



A FAMILY
RESOURCE

Stress and How It Affects Nursing Home Visits

*If you feel uncomfortable when first visiting
a nursing home, you're normal.*



INTRODUCTION

A common challenge for families is visiting their loved ones. One reason for this is the stress and uncomfortable feeling when we experience ageism of old age.

In this leaflet, we will discuss ageism and how it affects us. Loved ones can learn how to address the stress associated with visiting a nursing home facility.

Visiting a place which most people think “old people go to die” can trigger discomfort for many reasons, mostly unconscious. And while most facilities work hard to reposition our home as “a place to live”, overcoming discomfort can be a challenge.

The first step to having a more positive experience, is understanding why visits to a nursing facility cause a stressful response.

UNCONSCIOUS BELIEFS ABOUT THE ELDERLY

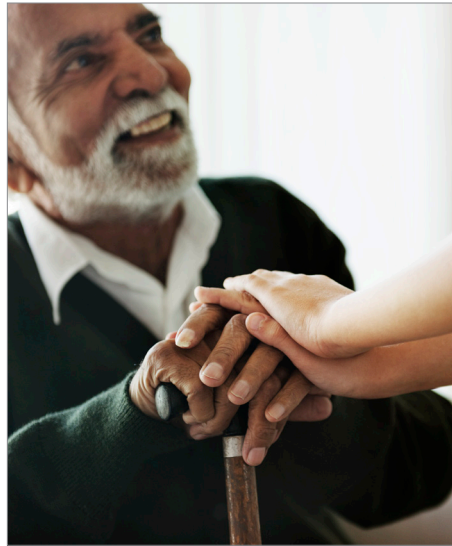
Social psychologist, Ellen Langer conducted an experiment at Harvard to explore the unconscious beliefs and assumptions about the elderly that could trigger discomfort.

In the experiment, she asked two groups of students to sort pictures of people. The first group sorted photographs of people by age, from babies to the elderly. The second group was asked to sort the same number of photographs by age. But these photos were only of seniors (65-90 years old).

Although both groups thought the experiment was about how well they sorted, the real experiment was timing how long it took the students to walk down the very long hall after sorting.

The students who sorted the photographs of only old people took almost twice as long to walk down the hall as students who sorted the mixed age range of people photographs.

Why did it take the second group longer? The reason is attributable to ageism.



Remember the reason why you are there - to visit your loved one!

AGEISM

Ageism is the built-in conscious and non-conscious beliefs, prejudices, and assumptions we all have about ageing, which shape our behavior and responses.

For example, observing a slow driving senior and attributing his driving speed to his age is conscious ageism. Feeling depressed simply by approaching a nursing home is non-conscious ageism. Like the students who sorted pictures of only older people, we can be unconsciously cued to negativity by simply approaching a nursing home.

WHAT WE CAN DO

No matter what we do as health care providers — through architecture, interior design or even staff training — a nursing home is a nursing home. Many residents now living here will die here. That is a reality we simply can't change. What we can change is our awareness of unconscious, ageistic prejudices before we visit, then consciously reframe our thinking to be thankful for the time and opportunity remaining.

One simple step to reduce ageism and improve the quality of visits, for both you and your loved one can be done just before you enter our home. Simply stop, take three deep breaths, then consciously think about why you're visiting. This simple process derails normal unconscious ageistic thoughts and allows you to create a visit which better meets both your needs and the needs of the resident you are visiting.



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**Additional resources can be found on our website,
www.avilainstitute.org/family-resources.**

The Avila Institute of Gerontology, Inc. is the educational arm for the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm. They provide education for compassionate care for long-term care professionals, caregivers and resident families.