

Embracing age diversity

A guide to inclusive
language and images

**Challenge
your bias**
Embrace your age

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Who is this guide for?

This language and imagery guide aims to raise awareness about ageism and how strengths-based language and behaviours can reduce the occurrence of ageism. The guide provides practical examples of how words, phrases, and images can better portray older people and combat ageism.

Who are we talking about?

The term 'older people' refers to people aged 65 years and over or any Aboriginal person aged 55 years and over.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, Elder has a specific meaning. Elder with a capital 'E' is used as a cultural term to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are well regarded in their community. Age is not a deciding factor in being an Elder. Elder used in any other context is spelt with a lower case 'e'.

What is ageism?

Ageism refers to how we think (stereotypes), how we feel (prejudice), and how we act (discrimination) towards people based on their age¹. The terms ageism and age discrimination are often used interchangeably.

Anyone can experience ageism at any point in their life. It can influence how we view ourselves and other people.

Ageism can be expressed in a way that may appear well-intentioned. This is known as benevolent ageism or compassionate ageism. This type of ageism makes a judgement that a person is not capable of a particular activity due to their age and assumes that a person needs assistance. Sometimes the assistance can occur without the consent of the older person. An example of this is assisting an older person to cross the road without asking, assuming that their age and slower pace means they require help.

The different dimensions of ageism

- Structural ageism – refers to laws, policies, culture and practices of organisations and government that may disadvantage people based on age.
- Interpersonal ageism – is directed at other people.
- Self-directed ageism – is internalised and is directed towards oneself.

Implicit bias refers to the learned behaviours modelled by others which can affect our opinions of people, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Research shows this bias is pervasive, common and unintentional². This can be expressed by overlooking an older person in favour of someone younger or not including an older person in an activity under the assumption they could not participate as well as a younger person.

Explicit bias is when a person is outwardly judgemental and feels that they are correct in their opinions about older people. The way this bias is expressed is generally rude and obnoxious and can intimidate the person who is the target of the discrimination.

Ageing

Ageing is a normal life process but when referring to an older person or generation, many terms that are used describe ageing negatively and as something to fear. Everyone experiences ageing in different ways and what may be considered stereotypical for ageing is not always true. We have the opportunity to participate in activities or learn new things as we age.

Western Australians are living longer than ever before, with older people projected to make up one-quarter of our population by 2071³. Individual diversity increases with age. Using collective terms assumes everyone over a certain age requires the same things, such as health and social supports, when this isn't always the case.

Why do we need to do something?

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) surveyed over 2,000 Australians and found that 90 per cent agreed that ageism exists, with 83 per cent believing that it is a problem. Two-thirds of Australians have experienced ageism, many without realising due to ageism being so ingrained in society⁴. Ageist language and images used to discriminate, harass, and bully is unlawful.

Ageism can impact a person's physical and mental health. It has been shown that people with a negative outlook on ageing live 7.5 years less than people who have a more positive perception of ageing⁵. Ageism is also associated with social isolation, loneliness, financial insecurity, and a reduced quality of life.

Ageism is a known driver of elder abuse. Some carers may act on the misguided assumption that the person they are caring for has limited capabilities due to their age. While they believe they are taking actions to protect the older person, those carers may really hold a negative perception of their ability to be independent and make decisions. The AHRC found that 60 per cent of people make assumptions about a person based on their age⁶. It is important to reflect on whether these assumptions are expressed through our behaviour and verbal interactions.

Raising awareness and education is key to reducing ageism.

Elder Abuse support

The Government of Western Australia collaborates with service providers to help deliver elder abuse support services. Further information is available at [Elder abuse support services and resources](#) (www.wa.gov.au). If you require confidential advice and support, call the WA Elder Abuse Helpline and Information Service on 1300 724 679.

Language

Language really does matter.

Raising awareness of ageist language and being mindful of how older people are perceived can positively influence our behaviour and attitudes towards older people.

You probably know of many words that promote a negative association with ageing and older people. The aim is to rethink how ageing and older people are described and represented in the media, in organisations, and everyday life, and to consider alternatives.

While reading this language guide, you may recognise some of the ways language and associated behaviours can be ageist and may find you have said these things yourself. Don't be disheartened. Even the most ardent ageism activist can still be ageist to themselves or other people. This reflects ageism being so covert and widespread and is why campaigns such as this are so important to raise awareness.

Referring to older people

It is common to use generalisations and make assumptions to describe older people as a singular group. This negative stereotyping takes away the individuality of people. There is an international trend to change the language, and therefore, positively impact the perception of ageing.

Better terms to use include [some] older people/adults, older populations, people over the age of XX, people between ages of XX and XX.

These are neutral terms that don't carry any assumptions about a person or group of people.

Some things to consider when writing about older people:

- Use inclusive language ('we') where possible to avoid 'othering' (use of 'us and them' language) as ageing is not separate from ourselves. For example, instead of using 'what older people need', use 'what we need when we are older'.
- Avoid focusing on the problem or challenges and the use of conflict related language, like sufferer or battler. Instead use language that reflects a person's ownership over their health issues, for example, use 'person living with dementia' rather than 'dementia sufferer'.
- Think about whether referring to age is important or relevant to the content.

Elderspeak

Have you ever heard someone talk to an older person like they were a young child or have you caught yourself doing this? This way of speaking may come across as caring but instead questions the competence of the older person. This is called 'elderspeak'. It can sound patronising when a person speaks slower, with an exaggerated intonation, elevated pitch, and a simpler vocabulary⁷.

Generational labels

Terms that separate generations such as Boomer, Generation X, or Millennial are unhelpful as they create conflict between age groups and can cause unnecessary tension. These generalisations are not scientifically defined, don't have consistent names and are best avoided.

Over the hill or over ageism?

Many common sayings suggest that older people are incapable of learning new things or can't participate in activities. Some may also try to prove youthfulness and therefore relevance. Examples include:

- you can't teach an old dog new tricks
- over the hill
- XX is the new XX, e.g. 50 is the new 30

Continuing to learn new skills and gain knowledge, especially with other people, is beneficial for a person's mental and physical health.

Fostering community⁸

A proportion of the older population will require intensive support in their later years that cannot be provided in their family home. Terms to describe these places such as 'facility', 'institution', 'nursing home', 'old people's home' reduces their living environment to be clinical sounding or a place for a person to be forgotten about.

These environments are an older person's home and community. Terms such as 'aged care home', 'residential aged care' and 'assisted home living' provides a respectful description of an older person's living arrangements.

Imagery

Imagery is as important as language. It can be easy to perpetuate stereotypes of ageing with photos depicting older people as frail, alone, and/or lonely. Photos that show older people ageing positively can elicit positive feelings towards ageing and older people.

Choose images that show the diversity of older people in different settings, participating in a range of activities with other people, preferably of varying ages.

When using representative imagery of older people:

- ✓ Use images that promote age positivity and a positive demeanour without being unrealistic. Older people and their lives are very diverse, so it is important to show that ageing is a normal process of life and that we all experience it differently.
- ✓ Only showing images of older people participating in extreme activities is not relatable to the majority of people.
- ✓ Images that show older people with negative emotions as well as being alone can promote stereotypes of older people, such as being frail, socially isolated, and lonely.
- ✓ When showing people with limited mobility, choose images that show them participating in activities, particularly with other people.
- ✓ Showing older people in the community or workplace, especially with people rather than at home alone, shows that they have a valuable contribution to make to communities.
- ✓ Choose images that include people of all ages. Intergenerational images elicit more positive attitudes compared to images showing people of a single generation.
- ✓ Select images that show the diversity of older people, e.g. race, culture, sexual identity, gender.

Image libraries

The Centre for Ageing Better (UK) has a [free image library](#) with the purpose of challenging stereotypes of older people. Over 3,000 photos show age-positive, realistic situations of older people.

[Getty Images and Disrupt Ageing through the AARP](#) has over 18,000 stock images of older people that can be licenced for use.

Legal protection against age discrimination

If you believe that you have experienced ageism in public, by language or images, there are protections under *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* (WA) and *Age Discrimination Act 2004* (Commonwealth). Public life includes, but is not limited to, employment, education, accommodation, access to place and vehicles, and provision of goods, services, and facilities. The *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* (WA) [provides a complete list of areas of public life](#).

The *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* (WA) defines ageism as:

- Direct: when a person is treated less favourably compared to others of a different age in the same or similar circumstance. This is similar to the definition of interpersonal ageism.
- Indirect: when a requirement, practice or condition is the same for everyone but has an unfair effect on someone of a particular age and is unreasonable in the circumstances. This definition aligns with structural ageism.

The legislation provides for lawful and unlawful discrimination. This recognises that there will be times where discriminating based on age is valid. An example of lawful discrimination is when a person is offered voluntary retirement at a certain age. An example of unlawful discrimination is when an employer refuses to consider job applications from applicants who are over a particular age.

What the State Government is doing about ageism

The State Government is committed to supporting older people in Western Australian to feel valued, safe, and empowered to lead happy and fulfilling lives in age-friendly communities.

The Department of Communities website provides more information on the work of the Seniors and Ageing portfolio, including further information about ageism and An Age-friendly WA: State Seniors Strategy 2023-2033.

Everyone has a role to play in challenging ageism. Knowing how to use language and imagery to reflect the diversity of older people is a great place to start.

Contact

Seniors and Ageing

Department of Communities

Email: seniors@communities.wa.gov.au

Telephone: 1800 176 888

Website: [Seniors and Ageing](#)

Resources and references

Australian Human Rights Commission [‘Age discrimination’](#)

Australian Human Rights Commission [‘Age Discrimination Act 2004’](#)

Equal Opportunity Commission (including information about what is lawful under the Equal Opportunity Act 1984) [‘Age Discrimination’](#)

[EveryAGE Counts](#)

Frameworks Institute [‘Reframing ageing through images: Recommendations from research’](#)

National Ageing Research Institute [‘Age-positive language guide’](#)

The Centre for Better Ageing campaign [‘Age without limits’](#)

- 1 World Health Organisation. [Global Report on Ageism](#), 2021
- 2 Bowman, C. and Weng Marc Lim. [The Language of Ageism: Why we need to use words carefully](#), 2015
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics. [Population Projections, Australia \(Western Australia\) 2023](#)
- 4 Australian Human Rights Commission. [What’s Age Got to Do With It?](#), 2021
- 5 Levy, B.R., et al. [Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging](#), 2002
- 6 Australian Human Rights Commission. [What’s Age Got to Do With It?](#) 2021
- 7 Gendron, T. L., et al. [‘The language of ageism: Why we need to use words carefully’](#), 2016
- 8 Bowman, C. and Weng Marc Lim. [How to avoid ageist language in ageing research: An overview and guidelines’](#), 2021