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Ageism During Disasters

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There was something ironic about New York City's Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) calling for special attention to the needs of the "elderly" during the preparations for Hurricane Irene. Born in 1942, he is 69 -- an elderly person.

What he meant, presumably, was that special attention should be paid to elderly people who are disabled and in need of help. Obviously, that is a critical need during a disaster, but is it really about "the elderly"? Shouldn't special attention be focused on people who are disabled and in need of help whether they are elderly or not?

Of course, older adults are more likely to be disabled and in need of help, especially if they are very old. And of course, we need to make special provisions for this sub-population. And of course, we need an aging services system that has the capacity to meet their needs -- which is very much at risk these days.

But, even at age 85, fewer than half of older [adults are so disabled](#) that they need extensive help to manage from day-to-day.

The fact of the matter is that older people generally manage better -- especially [psychologically better](#) -- during and after a disaster than younger people. Most have lived through disasters before. Most have been toughened up by experience, which has prepared them well to keep their composure and to take actions that will help them and their families to survive a disaster, and to recover from it. Most older adults, therefore, should be seen as people with the [capacity to help others](#) rather than as people in need of help by virtue of their age.

What is at work here is ageism, which is widespread in our society. Think of all the people who deny the fact of age. If busy, productive older adults, like Mayor Bloomberg, say they are old,

they are frequently told they are not. "You're as old as you feel." "You're young at heart." "70 is the new 50." "You're not old; you look terrific."

Okay, people are living longer and have better health in old age than they did even one generation ago. Being 70 doesn't mean what it meant 50 years ago, when life expectancy in the United States [was about 69](#) . But that's exactly the point. It is now possible -- indeed likely -- to be old and good. Denial of this -- the expectation that old people will be depressed, sick, disabled and/or decrepit -- is ageism. And it has terrible effects on older people and on people who dread aging because of it.

Most obvious, of course, is the difficulty older people, who want to work, often have getting a job even when they are well-qualified and still capable. But ageism is also at work in the lack of respect for the value of the experience of older adults. And it is at work in the difficulty many older adults have with the developmental challenges they confront as they age. Psychologists, such as [Erik Erickson](#) and his [followers](#), tell us that older adults need to develop a sense of "integrity." This is hard to do in a society in which old age by itself is regarded as a fundamental deficit.

Ageism is also at work in our helping systems. [Robert Butler](#), who coined the word "ageism" and was the first director of the National Institute on Aging, used to tell the story of an old man who went to a doctor and complained about a pain in his right knee. "What do you expect?" the doctor asked. "You're 101." The man responded angrily, "The problem with that, Doc, is that my left knee is also 101, and it doesn't hurt at all." (Quoted in Mark Lachs's excellent new book, ["Treat Me Not My Age"](#).)

The story is an important reminder that too often doctors and others who provide care and treatment for older adults miss the specific realities of the people they are serving because of assumptions they make about what it means to be old.

The fundamental expectation in our culture -- that older adults are disabled and in need of help even though most are not -- results in a sad loss of human potential. In disasters, as in many other situations where we need people to help other people, older adults can make a great contribution. Yes, our society should make provisions for older adults in need of help; but it also should draw on the strengths of those who by virtue of experience gained over long lives have [much to offer](#) to their families and their communities.