploits women's well-founded fear of looking old. Many people proclaimed a real breakthrough in the 1980s when the female stars of the TV series *Dynasty* were considered still attractive and employable at age 50. A 1993 consumer survey, reported in *Advertising Age*, found that most consumers older than 35 now believe that a woman can be beautiful at 40, or 50, and *even* past 60. This was hailed as great progress, even though it implies that women past sixty-something have no chance (*Advertising Age* 1993).

Yet the U.S. population is about one-third older persons over age 50, one-third youngsters under age 20, and one-third adults in between. Assuming youngsters are not potential customers for many of the products and services that companies sell, people 50 and older represent nearly half the potential customers that most companies should target. Companies that project an image of older persons in a positive way, with attractive, natural older role models will hit pay dirt, especially with the me-generation of baby boomers, as discussed later.

***Myth #6. One that's true—you're only as old as you feel.***

A myth is a symbolic saying or story whose function is to bind together the thoughts of a group and promote coordinated social action. Some myths are essentially true,

and this is one of them. Scientists are discovering that aging is mainly in the mind. The best ways to slow the mental aging process are to (Wagster 2005):

- maintain a positive attitude
- remain mentally and physically active
- eat plenty of foods that are rich in anti-oxidants, such as fresh vegetables and fruits

These activities bring us to Myth #7.

***Myth #7. One that's very true—use it or lose it.***

This myth is not only true, it's a key to staying healthy and alert as we grow older. We can retain both our vitality and health by using our minds and bodies. Physical and mental exercise, along with a healthy diet, are the specific keys. Energy levels peak in the early thirties and normally drop about 7% per decade, primarily because people tend to become more sedentary. But physical exercise can dramatically slow the energy drop.

Aging decline has in fact been reversed with changes in diet, exercise, lifestyle, and environment. People who reached age 65 in the 1990s were more likely to be healthy, active, and financially self-sufficient than any previous generation as predicted by Alice Rossi (Campbell 1985). We must learn to view age as continued human development, a continuation of personal growth, not of decline and decay. Staying independent and connected to people in the workplace, community, and family are crucial to vital aging and longevity. The key is to move on to new growth in the last third of life, from 60 to 90.

**What's in a Name? Terms We Use**

The *Associated Press Stylebook* for reporters gives the following advice:

Do not focus on age when describing a person; focus on the human being regardless of age. Normally age is not mentioned. If age is relevant to the story, use such terms as “*man, 85,*” or “*woman, 77.*” For groups, consider the following:

**Proper terms:** *older person, older people*

**Do not use:** *elderly, senior citizen, golden years, feisty, spry, grandmotherly, 80-years-young*

**Insulting terms:** *biddy, codger, fogey, fossil, geezer*