

# The Cruel Nature Of Sexual Ageism



DR. SANDRA  
SCANTLING  
INTIMACY,  
SEX &  
RELATIONSHIP  
askdrscantling  
@aol.com

**D**id you ever laugh at a joke and then ask yourself, “What made that funny?” Someone recently asked me: “What’s the advice we should give a man walking on a tight rope stretched between two skyscrapers and a 40-year-old man having sex with an 80-year-old woman?”

The answer: “Don’t look down.”

I smiled, but felt uneasy. I couldn’t help but wonder whether the joke would still be considered “funny” if the woman were 70, 60, or even 50 (gasp). What if the male-female roles were reversed, or if the man were older than the woman?

OK, so I may be losing my sense of humor — especially when the subject is menopause, wrinkles, or suddenly sagging parts. But more important than that, we’ve got an enormous societal problem when it comes to stereotyping the elderly as asexual.

Let’s face it. Most of us are ambivalent about aging. We accept it, given the alternative, but are less than thrilled about the day we qualify for our \$2 senior-citizen discount at the movies. At our best, we may consider seniors to be wise, mature and accomplished — appreciating their multi-generational perspectives. At our worst, we can be marginalizing, disempowering and ageist.

The nature of ageism is a complex psychodynamic and socio-biological phenomenon. Often it’s not the aging itself, but characteristics that accompany age — such as chronic illness — that explain our bias. We value health, beauty and power. As long as older women (and men) are thought to be attractive, competent and fiercely successful (like the Miranda Priestley role played by Meryl Streep in “The Devil Wears Prada”) we are infinitely more tolerant about the aging process.

Unfortunately, many elderly have internalized the view that human worth diminishes along with one’s perceived productivity. While visiting my parents in Florida, I overheard several octogenarians talking by the pool. “I used to be a banker” one of them said. Another replied, “I used to be a musician” and a third said, “I used to be a radio broadcaster.”

I wanted to ask them what they are — right here and now — and why they’ve prized “doing” above “being.”

Our society makes it tough to age — especially when it comes to sex. Mature

couples who publicly hold hands are whispered to be “cute,” “adorable,” or “precious” — terms often associated with cherubic newborns. Families of aging parents and health-care facilities address activities of daily living quite well, but typically ignore the more controversial areas of intimacy and sexual connection.

The privileges and responsibilities that accompany sexual maturity are attained as a rite of passage when young men and women meet certain biological and societal markers. Over the other side of the hill, once our procreative abilities cease, we’re summarily stripped of our sexual privileges and identities and relegated to the ranks of the “sexless elderly.”

The belief that aging sounds the death knell for sexual passion couldn’t be further from the truth. Many couples of advanced age report heightened pleasure as they are freed from parental responsibilities, have the experience to know what they like and the leisure time to spend together. With better health care, diet and exercise, we’re not just living longer, we’re loving better. The following letter illustrates this fact beautifully:

*Dear Dr. Scantling,*

*I’m just writing to let people know that life (and sex) are not over at 70. I was married for 26 wonderful years, but lost my wife to cancer in 2003. The following year, while at church, I spotted a former neighbor who I hadn’t seen in many years. I went up to her after the service, said hi, and suggested we have lunch to catch up. The rest is history. We fell head over heels in love and were married last October, just shortly before my 70th birthday.*

*And that brings me to the discovery: We have a remarkable sexual relationship. It is “out of the box” in the sense that I didn’t know — despite a very good one with my last wife — how exciting, wonderful and prolonged our nightly encounters can be if you focus on “the going, rather than the getting there.” One might have thought that my ability to have an orgasm at the age of 69 or 70 would have come to an end — but I’m happy to report that this is not the case. My erections continue — sometimes for as much as 45 or even 60 minutes. The key is enjoying each second of the experience... the touch, the awareness of feeling the various parts of my wife’s body against mine, the movement, the breath... there is no rush, no end sought other than to*

*bask in the fullness of the moment’s pleasurable sensations. My erections don’t always remain as hard as they may have been, but even a modestly erect (or even soft) penis can do wonders inside my wife in a whole variety of positions I never had discovered before. (For which I give a lot of credit to The Kama Sutra — another recent discovery, thanks to my wife.)*

*If a sexual relationship can be this good, I want to let others know not to wait until they reach 70 to discover it. It is an experience of ecstasy that I never knew to be possible. Thank you for the opportunity to share, in this detail, why I feel so lucky — both to be so deeply in love again and to be able to express our love in such a physical way.*

— *Still Going Strong*

America is rapidly graying — that’s a well established fact. In 1900, approximately 4 percent of the U.S. population was over 65. By 2030, it is expected that 21 percent of us will fall into this category. So like it or not, the prevailing socio-cultural attitudes toward the elderly will affect every one of us (if we’re fortunate enough to enter our “golden years”).

Ageism is just one form of sexual discrimination. As a society, we have numerous biases that preclude admission into the select “club” of sexual acceptability.

## To Ask A Question ...

Our intimate relationships and sexual health are intensely personal concerns that many people find difficult to discuss. Please think of this as a safe place to have those concerns addressed.

Write to me in confidence at: [AskDrScantling@aol.com](mailto:AskDrScantling@aol.com).

Feel free to ask me whatever is on your mind regarding sexual wellness, health, intimacy and relationship -- mind, body or spirit. The large volume of e-mail I receive makes answering individual letters impossible, but your questions will help me identify the subjects most important to you and other NE Magazine readers. Some readers’ letters will be chosen for publication and reply in the column. They will be edited to eliminate names and other personal identifying information.

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Obese couples, those who are grossly incompatible in height, widely discrepant in age (especially if the woman is older — although this is shifting a bit), same-sex couples, disabled persons, or even those of visibly different ethnicities, suffer from derisive comments and sexist stereotyping.

So the next time we hear a joke about the toothless old man or the blue-haired woman, maybe we could ask ourselves: What’s really so funny here? How much of this has to do with our own anxiety about aging, and will it be as funny when we’re part of the silver-haired set?

At what age do we stop wanting or needing to experience and express passion — and who gets to decide? When will we wake up and no longer wish to run through a pile of freshly raked leaves, walk barefoot on the beach squishing wet sand between our toes, or share intimately with our partners?

The short answer is hopefully never. May we never deprive ourselves of touch, tenderness and sexual closeness. May we fight confining stereotypes (of all kinds) and refuse to accept the beliefs that rob us of our hard-earned “intimate” retirements. May we express affection freely, as the spirit moves us, without shame or fear of recrimination. And if we stare at the older, yet still in-just couple, hugging in the popcorn line, may it be out of admiration.