



Challenging ageism

through everyday conversations, dialogue and discussion



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The guide to Challenging Ageism through everyday conversations, dialogue and discussion.

About Age Without Limits

Age Without Limits is a campaign from the Centre for Ageing Better to challenge ageism for the benefit of us all as we grow older.

We aim to spark a debate and conversation about what ageism is and to change the way we all think about ageing. Find out how at [AgeWithoutLimits.org](https://www.AgeWithoutLimits.org)

About this guide

Whether we're challenging negative stereotypes or questioning the way ageing or older people are talked about, having conversations is a powerful first step to challenge the ageism that's so ingrained in society, we barely notice it.

- We might **chat to family and friends**, start a conversation in our communities or discuss it at work
- We might even **find ourselves reflecting** on the assumptions we make about ourselves as we get older.

However it happens, this guide can help you have a conversation about ageism or create discussion / debate about a topic that impacts us all.

A conversation about ageism can happen at any time. It might be sparked by hearing an ageist comment, or seeing ageist behaviour directed at someone else or experienced by yourself. You might find yourself in a situation where you can share your personal experience of ageism to further inform the debate.



What is ageism, and why is it an important issue?

Ageism refers to stereotyping, discrimination or prejudice directed towards a person because of their age.

Evidence shows ageism can have a hugely damaging impact on us as we get older – on our health, on our job prospects and the way we live our lives, and on wider society and the economy.

Ageism is widespread in the UK. It's embedded in our institutions and social groups, and even accepted as normal by those who are on the receiving end of its prejudice.

But it doesn't have to be this way.



Step one

Get to know the topic of ageism a little better ...

Ageism is a prejudice that's hidden in plain sight. It's not always obvious and most people haven't thought about it before.

More worryingly, our research suggests that 1 in 10 people believe ageism doesn't exist¹. It's become so normalised as part of everyday life that it makes it difficult to recognise, even if we're subjected to it. At the end of the day, we can't challenge something unless we're aware of it.

We know it can feel difficult to have the confidence to challenge ageism and enter into a conversation about it without having some facts up your sleeve. So, we've included below just some ways you might see or hear ageism which can be added to those you've probably experienced yourself. These might come in handy as you begin to speak about this really important topic.

Ageism can occur

- **In social situations or online**, where negative comments about ageing and older people are normalised or dismissed as harmless banter
- **In comments we make about ourselves:** 'I'm too old for that', 'I'm having a senior moment', 'Not at my age'
- **In everyday interactions:** People being spoken down to and patronised e.g. in the doctors' surgery or in shops
- **In employment and the workplace:** People applying for jobs but being turned down because of their age, even if not explicitly told this is the reason. Older workers not receiving the same opportunities for development and training

- **In access to healthcare:** Receiving different medical treatment - for example, receiving medication rather than counselling for a mental health problem. People can also assume they deserve less treatment because of their age, for example, you experience pain in your knee but don't go to the doctor because you think it's what you should expect at your age
- **In the mass media**, where older people are either not featured in films or adverts or reduced to damaging stereotypes

Ageism is common

- Ageism is the **most widespread form of discrimination in the UK** - anyone can experience it²
- Half of people aged over 50 in England **experienced age discrimination** in the last year³
- At least a third of people **hold ageist beliefs**⁴
- One in five employers believe that **age discrimination occurs in their organisation**⁵
- One in three people aged over 50 believe they have **been turned down for a job because of their age**⁶
- UK media is among the most ageist - a study of the use of language related to older age in web-based magazines and newspapers found that of 20 English-speaking countries, **the UK was the most ageist of all**⁷

Ageism is harmful

Ageism affects how we feel about ourselves and limits our lives and opportunities. It affects our job prospects and our health⁸.

- **Impact on mental health:** repeated negative portrayals of older people, or the absence of positive portrayals, can lead to poor body image or increased pessimism and anxiety about getting older
- **Impact on physical health:** in some cases, older people receive different medical treatment because of their age or don't seek help for medical problems because they assume they are a normal part of ageing. Ageism can also lead to people limiting the activities that promote better health such as physical activity (due to negative ideas about appearance, suitability or physical capability). During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw attempts to limit the lifesaving resources available to older people, with 'do not attempt resuscitation' decisions being made without consultation with individuals or their families
- **Financial impact:** ageism in the workplace means older people not being able to work for as long as they want to. This can lead to people being locked out of employment and potentially facing financial insecurity and poverty in later life

- **Impact on the economy and wider society:** ageism has a detrimental impact on the workforce - 460,000 people aged 50-64 are currently out of work but would like to be in work and ageism is one of the key barriers older workers face. Shutting older people out of the workforce has repercussions for the economy through the effect on income tax and national insurance receipts as well as the welfare bill. It also exacerbates skills and labour shortages faced by many industries.

Ageism means as a society we don't invest in ways to help people age well. For example, a failure to design and build homes and communities (including transport, accessible streets and public spaces and facilities such as toilets) that are suitable for us as we get older, despite the increasing need from an ageing population. Ageism also has an impact on social cohesion.

Ageism is not inevitable

It doesn't have to be this way.

Thinking negatively about ageing and older people has been accepted and ignored for too long.

The Age Without Limits campaign aims to spark a debate and conversation about what ageism is and to change the way we all think about ageing.



Step two

Spot opportunities to challenge ageism

We see and hear casual ageism every day in the media, on TV, at work, in pubs / cafés, on social media, in family conversations.

We all joke about the perceived downsides of ageing, even those of us who are older. These are all ideal opportunities to call out ageism, to ask people to reflect and think differently, to start a conversation about the topic.

How you respond may depend on the situation you're in and who's made the ageist comment, or used ageist language or phrases. This might feel a bit uncomfortable at first, which is natural. But never put yourself in a situation where you might be or feel unsafe.

A few useful responses to have to hand could include:

- That's not funny to me
- That sounds ageist
- Was age relevant to the story?
- I'm sorry, could you explain that to me?
- That comment makes me feel ... uncomfortable / worthless / invisible / irrelevant ...
- I wonder if you've considered the impact of your words?
- You might not realise it but ...
- I don't think you can make generalisations like that based on someone's age
- People can be like that at any age.

We know that most people don't intend to cause offence in the way they talk about older people, or act towards them. But if someone refers to you, or an older person using patronising words or phrases ("Dear" / "wrinkly" / "come on grandad" / "little old lady") ...

- When you reply you might swap out the ageist word or phrase with a more appropriate one, for example, referring to yourself or the other person by their name, or describing them as an older person, man or woman. This is a subtle way to challenge ageist language without making the person who said it feel defensive



We know that many people are unaware of ageism. Our research suggests over 40% of people have never really thought about ageism before⁹. So, if someone makes a stereotypical assumption about you, or someone else, because of their age, for example, that older people can't learn new things or that we become stuck in our ways as we get older...

- When you reply you might question the basis of that assumption or ask them to explain their logic more fully. This allows the person to really reflect on what they're basing that assumption on; it could be misinformation. You could then follow it up with useful evidence that might dispel that stereotype (e.g. "actually research has shown people aged over 50 improve workforces, making them more innovative and productive")¹⁰.

We know that ageism can present as 'banter' and jokes. 40% of the public think it's acceptable for people in society to tell jokes or use terms that poke fun at older people¹¹.

- You might want to ask the person to explain the joke or punchline for you. This can help people see the negative stereotypes that underpin the joke, supporting them to reflect on the how that might be received or make you or someone else feel.

We all love a compliment, but we may notice that, on occasion, that compliment comes with a less flattering qualifying statement such as "for your age". For example: "You look great... for your age". Or it might even be the compliment: "You don't look your age".

- You might want to respond by acknowledging the compliment as intended. Point out that the reference to age probably isn't necessary or fair - people can look good regardless of age. You might want to use humour to state the obvious - "I am X age, so I guess this is what people my age look like".



Step three

Prompting discussion about age and ageism

If you have the time, you might decide that you'd like to host a discussion or workshop in your community, workplace, or amongst friends and family to talk about ageism.

You might consider timing these to coincide with the Age Without Limits Action Day on 20 March, as part of the UN's International Day of Older Persons on 1 October, or a time that suits you and your participants best.

The next part of this guide helps you to think through how you might approach that.

Exploratory questions to help you plan:

- What aspects of ageism would I like to address with this group?
- What are my goals for the discussion? What would I like to get out of it? What change do I want to help bring about?
- Is it a one-off discussion or might we meet more than once?
- Who should be included in the group?
- What venue should we use?

Possible formats:

- A small group of friends or members of a local club meeting once or twice - a bit like a book club discussion
- A workshop with colleagues at your workplace
- A larger, public meeting where you invite panellists such as councillors and MPs, professionals from local organisations and services (don't forget to see if you're part of an **Age-friendly Community** and invite a representative along!)
- A community-wide dialogue composed of multiple meetings where you discuss different aspects of ageism and how it affects local people (perhaps using some of the suggested prompts below).

For larger groups or discussions in workplaces or community settings, consider asking other people to help you lead the discussion - these could be people representing different ages.

Consider who to invite

- A mix of all ages
- Friends and family members
- People from local clubs or services you attend, or organisations you volunteer at
- Workplace colleagues including managers
- Local councils, health and wellbeing boards, the voluntary sector in your area
- Your local Age-friendly Community
- Local stakeholders who work with or represent older people from charity, private and public settings.

A (more formal) agenda

- Welcome
- Introductions - invite people to introduce themselves (consider using name tags for groups who don't know each other)
- Purpose - describe your hope for the time
- Establish ground rules (see a possible list to get your going below)
- Prompt discussion through questions (we've given you some suggestions below, but you may already know what aspects of ageism you want to explore). It helps to periodically summarise what people have said
- Summarise the entire session before wrapping up.

Possible ground rules

Invite the group to make changes and suggestions:

- **Be here now** - set phones and electronic devices aside
- **Listen and ask questions** - take a curious stance, speak from your own experience, and ask each other questions
- **Respect confidentiality** - at the end of the conversation, take the learning with you, but leave names and specifics behind
- **Participate to the fullest of your ability** - if you hear your voice a lot, pause and listen. If you haven't heard your voice, speak up. Try to include every individual voice around the table.



Example questions that might help:

To set the context

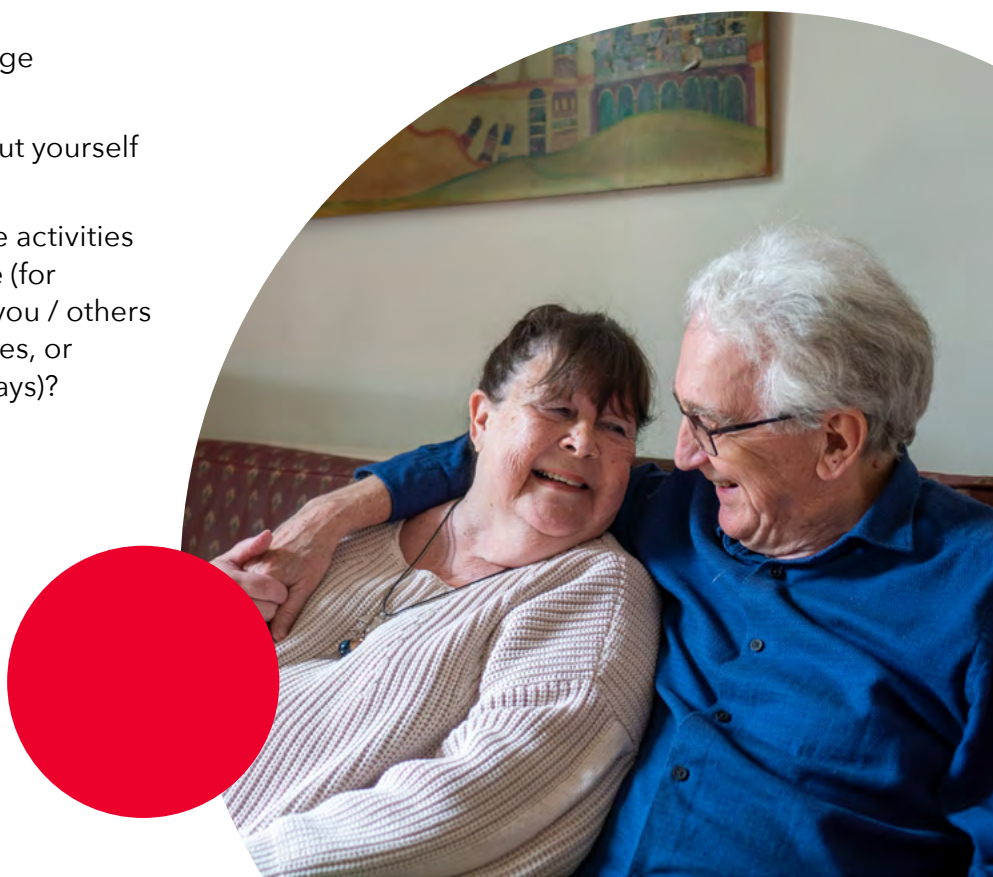
- What does the word “ageism” mean to you? Have you heard it before?
- Do you think ageism exists in this country? If so, what does it look like?
- In what ways does ageism impact your everyday life?
- Why is it important to talk about ageism?
- What is it about ageism that worries you the most?
- What things do you think need to change to help end ageism?

People to explore their own beliefs about ageing:

- What beliefs about ageing do you hold?
- How do you feel about telling people your age?
- Think of a situation in which you wanted to know a person’s age. Why? What changed when you learnt it?
- How do you think attitudes have changed since your parents were your age? What has stayed the same?
- When do you recall first noticing age differences?
- Do you think in negative ways about yourself as you get older?
- Does your age lead you to limit the activities you do or the way you live your life (for example, only taking part in what you / others consider “age appropriate” activities, or dressing in an ‘age appropriate’ ways)?

People explore their own experience:

- Has anyone told you “you look good for your age”? If so, how did this make you feel? What does that statement imply about being older?
- Have you ever witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of their age? If so, how did you respond? How did it make you feel?
- Where do you notice ageism in your life (it could be your personal life, career, healthcare, in the media, on TV, in advertising)? How does this affect the way you think about ageing?
- Have you ever experienced a situation in which your age seemed to contribute to a problem or uncomfortable situation?
- What have you heard others say about your age or other people’s age? How did it make you feel? How did it impact your perspective, including your thoughts, feelings and actions towards others and towards yourself?



Starting a conversation

To help spark a discussion, dialogue or conversation, you might also like to consider using the following examples as prompts, or find some of your own:

Beauty products that say you should defy ageing by using “anti-age” creams, “youth cream”, or “anti-wrinkle cream”. You could search for examples of such products on many online retail stores. Why not explore the societal expectation that we “fight” the normal effects of the ageing process, or that we should all aspire to be a younger version of ourselves. Instead, let’s celebrate and take pride in ageing.

Whilst **birthday cards** can be funny, full of irony and witty, **many of those aimed at older people also rely heavily on ageist stereotypes of older people.** You might want to search for examples in shops or online, or even use some you’ve received yourself. Use these to start the conversation, discussion, debate and explore the contribution such assumptions make to ageism in our society. This might include the impact of those messages being on shelves and on-line for all to see – and the influence that has on perceptions of ageing. You might want to explore how those messages make you feel, or think about yourself or others.

See **Cards We Like** from Better Birthdays for cards with messages that celebrate and appreciate ageing.

Headlines that include a person’s age when that’s not relevant to the story or use negative stereotypes as the norm.

You could search online for terms like “wrinklies”, “age defying”, “youthful granny”, “baby boomers”, “anti-ageing guru”, “too old”, “vulnerable OAP” or keep an eye out at newspaper retailers for other suitable examples.

You might view, show or share Ashton Applewhite’s **Let’s end ageism TED talk** and lead a discussion on it afterwards.

Use this **‘super helpful ageism flowchart’** which aims to disrupt our thinking and remind us all that our words make a difference to ending ageism.

Take our online quiz to explore your own attitude toward ageing. And encourage others to do so too. You might be surprised by how many myths and misconceptions we all hold about ageing and older people.

You could use this as a tool to start the conversation about ageism and how much we internalise the messages we hear and see around us without realising.

References

- 1 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Age Without Limits Campaign Wave 1 Tracker Survey by Solutions [unpublished]
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- 3 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Age Without Limits Campaign Baseline Survey by NatCen [unpublished]
- 4 This is an estimated figure based on a number of survey findings including:
Centre for Ageing Better (2021) Reframing ageing: Public perceptions of ageing, older age and demographic change. Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/resources/reframing-ageing-public-perceptions-ageing-older-age-and-demographic-change
How Ageist is Britain? Available online: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/stop/how-ageist-is-britain/>
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- 5 Centre for Ageing Better / YouGov survey (2022). Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/resources/employer-attitudes-evidence-cards
- 6 Centre for Ageing Better (2021) Shut out: How employers and recruiters are overlooking the talents of over 50s workers. Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/resources/shut-out-employers-overlooking-over-50s-workers
- 7 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Ageism, What's the harm. Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/resources/ageism-whats-harm
- 8 All the examples in this section are taken from Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Ageism, What's the harm. Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/resources/ageism-whats-harm
- 9 Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Age Without Limits Campaign Wave 1 Tracker Survey by Solutions [unpublished]
- 10 Centre for Ageing Better (2021) Older workers are the solution - not the cause - to the UK's productivity problem. Available online: ageing-better.org.uk/blogs/older-workers-are-solution-not-cause-uks-productivity-problem
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Thanks, and acknowledgements

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We are grateful for the permission to link to **Tracey Gendron's** "Super helpful ageism flowchart".



To learn more, visit our website
[AgeWithoutLimits.org](https://www.AgeWithoutLimits.org)