

## **Five Ways To Reduce Ageism and Reverse Ageism Working With Clients**

Can you imagine bashing someone of another race, religion, or sexual orientation at work? Of course not. So why do some healthcare organizations sit by and allow their employees to bash people based on their age?

Recently a team of Gen-Xers and Baby Boomers told me about a “problem employee” in their healthcare workplace. They went on to describe this employee’s behavior as unprofessional, overly emotional, reactive, and self-centered. When they offered examples to support these claims, I couldn’t help but agree that they certainly had a problem on their hands. I was floored when one member of this team said, “You know, he’s the typical Millennial.” And her boss nodded in agreement.

Huh?

The behavior the team described was certainly a concern. It sounded as if the employee had traits consistent with an untreated mental health condition. But did this employee sound like “the typical Millennial?” No.

Millennials are simply a generation. As a demographic they may seek work-life balance, telecommuting options, and change jobs more frequently than other generations, but they are certainly not known to be destructive in the workplace.

When I hear a team at work talking about colleagues of different generations critically, I wonder how they are able to sensitively serve clients and patients of different age groups.

Many social workers who have a bias against Millennials don’t think it impacts their practice. For example, perhaps your clients and their caregivers are mostly middle-aged and older. In fact, according to AARP, 25% of caregivers are currently Millennials and the oldest Millennials will also be entering middle age in the next decade.

Perhaps your team works heavily with Millennials and Generation Z and you hold stereotypes about Baby Boomers and Traditionalists. What about the large numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren? Even if your niche is younger generations, it’s still wise to possess some cultural competence about older people.

If your organization is age-stereotyping or generation-bashing, what steps can you take today to be more inclusive? Trying to better understand different generations offers countless potential benefits, including better outcomes for clients and patients and enhanced work performance from social workers of diverse age groups.

Here are 5 tips for increasing age sensitivity with clients, patients, and colleagues:

1. Acknowledge that age diversity should be respected and embraced. Don’t participate in perpetuating stereotypes about any generation. Making jokes about how Millennials are narcissistic or that the oldest generations can’t handle technology should not be tolerated in any workplace.

2. When working with patients, clients, and colleagues of different generations, pay particular attention to body language and facial expressions. Sometimes clients and patients don't tell you they don't understand a remark for fear of seeming ignorant, but you will usually observe confusion expressed in body language and/or facial expressions.
3. If you are older than most of your patients, clients, and colleagues, be cautious about metaphors or references that may seem "dated."
4. If you are younger than most of your patients, clients, and colleagues, avoid saying, "that must have been before my time." It's more sensitive to mention that you simply don't understand a comment and request clarification.
5. If you are a manager or supervisor, coordinate or suggest staff attendance at a training or workshop about age sensitivity. NASW's Code of Ethics encourages this: **1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity (c)**  
**Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.**

One such learning opportunity is coming up at the Society For Social Work Leadership In Healthcare (SSWLHC) Conference! For a deeper dive into this topic, join me for my general session, **Navigating Communication With Different Generations: Reducing Drama and Conflict In Healthcare at 8:00 am. on Friday, October 13 in Baltimore.** I hope to see you there!

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