

Reflections on Ageism

Category: Making Assumptions

written by Paul Rooprai | July 18, 2019

As a pre-med student, I volunteered in the emergency department of a local hospital, and I also worked as a personal trainer for MacWheelers, an exercise program for adults with spinal cord injury. Looking back, I now realize how often I made wrong assumptions about elderly patients I cared for. I assumed they were too weak and fragile for simple tasks. As a personal trainer, I was overly restrictive on which equipment they could use and the types of movements they could safely perform.

One example occurred when I was developing a physiotherapy-based routine for Laura, an elderly client who suffered a stroke, leaving her wheelchair-bound. The initial routine that I created, which involved the use of light exercise bands without free weights, was informed by my assumptions about my client's age and not based on her abilities. Overtime, this routine resulted in Laura developing muscle weakness leading to pain in the shoulder joints, which was subsequently corrected by adding in weighted exercises.

The turning point for me was when I attended a geriatrics conference and learned key concepts such as ageism (stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of age) and marginalization. I examined my attitudes, behaviors and language, and began to recognize hidden biases and prejudices. I examined the way our society views older people as less able and less valuable, and began to recognize the negative impact on their health and well-being.

Learning about ageist practices has given me a greater appreciation for the process of aging and my interactions with older populations have in turn become more meaningful. An awareness of ageism will serve me well as a future healthcare professional by allowing me to adopt an approach to care that focuses on the individual's characteristics and not their age.

Paul Rooprai

Mississauga, Ontario