

Challenging Devaluation

Stereotypically older people are often seen as being of 'less worth' than others. One result of such devaluation is social rejection, separation and exclusion by others. This can often be seen in the way that we segregate and congregate older people in society. This can lead to older people being denied or having restricted access to the things that we, as citizens value and take for granted. In turn this becomes a vicious circle; less opportunity leads to less practice and participation which in turn leads to an older person withdrawing and becoming isolated. The loss of valued relationships, respect, autonomy and participation are exactly the kinds of experiences that bring about depression, despair and isolation, all factors consistently correlated with **suicide** in older people.

One way that we often respond to such claims is to express the view that older people *choose* to do these things and that it is part of *growing old* and *disengaging* from the world. Some old people do prefer the company of other older people and do want space to reflect and look back on their lives; but not at the expense of all the other kinds of possible experiences they could have. Growing older is part of life and older people just like everyone else have a right to participate and engage in all aspects of life.

This is admittedly a 'bleak picture' but it is important that we recognise the possibility that devaluation and rejection can lead to an older person believing that they are a burden and a source of anguish to others. Suicide in older people is a complex problem and if we take the problem seriously we need to combat stigma, work to build inclusive communities, and empower older people to engage in civic life.

