

Responding to ageism



Purpose

An easy-to-use guide for older people to review their experience of ageism and decide if and how to respond. It contains links to external resources that provide additional practical tips.



Audience

Older people who wish to speak out against ageism and challenge ageist stereotypes.

View all
age positive
communication
tools

[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/
AgePositiveCommunicationToolkit](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/AgePositiveCommunicationToolkit)

What is ageism?

[According to the World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism) (<https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>) (WHO) **ageism** refers to the stereotypes (**how we think**), prejudice (**how we feel**) and discrimination (**how we act**) towards people on the basis of their age.

The WHO distinguishes between *institutional*, *interpersonal* or *self-directed* **ageism**.

- *Institutional* ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age.
- *Interpersonal* ageism arises in interactions between two or more individuals, while
- *Self-directed* ageism occurs when ageism is internalised and turned against oneself.

Ageism is stereotyping, discrimination and mistreatment based solely upon age. Ageism, when directed towards older people, is holding negative attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be older, and not recognising the rights, contributions and value of older people.

The [Australian Human Rights Commission](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/whats-age-got-do-it-2021) (https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/whats-age-got-do-it-2021) sees stereotypes as a key way in which ageist attitudes are communicated and normalised through the use of certain words, negative images and how we behave towards each other.



Was that ageist?

It is likely that many older people have been on the receiving end of ageist stereotypes at some point in their lives. However, each individual will interpret whether a situation is intentional, harmful or discriminatory differently. Below are a few examples you may have experienced as ageist.

- Being addressed using terms such as ‘dear’, ‘love’ or ‘young man/lady’
- Self-directed e.g. making excuses such as ‘having a senior’s moment’
- In conversations e.g. group of friends complaining about their ageing bodies
- In retail e.g. staff showing frustration with an older person taking their time to make a choice
- In marketing/advertising e.g. use of imagery or words which indicate unrealistic, non-inclusive and singular depictions that reinforce ageist stereotypes
- In decision-making e.g. situations where the rights of older people to make their own choices are ignored
- In news media e.g. portrayal of older people as all the same
- In social media e.g. presenting an increasing ageing population in ways that create a sense of burdening or inconveniencing others
- In healthcare e.g. minimising patients’ health concerns by putting symptoms/worries down to ageing
- In workplace e.g. expectations about retirement age, assumptions about capabilities and being overlooked for promotion
- On holiday e.g. unsolicited offers of help on the assumption that an older person’s age prevents them from doing something, such as reversing a caravan
- Using technology e.g. assistance offered on the assumption that older people are digitally illiterate

Why is it important to respond to ageism?

Ageism is not benign or harmless. It impacts our confidence, quality of life, job prospects, health, and control over life decisions. It is pervasive but often hidden. It can [distort our attitudes to older people and ageing](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/whats-age-got-do-it-2021) (https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/whats-age-got-do-it-2021) and have a profound negative impact on our personal experience of growing older.

[Research conducted by the Benevolent Society](https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/research) (https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/research) shows that ageism can be a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', leading to internalised and reinforced negative perceptions of our own self-worth. The adverse impacts of ageism not only limit the potential for older Australians to participate fully in the community, they also significantly impact their overall health and wellbeing.

While there are global and national strategies focussed on shifting ageist stereotypes and attitudes within our communities, we must take responsibility for our own self-directed ageism and when we experience ageism in our lives, act to create the change we want to see.

Checklist for responding to ageism



- 1 Check-in with yourself.** What are you feeling as a result of the situation you're experiencing? Do you feel that you've been unfairly treated purely on the basis of your age?
- 2 Identify what has shaped your reaction.** Be clear on what you disagree with, believe is discriminating against you and other people, or reinforces ageist stereotypes.
- 3 Is a response required?** Each of us responds differently to what we experience. Some may view situations as unintentional whilst others may perceive them as creating harm. What is your perspective on the situation and does this lead you to act?

List continued on next page

4 **Choose how to respond.** Some of us are blessed with quick wit and naturally respond when something happens, others need more time to reflect before deciding how to respond. Work out what is right for you, is it:

- a quick response in the moment
- a conversation to be had at another time
- an issue to be raised with a supervisor or manager
- requiring a formal complaint
- or a response that others can be involved in?

There are a number of resources available to help you work out how best to respond to ageism in interpersonal scenarios as well as garnering support from the wider community. Refer to the list of useful resources in this toolkit or use the links below to find out more;

- Every Age Counts: [Practical tips to respond to ageism](https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/campaign_materials) (https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/campaign_materials)
- U3A & Centre for Ageing Better: [Changing the conversation: A toolkit for challenging ageism](https://ageing-better.org.uk/publications/challenging-ageism-guide-talking-about-ageing-and-older-age) (<https://ageing-better.org.uk/publications/challenging-ageism-guide-talking-about-ageing-and-older-age>), pages 10 to 15.
- Office for Ageing Well, SA Health: Bystander Action for Ageing Well Facilitator Guide

This toolkit also contains a guide to help you structure a written response (letter, email or social media post).

5 **Decide on the key points you want to communicate.** Take the time to work out the key points you want to get across about your experience, how the situation demonstrates negative stereotypes of older people and what needs to change in order to challenge ageism.

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6 Identify the appropriate person/s to respond to. It is important that you respond to the most appropriate person/s. This can sometimes be tricky to work out. If the situation involves an organisation, look at its website, social media and promotional materials. You may need to make a phone call to identify who within the organisation is responsible and to learn about its formal complaints process.

Some sectors have specific bodies to whom you can make a formal complaint such as:

Media

[Australian Communications and Media Authority](https://www.acma.gov.au/complain-about-ads-tv-or-radio)

(<https://www.acma.gov.au/complain-about-ads-tv-or-radio>)

[Ad Standards](https://adstandards.com.au/make-a-complaint/) (<https://adstandards.com.au/make-a-complaint/>)

Workplace

[Australian Human Rights Commission - Age Discrimination](https://humanrights.gov.au/complaints/make-complaint)

(<https://humanrights.gov.au/complaints/make-complaint>)

State & Federal Government

[OmbudsmanSA](https://ombudsman.sa.gov.au/make-a-complaint/how-to-make-a-complaint) (<https://ombudsman.sa.gov.au/make-a-complaint/how-to-make-a-complaint>) - provides a [useful list](https://www.ombudsman.sa.gov.au/make-a-complaint/other-complaint-handling-authorities) (<https://www.ombudsman.sa.gov.au/make-a-complaint/other-complaint-handling-authorities>) of

other state-based complaint handling authorities.

[Commonwealth Ombudsman](https://forms.ombudsman.gov.au/prod?entitytype=Approach&layoutcode=ApproachWebForm) (<https://forms.ombudsman.gov.au/prod?entitytype=Approach&layoutcode=ApproachWebForm>)

7 Approaches to ensure action is taken. Rather than sending your response to just one person, you may need to consider copying your response to other parties with responsibilities that cover the area of the complaint. This is especially true where one party holds a position of authority over another, e.g. local council as well as the relevant state government department, the chief executive officer of an organisation as well as the local branch manager.

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If you have followed a formal complaints process, the organisation should provide you with an initial response to your complaint and let you know what will happen next. Don't be afraid to follow up with the organisation or authority if you haven't heard anything for a while.

You may consider bringing other people together to create a collective response and a louder voice for challenging ageism. There are many resources available to help you do this, refer to the list of useful resources in this toolkit or click on the links below to find out more.

- [This Chair Rocks](https://thischairrocks.com) (https://thischairrocks.com) (Ashton Applewhite):
[“Who me, ageist?” How to start a consciousness-raising group](https://thischairrocks.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ConsciousnessRaisingBooklet2018.pdf)
(https://thischairrocks.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ConsciousnessRaisingBooklet2018.pdf)
- [EveryAGECounts: Conversation Starters](https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/campaign_materials)
(https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/campaign_materials)

Tackling ageism is everyone's responsibility. If you are a younger person, remember that the culture you set now will be exactly what you inherit as you get older.

Discrimination against an older person is actually discrimination against your future self.

For more information contact

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[View all age positive communication tools](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/AgePositiveCommunicationToolkit)
(www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/AgePositiveCommunicationToolkit)

[Visit the Tackling Ageism website](https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/tacklingageism)
(https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/tacklingageism)



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