

Summary

In this enlightening conversation, hosts Jen Yanez Pryor and Andrea Price discuss the significance of Ageism Awareness Day with Dr. Tracy Gendron, a leading expert in gerontology. They explore the pervasive issue of ageism, its impact on society, and the importance of fostering an inclusive environment for all ages. The discussion delves into the role of gerontology in combating ageism, the connection between social isolation and age bias, and the concept of elderhood as a positive life stage. The conversation also addresses the anti-aging movement, intersectionality in ageism, and the importance of intergenerational relationships. Throughout, the speakers emphasize the need for advocacy, awareness, and a shift in language to combat ageism effectively.

Takeaways

- Ageism is often invisible and normalized in society.
- Awareness of ageism is the first step to combat it.
- Gerontology programs play a crucial role in educating about ageism.
- Social isolation is linked to the lack of roles for older adults.
- Elderhood should be viewed as a strengths-based life stage.
- The anti-aging movement often perpetuates ageism.
- Intersectionality complicates the experience of ageism.
- Global cultures have varying approaches to ageism.
- Advocacy against ageism can bring joy and empowerment.
- Language matters; we should avoid ageist phrases.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:01.324)

Hello and welcome to Aging For All. We're your hosts. I'm Jen Yanez-Pryor.

Aging For All (00:07.104)

And I'm Andrea Price. Thank you all so much for joining us today. This is our very first live stream for this podcast. Yay! It's worth celebrating. And we're happy to have each one of you who have joined us today. So feel free to use the chat, feel free to ask questions, feel free to post comments, because we are here for this wonderful occasion, Ageism Awareness Day.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:16.557)

Bye!

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:34.157)

Yes, yes, I want to thank you all for being with us live. And for those of you who couldn't join us, thank you so much for continuing to be an active listener. As Andrea mentioned,

the American Society on Aging is urging everyone to spread the word that October 9th, 2024 is Agism Awareness Day. So today we're going to do just that. And without further ado, I would like to welcome our very special guest, Dr. Tracy Gendron. Tracy serves as

the chair for the Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Gerontology, as the director for the Virginia Center on Aging, and she is the author of the book, *Agism Unmasked, Exploring Age Bias and How to End It*. With over 25 years of experience as a grant-funded researcher and nationally recognized speaker, Tracy is dedicated to raising awareness and ending ageism through education. Tracy has a master's degree in gerontology,

a master's degree in psychology and a PhD in developmental psychology. Tracy has dedicated her career to changing the landscape and developing an age inclusive climate that facilitates growth and engagement in elderhood. Her personal and professional goal is to raise awareness of elderhood as the solution to the deeply embedded ageism pervasive within all cultures, settings, and individuals.

Aging For All (02:01.28)

Hello and welcome, Tracy.

Jen Yanez Pryor (02:02.572)

Hello, hello. Thank you for having me. We are so excited to have you. I am so excited to be here.

Aging For All (02:09.73)

It is exciting to be a part of the Virginia Center on Aging and just to be a part of this center and your leadership. It's been inspiring and encouraging just to be a part of this team. So thank you for that.

Jen Yanez Pryor (02:21.617)

thank you. Couldn't do it without incredible people on the team.

Aging For All (02:26.526)

Yes. Now over the summer, I was one of thousands of people who watched your TED Talk entitled, *Why You Feel Younger or Older Than Your Age*. I'd love to get your take on why you believe it's important for us just to talk about ageism.

Jen Yanez Pryor (02:43.317)

Yeah, it's a great question. And first I want to say I don't love the title of that talk. I think the title I would have chosen is *Why You Feel the Age That You Are*. Because it's not

about feeling younger or older. It's about taking your power back at all ages and saying, this is me at this age, and I embrace that. So why do I think this is important? Well, we don't really talk about ageism.

as much as I think we should or we could. And yet ageism remains really invisible and normalized within society. So we have an opportunity to really give people a gift by sharing what ageism is, what it looks like, how it affects us personally, how it affects us societally, and then shift that narrative to something that is much more strengths-based, much more open.

to inclusion of people at all ages. And I like to say ageism is like, once you see it, you can't unsee it. So the first thing is just becoming aware and realizing that this is a thing that exists in the world that probably goes like, whoosh, right over you. So I also wanna say no blame, no shame, because if you don't see it, you can't do anything about it. So ageism awareness day is about taking that first step for many of us or taking our hundredth step for many of us.

on seeing it and then kind of getting empowered to do something about it. Yeah, you know, it's funny. when I think about most people's kind of first introduction to ageism, it's probably towards myself. Yes. Yes. I feel some kind of way about the way people are treating me because of my age. And so, you know, I know for me, I didn't necessarily connect that with ageism as a younger person, but we know that

We all experience it, no matter how old we are. Exactly. And I think it's really interesting to figure out what your moment is when you were like, when did I realize that this was affecting me? And I know for me, one of the moments was when someone asked me why I became a gerontologist. And I said, cause I wanted to work on behalf of the aging population. And after the hundredth time saying that, said, why do I refer to older people as the aging population when we're all aging?

Jen Yanez Pryor (05:04.372)

my God, it was such a moment of like, wait, that's ageism and I'm doing it. So I need to do something about it.

Aging For All (05:15.434)

Yeah, so and I think your work at the Department of Gerontology and just at VCU in general, one of the gerontology programs in the world is doing a lot to combat it for students. So talk a little bit about the role of a gerontology program in doing this work of combating ageism.

Jen Yanez Pryor (05:36.116)

Yeah, I would love to. So our Gerontology program is special, and it's special for a lot of reasons. But one of them is that we embed kind of a framework of ageism and elderhood into the core and into the foundation of all of our classes. So it isn't just a class that you get, what is ageism, what is elderhood. It's actually kind of these fundamental bookends with threads in every single class.

because it is kind of two topics, ageism and elder hood that take a long time to be able to really fully understand and embrace and be able to articulate in a strengths-based kind of way. So I think it's such a unique strength of our program that we do this and that we consistently talk about it and then message it in everything that we do. And I think that that's something that attracts people and it's something that when we graduate people, we really are the change agent.

We really are the ones that are out there that are making the difference and that are kind of moving us forward. Did you add anything to that? I was just thinking, just being someone who teaches in the program. Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. And I think that it also shows our students all of the different ways they can impact, know, disrupting ageism in all things from the macro level down to the individual level. I'm curious.

if you've had any thoughts or given any thoughts to kind of some of those outcomes, what have you seen since you've been with us throughout our journey of disrupting ageism? Have you seen anything change in our alumni and what they do or how they approach their work, anything? Yeah, my God, definitely. I mean, we can think about a ton of alums that we've graduated over the past 10 years, 15 years.

who are out there really kind of changing the fabric of the institutions that they work with through policies, through language, through marketing, through branding. If you think about all of the folks that have come through this program and like the different fields that they've gone into, it's truly transformative. And we seems like, you know, we've attracted students too that are outside of what you would consider gerontology. So engineering and architecture.

Jen Yanez Pryor (08:00.6)

and business and marketing and to bring the language of gerontology into other spaces, that's powerful. I mean, that's how it grows. So yeah, I was at an event this morning that was at our local department for aging. And my first question was how many of you are gerontologists? And it was nice to see a whole bunch of hands go up. So yeah, we are spreading far and wide.

Aging For All (08:30.991)

Yes, as Jen mentioned in her introduction, everyone should have a copy of this book, *Ageism Unmasked, Exploring Age Bias and How to End It*. So I want to make a plug for your book. But I also want to point out something that, well, one of the chapters that really resonated with me was about social isolation. As you know, our attorney,

Aging For All (08:55.838)

Surgeon General, I'm sorry, Dr. Vivek Murthy put out a report about social isolation and how it's an epidemic and you wrote in your book over and over again, we have minimized the importance and contributions of older people in this section about social isolation. This has resulted in an almost predatory, consumeristic and deterministic model of telling older people what they should want and what they should feel and need. How do we combat that?

Jen Yanez Pryor (09:24.194)

Yeah, I think it's so important to connect ageism to social disconnection because I don't think it's something we automatically kind of put together. But when people feel like they don't have a role, that there's no way for them to contribute, that when they go out into society, there's nothing for them, a roleless role, or that people kind of just ignore their contributions or don't make space for their contributions.

That's gonna lead to isolation. It's gonna lead to like, well, why should I bother? Why should I bother when there's nothing left for me to give? And when people are not valuing what I wanna say. So what can we do about it? We can create roles and opportunities for older people. We can start thinking differently about retirement. And that retirement doesn't mean like the end of your contributing life. It just means that you've ended a particular career. So what are you gonna do now?

whether that's outward facing or whether that's quiet solitude and inward facing, but I think each one of us can invite opportunities for older people to give back, either through work or through mentorship or through family relationships or whatever it may be. But if each one of us took some effort and initiative to do that and people started to feel like, I matter, then we'd start to see aging as something to look forward to.

instead of something that we were afraid of. Yeah. So now the question I think is how does that connect to this concept of elderhood? Right? Yeah. Because that's the other bookend. That is the other bookend. So I like to think of elderhood as like the antithesis

to retirement. So retirement is a social institution and it tells me like that you used to work full time. Elderhood is a strengths-based life stage.

that talks about who you are and who you are becoming. And it recognizes that development in later life looks different and feels different than it does in midlife. So what if we thought about adulthood as a stage and then elderhood as another stage? And recognize there's no one path to elderhood. There's no one age when you become an elder. It looks very different for everybody.

Jen Yanez Pryor (11:44.366)

but in elderhood, you have the chance to define success differently than you did in adulthood in your own unique way and an opportunity to still think about who you're becoming. It's like mind blowing when you think about it. Like that's such a shift in the way we think about later life. So it's developmental.

Aging For All (12:08.352)

Yes, and I want to remind all of our viewers that you can ask any questions that you would like to in the chat. I see the comments, but if you have any specific questions for Tracy, please feel free to drop those questions in the chat. Until I see those questions, I do have another question.

We are celebrating this amazing day trying to bring awareness to ageism. We know there's another end of this spectrum, the anti-aging movement. And those are things that clearly clash. So why is this ageism awareness important for counter, having a counter narrative for the anti-aging movement?

Jen Yanez Pryor (12:51.635)

Yeah, and how many times do we all see anti-aging products and creams and it's everywhere all the time. The first question that always comes to mind with that for me is what is anti-aging? What does that even mean? It means death. If you're not aging, you're not living. You're not alive. I think what a lot of it really means is pro-longevity, but then say pro-longevity. So, you know, we can't not be aging. So what do we do?

We, I think, really look at it critically and decide whether we're using products and services because we feel shamed into doing it. And if so, think about why we feel that sense of shame. Like if people want to use products and dye their hair and use makeup and great, just be like the most authentic, beautiful, handsome version of yourself. Go for it. If that's what makes you happy, then do it. But we can do it without giving into, want to look young.

Right? We can do it because it's like, this makes me feel good. This makes me feel like the best version of myself. So even if we just shift our intentions a little bit, because the anti-aging industry is not going away. I think that ship has sailed. you know, we can change our intention and our relationship to it. That's what I think. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, just thinking about the anti-age, it's, so big and it makes so much money and.

I always think about they're making money off of people's insecurity and off of people's fear. And I, it's gross to me. I don't like anything that feels that way. And so I think, you know, what you had to say about just recognize why you want to do this. Is it because you feel good or are you, are you somehow feeling bad about the way that you're presenting to the world? Because I'm not.

I'm not 25 anymore. I don't want to be 25 anymore, honestly, but just like, I don't look like I'm 25. And that is so deeply rooted in so much. know, Tracy, I think when we first started off on this journey, you were looking into some of those intersections with sexism and really looking at like men and women have different experiences with age of them. Yes. And, you know, so there's no one size fits all solution here.

Jen Yanez Pryor (15:19.427)

really individual. So true and and yes men and women are shamed both just in different ways. Yeah. Yeah about what success looks like so yeah I agree with you it gets very frustrating. I mean once we start putting all the layers on top of each other with you know gender, race, every everything right it starts to get more more complicated. It sure does.

Aging For All (15:43.756)

Yeah, we have a comment. I am not, I am not ashamed by my age. I love it and living my best at 61. Yes. And we do have a question. What would you say to people who downplay or even justify ageism?

Jen Yanez Pryor (15:51.867)

I love it. Beautiful.

Jen Yanez Pryor (16:03.257)

Mm-hmm. That's a good it's a great question and it's really common and I think part of it is because you don't know what you don't know so ageism is again so deeply embedded and normalized and invisible and often thought of as Complimentary right when we tell somebody you look younger you you know that haircut that dress that

whatever makes you look younger I think that it's it's about reframing for people so recognizing like

Every little thing you do, every conversation you have, every time someone says something to you that you have the opportunity to challenge and say, hmm, you know, what do you mean by that? Or actually, I really love being my age. I've worked really hard to learn all the things that I've learned. Every time we role model it for other people, we're making a difference. Even if it's a little thing and even if someone isn't ready to hear it yet.

because it's layered and layered and layered. And it takes years to unlearn this, years. I mean, we're still unlearning. Yes. So it's not, you don't, don't think you're ever going to get to the end. Nope. You know? Yeah. That's like saying, buy it. Right. I'm done. It's Exactly. It's a journey and we're all in different places in the journey. And so I think that that's important to recognize too, that, you know, we may not be in the same place. So

giving grace to not only ourselves but to those around us that we're interacting with. Exactly. important. Exactly.

Aging For All (17:36.522)

I love that giving grace. We touched on it just a little bit, but the intersectionality that is also a part of ageism. We mentioned gender and sexism a little bit. So can you talk a little bit about how we can separate ageism from these other isms that we encounter often?

Jen Yanez Pryor (17:37.498)

Yeah.

Jen Yanez Pryor (17:57.381)

You know, I think it's really hard to separate them because everybody has their own unique lived experience. I think what we can do is recognize that even though we're all aging, every single one of us, no two people are aging in the same way. So when we have to look at an individual, we have to look at all of the forms of identities that they have, all of them, from their level of education to where they lived.

to gender, race, all of those things that we're used to and recognize that that makes them a person that is extremely unique and different from everybody else. And those intersections are gonna impact them in really different ways. So we can't generalize what it is to be of a certain age for anyone or for anyone of any other characteristic or identity. But I will say when you lift up one-ism, I think you're lifting up all.

When you're raising awareness of one, you're raising awareness of bias in totality. And all of that is getting you to see the unique person that is in front of you, not like, you know, the labels that you put on them as soon as you meet them. So it, yeah, yeah.

Aging For All (19:11.394)

And we have a question that kind of is aligned with maybe the cultural components of this. How do other countries approach this? Any knowledge of that?

Jen Yanez Pryor (19:19.663)

Yes, it's a question that I get a lot. And there's actually like some misnomers around that. So the research shows that ageism is everywhere. Ageism is in most cultures and most settings. That said, there are certain cultures that have more customs and celebrations that revere elders embedded within their culture.

So like days of reverence for older people and celebrations at 60 and every 12 years. And there are definitely some more indigenous cultures that live in intergenerational communities. Those that live in intergenerational communities still tend to revere elders and understand the value of elders more than people that are separated. So it's a little bit of a mixed bag, but as...

communities lean more into capitalism and as families separate, you tend to see a rise in ageism everywhere. Yeah. That's, mean, I just think about going back again to what do we do about all of the ageism around us? And the more layers you add on and the bigger picture you look at, the harder it becomes, but

You know, I think one of the things I teach students too is that we're not doing this on our own. We're doing this as a collective. Today we're raising awareness. Actually all week the Virginia Center on Aging and Department of Gerontology are raising awareness. And so, you know, we're making a community of people, I think, that are coming together to look at these issues. Because once you get to those like policy levels, I think that's where it gets

really hard because now you're looking at populations and trying to make decisions and policies that support a large group of people while at the same time we're saying everyone is an individual. Yes, yes, yes and that's so complicated. Yeah. Yes and that's why it's so layered and so nuanced and why it takes advocacy at all levels and why tiny little things make a difference.

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:35.538)

Right? Because if enough people make a change, then it actually does start to shift policy. And it does start to shift some culture. But that takes a movement, which is why we're here today. Yes.

Aging For All (21:46.966)

Yes. Tracy, know anti, this work, can be hard to change culture, change perceptions, change language. It's hard work. So what brings joy about this?

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:58.413)

It is. my gosh, it is hard, but honestly, everything brings me joy about this. When I can like have one person feel better about themselves, feel like, my gosh, I have value at this age. my gosh, my age doesn't define me. I get to define me, whether older or younger. When I give anybody just one little tool to help them, you know, embrace themselves, to feel stronger.

And especially knowing that how we feel about our own aging really matters to our health and to our longevity and all of that, it is 100 % worth it. And then also to know there's always gonna be people that aren't ready to hear it and that's okay too. I accept everybody where they are and recognize that, you you plant little seeds and you never know when that's gonna kind of flourish and when that's gonna come out. So I think it's incredibly empowering because it's literally freeing people.

to think about themselves in a different way.

Aging For All (23:00.418)

Absolutely. We have another question. What are some ageist phrases we should stop using and what are some ways we can replace those phrases?

Jen Yanez Pryor (23:09.077)

Ooh, okay. So what I think is a great starting point is thinking about how you use the words young and old. That's a nice kind of starting place. People use young and old with value judgments, right? But when you think about it, old and young actually mean longer lived or less longer lived. That's all that they mean. So in examples are people could use young as like frail and senile, but also wise and experienced.

Young is like happy and energetic and also immature and ignorant. So just don't use those words with value judgment. So if you're trying to give somebody like a compliment and instead of saying you look younger, say you look great. If you're trying to say something about your own aging, we don't have to cover it up in something like

seasoned or vintage or experienced. I'm 54 years old. Old is okay. It is like really good to be old and to grow old.

So starting to think about that as kind of one of the first language pieces that we can use, but then also just referring back to every time you're using age with an assumption or a judgment about someone, it gives you the opportunity to kind of reframe that piece. So I think those are good starting points, just kind of 101. Can I just throw one in there too? Please. I really wanna stop.

hearing people at conferences and meetings say the words, silver tsunami. gosh. It is very upsetting. That's of your pet peeves. is. Growing older is not a natural disaster. It's not. So can we stop saying that please? Just my two cents. My baking of all of you who are listening.

Aging For All (24:57.666)

You got some amens in the chat, Jen. Yes, please, we need to come out too. Yes, yes.

Aging For All (25:10.366)

agree with the young and old. Yeah, yeah.

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:11.543)

Yeah.

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:15.074)

Yeah, or senior moment. That's another one. Stop using senior moment. We all forget.

Aging For All (25:19.858)

Yes. But one word that I've always embraced is elder because as a child, that was a sign of reverence. We appreciated the elders. We love the elders. If we were at any event, they got the best treatment. So that was something I always aspire, still aspire to be the one that is loved unconditionally, that people look to accept and hug and

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:24.042)

Mmm.

Aging For All (25:49.504)

Just that's a great, so elderhood is great. And I think as a young child, it was kind of just embedded in me that this really matters. You still matter. And we're going to make sure you feel like you matter. So hope I can continue to carry that part of my upbringing with me forever.

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:52.621)

It was.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:01.934)

Yes.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:08.075)

You know, Andrea, that's such a good point because it's another strategy I think we can share with people that one of the best things we can do to foster positive attitudes about aging is has positive early experiences with older people. you know, be go make friends with somebody who's a different age than you really look at who are your role models for what it means to be older, whether it's a family member or as you said, maybe a member of your community.

an elder in your church, whatever it may be, like there's power to those relationships. So, and clearly, you know, impacted you and you're in this field now, in part because, you know, I want to grow up into being an elder. So that role modeling too.

Aging For All (26:51.406)

And honestly, I have conversations with people in their 80s and 90s, the teenagers. I feel like it's important not just to talk to my peers, so to speak, but people in every decade. Because we all learn from each other. We can grow from each other. We can share. And I think that just makes this world go around a little bit better when we see each other as we need each other.

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:08.065)

Yeah.

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:18.827)

Yes. beautiful. Couldn't agree more. I love that. I'll just add too, you know, I'm going to take us in the other direction. You know, I teach at the undergraduate level and there's so many students that have inspired me and have taught me things that, you know, I learned something from anyone no matter older, younger, whatever. And it's just, it's an incredible feeling when you're really tuned into that, I guess, kind of

Aging For All (27:20.396)

We are in life.

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:46.761)

growth space where you're like, what am I going to learn from the person that I'm interacting with? You know, regardless of where they are in life. And recognizing it all ages, more in common with each other than we think. We're meant to feel like we don't have things in common, but we do. Yeah. And all of that generational divide is just, just garbage. mean, it's absolutely.

Aging For All (28:12.406)

Yes, we need each other to survive this crazy, crazy building. So we do have a few more minutes. Please drop any questions you have in the chat before we go. But Tracy, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners? It's been a joy. It's been a pleasure. It's been an adventure doing this live stream. So thank you. Anything else you would like to share?

Jen Yanez Pryor (28:15.179)

Thanks for being here.

Jen Yanez Pryor (28:32.907)

I am grateful to be the experiment on the livestream. think that that is fantastic on this Ageism Awareness Day. Nothing really other than, you know, I'm glad everybody's here. I really encourage you to share that it is Ageism Awareness Day. Share the age that you are. Feel empowered at your age to be your age.

And remember that aging is living, aging is changing, right? Aging is something we want to be doing because we always want to be becoming the next version of ourselves. If we didn't have aging, then we wouldn't have evolving and developing. Like they all go hand in hand. So I hope that everybody thinks about aging maybe just a little bit differently after listening, and then they take that forward.

Aging For All (29:28.482)

Thank you for that, Tracy. Aging is living. But I do want to get this last question in. It just dropped, and I really want you to answer. Something that is common in the queer community is viewing our elders with a sense of hope and gratitude. They remind us that we can grow old. How can we share the perspective that growing old is a privilege?

Jen Yanez Pryor (29:31.529)

between us loving.

Jen Yanez Pryor (29:35.657)

Yes.

Jen Yanez Pryor (29:45.289)

Mmm.

Jen Yanez Pryor (29:54.698)

I love that. It's sharing it wherever you can and it's elevating the voices of those elders that are giving you that message. You know, the more space that we give them to share that with other people, the more space we give them to share their wisdom, their lived experience, the resilience that they have developed over time, the more that we are kind of creating that community of people that can feel that way too and look up to that too. So what a beautiful, beautiful thing. I

I hope you continue and they continue to find more pathways to have a voice.

I love that. What a great way to end this. I know, what an empowering talk. Thank you for that question. Yeah, I love that. And it just, I mean, there's, it goes back to what you said at the beginning. We have to make space, right, for everybody and not to just make decisions for others or share a message on behalf of someone else. It's getting those people to share their own stories. And it's just so powerful to hear.

someone else's experience and all the things that come with that, the pain and the hope and the everything, like all of it. of living, life is life. Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much for being here. thank you to everybody who is here with us live. This has been really exciting. I can't wait for us to plan another one. And of course, thanks to all the listeners who are listening afterwards.

Aging For All (31:24.311)

Yes.

Aging For All (31:30.882)

All right, thank you, thank you for submitting your questions and all of those comments in the chat. Again, thank you, Tracy. And please join us next time for another amazing episode of Aging for...

Jen Yanez Pryor (31:44.453)

Ha ha.

Aging For All (31:46.69)

you