

Understanding self-directed ageism

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Normal age-related changes in how we think, perceive and reason may increase the risk of older people viewing themselves through a negative and ageist lens, University of Queensland research suggests.

The study led by Professor Julie Henry from UQ's School of Psychology

looked at why self-directed ageism is common. The paper is published in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

"Older people are regularly exposed to ageism such as negative assumptions about their worth, capacity or level of understanding, as well as jokes about [older age](#)," Professor Henry said.

"At the same time, as we grow older, we rely more strongly on [prior knowledge](#) and cues from our environment to guide how we feel, think and behave.

"In a world that devalues aging, these cognitive changes make it more difficult for older people to challenge internalized ageist beliefs, known as self-directed ageism."

Self-directed ageism can present as [self-doubt](#) ("I'm too old to learn this new technology" or "I'm too old to make new friends") and negative perceptions of one's own aging ("I'm so much worse at this than I used to be").

Self-directed ageism can also present as concern over being judged according to age-based stereotypes ("If I forget to do this, they're going to think it's because I'm old").

Professor Henry said when ageism is internalized and becomes self-directed, it has been linked to a shorter lifespan, poorer physical and [mental health](#), slower recovery from disability and [cognitive decline](#).

"It can also be harmful when older adults allow their negative beliefs about aging to undermine their confidence to take on new or challenging experiences and opportunities," Professor Henry said.

"Interventions, such as creating more opportunities for positive social

interactions between younger and older people, are needed to prevent negative views of aging from developing in the first place.

"Our research also suggests that older adults will benefit directly from a reduction in cues to ageism in our wider [social environment](#).

"If fewer ageist cues attract older people's attention, the risk of self-directed ageism should be reduced."

More information: Julie D. Henry et al, The cognitive tenacity of self-directed ageism, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2023.03.010](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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