

K-State Research & Extension News for January, 2024

Grab Your Sled and Head Up the Hill

Submitted by Kathy Goul, Family & Consumer Science Agent

I have decided on my favorite commercial from this holiday season. No matter how many times it crosses my screen, I catch myself smiling. Each time, it adds a bit of joy to my life. I can picture myself doing exactly what the women in the commercial are doing - riding a sled down a hill covered in snow, smiling, laughing and reminiscing all the way to the bottom!

From an advertising perspective, Amazon has done a great job with this ad. It makes us smile and feel the joy of the holiday season – and we remember the company featured! For me, however, it is more than just a commercial. The ad captures, to some extent, how aging is viewed in today's society and how we are working to reframe aging.

When I dissect Amazon's commercial, the first thing I notice is the group of friends reminiscing about their youth and the joy of conquering the snow-covered hill with their sleds. However, when I look more closely at the body language of two of the characters, I feel a sense of sadness. Their expressions show they truly feel like this part of their life is now behind a door that can no longer be opened. Why is that?

As Amazon moves on to the third friend in the commercial, my smile widens. My first thought is this friend is the ornery one of the group. It's the twinkle in her eyes and the smile on her face that give her away. Her body language communicates a completely different outlook on aging compared to her friends. While watching the kids sled down the hill brings back fond memories, who says this fun is no longer an option for the trio?

Taking the initiative to order needed items, she encourages her friends to move beyond the stereotypes that are subconsciously telling them sledding down the hill is no longer an option at their age. At this point, my smile again widens. Watching the commercial I think to myself these two ladies must think their friend is absolutely nuts by even suggesting they attempt this feat.

Once at the top of the hill, their facial expressions show the change in their demeanor. Maybe sledding down the hill *is* something they can still do. As they head down the hill and each break out into a smile, I am encouraged by what this tells us. They have taken it upon themselves to challenge the status-quo. And they crushed it!

As viewers are focused on the change in the characters as they come down the hill, we can miss two very important moments. Next time you see the commercial, observe the look in the eyes of the two kids standing on the side of the hill watching this group of friends come down. Their sense of awe at these three older ladies on sleds provides a perspective that we don't see portrayed as often as we should. Would they be surprised by this occurrence if it happened every day? Are they surprised because this is something out of the ordinary?

Stereotypes about age and aging have a direct influence on our own actions and what we expect when we interact with people older than ourselves. One stereotype tells our two ladies in the commercial they are no longer able to sled down the hill because of their age. Perhaps it is the reason they look at their friend and think she has gone off the deep end. Is it also this stereotype that puts the look of surprise on the face of the kids when they see the ladies coming down the hill?

The bigger question is what we are doing, as a community, to help erase some of these stereotypes that currently exist. The fact that we see this commercial gives me hope we are seeing a shift in how aging is perceived in our society.

Our body believes what our mind tells it. The influence of these attitudes becomes more pronounced the older we get. The more someone believes the stereotypes associated with old age and aging apply to them, the more likely they are to see a decline in overall health.

In contrast, research shows the happiest and healthiest people in the aging community are often those who don't dwell too much on their age and just live their lives. They tend to focus on what they can do rather than what their age might limit them to, reinforcing the fact that age truly is a state of mind.

As we enter the new year, I challenge you to follow the words of encouragement from author Suzy Toronto. "You can live a life worth loving, regardless of the number of candles on your birthday cake." Don't be tied to the number that makes up your birthday. Be the ornery friend who challenges the status quo and shows us we can live life to the fullest each and every day. Grab your sled and head up the hill. I'll be waiting for you at the top!

For more information on aging well, contact Kathy Goul at 913-294-4306 or via email at kgoul@ksu.edu.