

APA Ageism Policy Statement

FEBRUARY 2025

Introduction

Consistent with the American Psychological Association's mission to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives, this policy statement affirms APA's support of the healthy aging of all individuals. For this statement, an older person is referred to as a person 65 years or older (NIH, 2025).

With a growing number of individuals living longer and the population of adults 65 years and older, there is a need for psychologists to become more knowledgeable about how to address healthy aging and the behavioral health needs of the older population appropriately. Likewise, policymakers, educators, researchers, and health care providers should become better versed in the aspects of healthy aging as well as anti-aging attitudes. Furthermore, they should unite in their support to promote access to behavioral and physical health care as well as educational services for older adults and their families. This resolution addresses three key topics: supporting healthy aging, meeting the behavioral health needs of older adults, and breaking down barriers and anti-aging biases.

Policy Statement

WHEREAS Ageism is a set of beliefs, attitudes, acts, and social institutions that discriminate against individuals or groups based on their chronological age (Butler, 1969).

WHEREAS The National Institute on Aging describes older adults as people age 65 or older;

WHEREAS The National Poll on Aging indicates that 93% of Americans aged 50-80 reported experiencing at least one ageist message (Allen et al., 2022); and

WHEREAS Ageism has been recognized as a global public health issue by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021); and

WHEREAS a trauma-informed approach recognizes trauma symptoms in older adults such as loss of family, friends or community, injury or illness, disability or financial distress and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life (O'Malley et al., 2023); and

WHEREAS individuals who are 65 years old and over and who are from historically marginalized communities face increased discrimination and trauma (Ng & Lim-Soh, 2020); and

WHEREAS older women often face unique challenges of invisibility, social devaluation, and irrelevance—exacerbated by cultural norms that may limit self-advocacy. Traditional roles and historical inequities in access to education, fairly compensated work, and unpaid care work that interferes with continuous employment have often restricted women's access to power in areas such as finance, employment, and decision-making (Cecil et al., 2022; Westwood, 2023). This is further compounded due to the intersection of age, gender, and other stigmatized identities (Ndobu et al., 2022); and

WHEREAS LGBTQIA+ individuals who are over 65 years old face discrimination in addition to the regular progress of aging such as increased discrimination and trauma (Chan et al., 2023);

WHEREAS individuals over 65 are particularly vulnerable during natural disasters due to immobility issues and may require behavioral health interventions during times of natural disasters; (Cherry et al., 2023).

WHEREAS training is needed to increase the number of psychologists entering the field of geropsychology and ensure an educated workforce to address the needs of older adults (Ma et al., 2023). By 2030, the United States will need approximately 5,790 more geropsychologists to meet the needs of its older adults. According to a 2024 APA survey, only 1% of psychologists self-reported being geropsychologists (APA, 2022).

WHEREAS research on ageism and brain health exists, additional research is still needed, as there is much research still lacking on understanding ageism, and economic impact and health outcomes nationally and internationally related to ageism; (Lin et al., 2024; WHO, 2021); and

WHEREAS the demand for psychologists who have a good understanding of aging and later life issues will increase as the older population grows (Carpenter, et al., 2022, Karel et al., 2012); and

WHEREAS there exist many inaccurate stereotypes of older adults. For example, age always results in dementia or decline in general ability or older adults are unemployable due to their inefficiency. This can contribute to negative biases and impact psychological and health services. Providers may be less willing to work with older

adults or not have the confidence that psychotherapy will work with this population (Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2018; Bodner et al., 2018; Whitbourne & Martins, 2020) and access to medical and life-saving care and resources may be determined strictly by age (WHO, 2021); and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association discourages any form of discrimination against any population, namely the older adult population; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT psychologists can play a vital role in helping address the mental and behavioral health needs of older adults. The specific needs of older adults include: social connections to reduce social isolation and loneliness and suicide risk (Van Orden, Areán, & Conwell, 2021), and mental stimulation to help reduce the risk of cognitive decline. Psychologists possess foundational knowledge about theories in psychological science that offer key insights (Lind, Poon, & Birdsall, 2022; Woodhead & Yochim, 2022); and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association supports and encourages the use of the APA's Multicultural Guidelines, the APA's Guidelines on Psychological Practice with Older Adults, APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines, APA's Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Sexual Minority Persons, and the Accessibility and Inclusion Maturity Model (AIMM) which serve as a framework for psychologists to provide culturally competent services, encompassing practice, research, consultation and education; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association advocates to promote age-supportive practices to deter ageism in clinical, research, education, and community settings. Specifically, these resources address the critical intersection of age with other identities, including sex, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, and social class.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association advocates for federal and state funding for research to understand better health needs of the older community and brain health, including research on topics such as training curricula, and community-based initiatives that strive to improve health and wellness and better understand the effects of trauma in later life; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association encourages graduate psychology programs, pre- and post-doctoral training programs, and continuing education programs to rigorously train psychology students, psychologists, and other public health providers in evidence-based programs that address older adults' health and well-being; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association advocates for state and federal funding to promote mental and behavioral health for older adults such as health screenings for all populations, treatment of trauma, and access to

health care and strengths-based approaches to wellness particularly among vulnerable and at-risk populations with intersectional identities; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the American Psychological Association actively explore new partnerships and coalitions to advance the stature of psychological science in policy solutions for older adults; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED the American Psychological Association encourages psychologists to work with older adults; and to train psychology students, psychologists, and other public health providers in evidence-based methods to provide for the treatment for the aging population; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED the American Psychological Association encourages psychologists to increase their knowledge and skills when working with older adults through training, consultation, and continuing education to support the psychological well-being of older adults.

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