

Age-Friendly Language Guide



“ Mainly it is all
about mutual
respect, isn't it?

East Coast resident

Age-friendly language

The *Global Report on Ageism* (World Health Organization, 2021) found that “Globally, one in two people are ageist against older people.”¹ Ageism harms people’s health and wellbeing.²

Short of time?

- Check your understanding of ageism – see [What is ageism?](#)
- **Dos and don’ts** tips for everyone, but especially service providers/ customer service staff.
- **Top tips for messaging** – a framework for comms, policy and project staff.
- **Facts about later life** is useful information for everyone.
- If you have time, read it all because the different sections combined present a fuller understanding of ageism.

Introduction

This guide aims to help you to combat ageism towards people of any age, but especially those who are aged 50 years and over.

It affirms that every person is of equal value and deserves equal respect, no matter their age.

Who is this guide for?

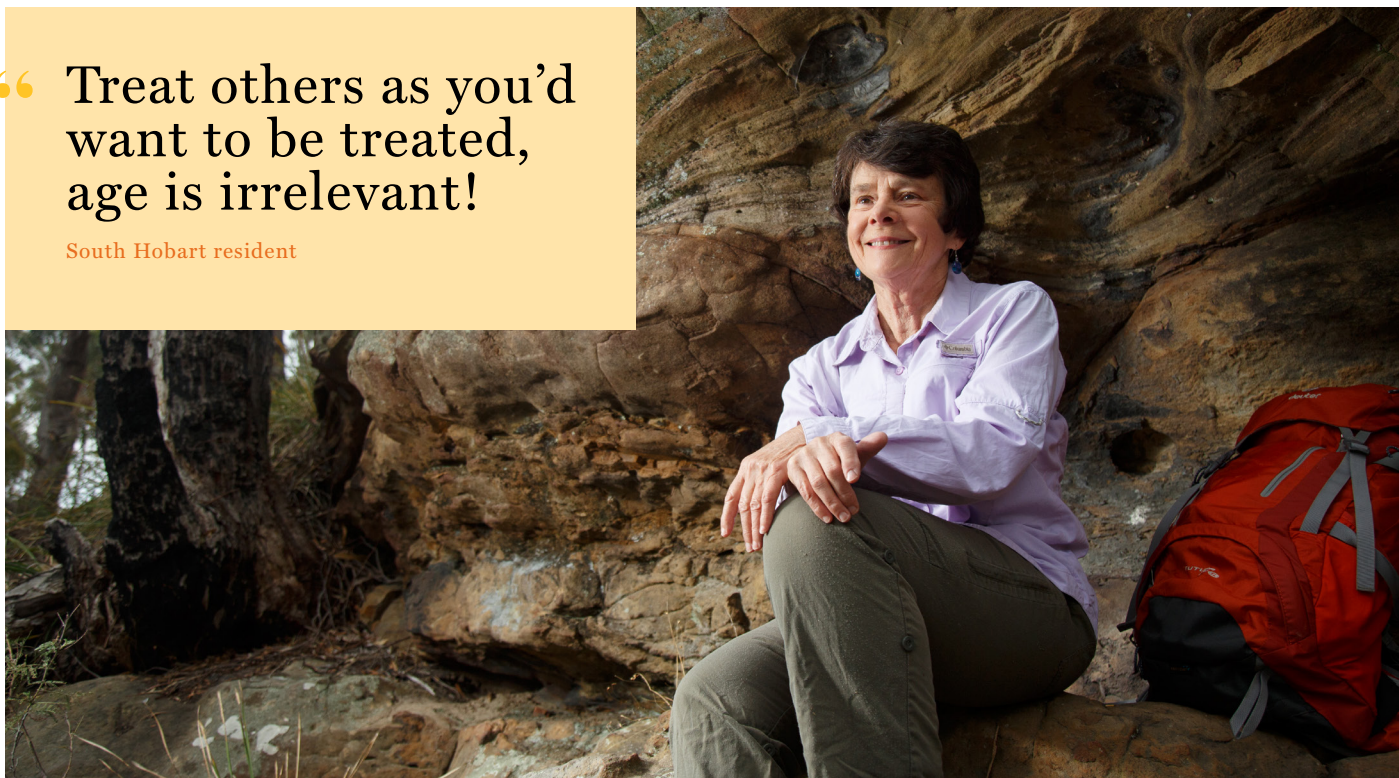
This guide is for everyone who wants to treat others with respect and check they’re not being ageist in their actions, language or imagery.

Language and imagery are key to shaping our thoughts and behaviours. Wherever you work or live, if you want a healthier more productive community, workplace, place of study, family/ social life, or want to feel better about yourself, combating ageism improves people’s lives.

If each of us feels comfortable with ourselves and accepted by others, just as we are, our quality of life, physical and mental health will be better.

“Treat others as you’d want to be treated, age is irrelevant!”

South Hobart resident



What is ageism?³

Age is one of the first things we notice about other people. However, age is often used to categorise and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage and injustice and erode solidarity across generations.

This is ageism: the stereotypes (**how we think**), prejudice (**how we feel**) and discrimination (**how we act**) towards others or ourselves based on age.

There are different aspects of ageism:

Institutional ageism – refers to laws, rules, social norms, policies, culture and practices of organisations, institutions and government that may restrict opportunities and disadvantage people based on age.

Interpersonal ageism – refers to ageism that happens in interactions between two or more people.

Personal or self-directed ageism – occurs when we accept and use age-based stereotypes and prejudices against ourselves, and in how we think about our abilities, capacities and roles.

However, it isn't ageist if people are talking to each other about the realities of getting older. It's important for us all to be accepted as we are, and not to have to pretend to be conforming to an idealised marketing image of our age group.

“ I don't get too upset about being called dear, but darling is a bit much and I really hate 'young lady'. I can be a dear on a good day, but I definitely cannot be a young lady. And a lot depends on the tone of voice.

East Coast resident

Why do we need to do something?

There's a problem with ageism. Ageism harms people's physical, mental and cognitive health, and is linked to social isolation, loneliness, depression, financial insecurity, reduced quality of life, and premature death. It also costs society billions of dollars.⁴

A 2026 study found that people's cognitive and physical function improved over time if they held positive age beliefs.⁵ A 2002 study found that people with a positive self-perception of ageing lived 7.5 years longer than people who had a less positive self-perception.⁶

Ageism is also a key factor in enabling abuse of older people. If all people are respected and listened to equally, abuse is less likely to occur. However, when people are disrespected and their rights and views are not heard or considered, injustices and abuses are more likely to occur.

With around 45% of Tasmanians aged 50 years and over in 2024, many Tasmanians can be affected by ageism.⁷ Ageism can impact on everyone.



Do's

- ✓ Check with yourself – would I be happy being spoken to or treated in the same way I'm speaking to or treating people older than myself?

“ It's about the way you speak with people – speak with them as you'd want to be spoken to.

Hobart resident

- ✓ Speak directly to older people, don't direct questions or other conversation about older people to younger members of their family, friends, or carers.
- ✓ Ask the people you interact with how they'd like to be addressed, e.g. by title and surname, or by first name. Don't assume it's okay to call someone by their first name.
- ✓ If someone is having difficulty understanding you – face the person, rephrase, speak clearly, lower your tone. If English is not their first language or the person seems to have difficulty hearing, ask the person 'what might help?' (e.g. use of translator).
- ✓ Celebrate the positives of ageing and achievements of older Tasmanians.
- ✓ Emphasise what we have in common and include everyone where possible e.g. 'we all need access to safe housing' rather than 'older people need access to safe housing'. This unites us.
- ✓ Ask yourself...do I need to refer to age at all? E.g. from 'You're never too old to learn a new instrument' to 'It's rewarding learning a new instrument.'
- ✓ Whenever you can, use 'people' and 'us' instead of 'older people' and 'them'.
- ✓ If you need to refer to a particular age group, use terms such as older people/adults, older populations, people over the age of XX, or between the ages of XX and XX.
- ✓ Assume that people with many years of paid work experience have valuable skills and knowledge to contribute to workplaces and the broader community, including by mentoring less experienced people.
- ✓ Assume that skills and knowledge gained over many years in other roles including parenting/caring/community volunteering roles are of great value in the community, including workplaces.
- ✓ Recognise the role of lived experience and storytelling, along with learning and wisdom.
- ✓ Respect older people's rights to autonomy and choice. This includes people using their assets/finances as they choose, choosing where they live, and making informed choices about their health and lifestyle.

This may change if an older person has invited a family member/friend to assist or take over managing these decisions, or they have lost decision making capacity as determined by a doctor. E.g. where someone has cognitive decline and has chosen to complete one or more legal documents in which they appoint another person to make decisions for them.
- ✓ Use 'someone living with...e.g. dementia NOT a 'dementia sufferer'
- ✓ Ensure hardcopy and online forms are clear, accessible, and easy to use. Consider that not everyone has access to a computer or the internet, or feels confident using online forms and portals. Use plain language, readable font sizes, and accessible formatting to support varying literacy levels across the Tasmanian community.
- ✓ Curiously question others who make jokes or use ageist language towards older people.

Don'ts

- ✗ Don't speak to older people as if they're children e.g. using terms like darling/love/dearie/ young lady or speak more slowly, using simple language, or speak more loudly (unless they ask you to speak up).
- ✗ Don't call older people old fogies/codgers/dears/love or boomers.
- ✗ Don't assume someone should be retiring purely because of their age. Retirement should be based on choice and capacity.
- ✗ Don't make fun of people or laugh at them because of their age, e.g. some jokes making fun of particular age groups can be very demeaning suggesting people are less capable.
- ✗ Don't call someone a 'sufferer' or 'battler' instead refer to someone 'living with dementia'.
- ✗ Don't refer to all older people as if they are the same e.g. 'older people lose their independence and need more support as they age.' This is true for some, but not everyone.
- ✗ Don't assume that being the same age makes people the same. Think about other people who are the same age as you and their differences.
- ✗ Don't use generational labels such as Gen X, Boomer or Millennial, they assume that everyone of a certain age is the same, can create division and conflict and are generally unhelpful.
- ✗ Don't compliment someone for not looking their age, or looking good for their age, it implies that looking older is bad. Just compliment someone for looking good.
- ✗ Don't make assumptions about someone else's physical/cognitive capacities based only on their age.
- ✗ Don't expect everyone to conform to prioritising younger people's needs/views over older people's needs/views. Equal weight should be given to each person's needs/views.
- ✗ Don't assume that younger and middle-aged people know more or are more capable than older people.
- ✗ Don't consider/suggest that younger people have greater need for the assets/finances of older people/generations, or more right to these.
- ✗ Don't assume all older people are technologically incompetent but acknowledge that people of all ages have varying knowledge and skills in relation to technology and ask people if you're unsure.
- ✗ Don't assume the complaint/problem an older person is telling you about is the one you've heard a million times before – listen before you respond.
- ✗ Don't presume someone's challenging behaviour is related to age, consider what's going on...and listen before responding.

“ You are responsible for your actions.

Hobart resident

“ Each person from newborn to end of life deserves, and should be, treated according to their need at the time.

Clarence resident

Top tips for messaging⁸

1 Use values (not facts) to persuade

Emphasise values of equality and the right for everyone to have self-direction (freedom to choose your own path in life), not facts/statistics, or selfish motivations e.g. that everyone will be older one day. Using stats or selfish motivations in messages doesn't change people's views/actions. People who aren't in older age groups often don't see this information as being relevant to them.

E.g. "Getting involved with ending ageism is important, because every person is of equal value, no matter our age."

"Nobody should have their opportunities in life limited by their age. Yet recruiters all too often overlook perfectly qualified older applicants."

Employment policies and practices can remove age as a criterion and focus on capability.

2 Emphasise human similarities (not differences)

Highlighting our common human needs and wants (across age groups, generations, and diverse backgrounds) unites people. It is important that messaging emphasises similarities more than differences.

One of the barriers to empathy is seeing ourselves as different to another person or group of people. Lack of empathy enables prejudice and discrimination.

Refer to 'people' and 'us' instead of 'older people' and 'them', and don't mention a particular age group if it doesn't add anything.

E.g. "We all have something to contribute. We all deserve to be seen. When you pay attention to and respect everyone, regardless of age, you create a stronger community."

E.g. "We all need access to safe and affordable housing" rather than "Older people need access to safe and affordable housing". This unites us.



3 Celebrate/acknowledge diversity within the community (not stereotypes)

Being the same age as someone does not make you the same as them. In fact, through different experiences and lives lived, we become increasingly diverse the older we are.

Despite this reality, younger and older people are stereotyped as being the same as everyone else in their age group, with older people often being portrayed as frail, vulnerable, and less active/competent than their younger counterparts.

E.g. Celebrate the positives and achievements of older community members.

Support everyone's access to opportunities based on unique individual qualities, not age, this can help us all achieve more of what we want in life.

It all adds up – other factors that could worsen the impacts of ageism.

Some people face discrimination because of their cultural or language background, disability, sexuality or other aspects of who they are. When these people also experience prejudice and discrimination based on age, this worsens the harmful impacts of ageism.

Again, equal respect for all people is key to stopping prejudice and discrimination.

4 Repeat your story (not myths)

Repetition is key to changing people's ways of thinking. That's because every time an idea or way of thinking is received in our brains, the brain's pathways to that way of thinking are strengthened. This goes for positive and negative thoughts. So, focus on repeating the message you want people to hear, not myths or stereotypes (even to point out that certain myths/stereotypes are wrong - as tempting as this might be). Ensure messages use appropriate language. Use older adults, older person, name particular age groups if necessary.

E.g. "I've been driving for nearly fifty years and have only had one accident, and that was when I was in my twenties. Older drivers have a lot of experience in driving in all sorts of conditions."

5 Focus on solutions (more than problems)

Encourage people to think, feel and act in respectful ways, by offering a range of solutions, rather than negative facts or hard to solve problems. E.g. Discourage others from making ageist comments or jokes; encourage policies and practices in services, workplaces and places of study that require everyone to be treated equally regardless of age.

Why focus on the positives? Usually, people avoid physical and mental pain or discomfort. So, reading/hearing something about widespread harmful impacts of ageism prompts negative thoughts or feelings in people and is more likely to prompt avoidance. Also, if people feel a problem is too big or they don't know what to do to fix it, they may think there's no point in trying to do anything.

6 Keep it real (not abstract)

Telling stories about, or quoting real people and events is more likely to motivate people to do something rather than focussing on legal or academic jargon, or abstract ideas. There will be some situations where this may not be safe or appropriate e.g. where someone is in an abusive relationship. However, when it's possible, safe and appropriate to use real examples these will be more persuasive.

E.g. "I often feel invisible when I'm shopping for clothes or waiting for service at cafés. Even if they come in after me, younger people are served before me."



7 Think carefully about imagery⁹

Imagery of older people used alongside stories in marketing, online or hardcopy resources often caricatures older people as sad, lonely and frail. This is not a truly representative view.

It is important to show diverse, realistic everyday examples, including showing people with grey/white hair and wrinkles, living their day to day lives at home and in the community. It's important not to limit images to stereotypes.

- Use Tasmanian settings where possible; avoid generic overseas stock.
- Show everyday contexts – not only care/illness or outstanding achievements unless this fits with the story. E.g. someone walking their dog, with family, at work, gardening, playing music, driving, shopping, cooking, travelling and socialising.
- Show diversity across culture, disability, family types/relationships, sex, socioeconomic context, body size, expression of identity.
- Avoid clichés (e.g. blurred view of a stooped person with a walking frame, disembodied wrinkly hands that don't show the whole person – at least include a person's face).
- Provide meaningful text, preferably stories about Tasmanians, and non-patronising captions.

“ Wrinkled hands and wrinkled brows express a lifetime of lived experience, and we (well me anyway) are proud of that as it identifies me, as does a photo of a swaddled newborn identifies the beginning of a new life.

Member of the Clarence Positive Ageing Network

Facts about later life

It's important to focus on values not statistics to persuade people (see Tip 1), and to repeat the message you want people to hear and not restate myths or stereotypes, even if you're debunking them (see Tip 4).

With this in mind, this section is to help give you context for when you're talking with people either face to face or in writing. It's not intended to encourage you to re-state facts/statistics unless they're pertinent to your story, and it is only an example of some of the facts about older Australians that people get wrong – there are many more.

FACT:

On average, Australians enjoy one of the highest life expectancies in the world.

2020–22: men 81 years, women 85 years.¹⁰



FACT:

There's no substitute for older workers.

The older we get, the more years of wisdom, knowledge, skills and experience we bring to our workplaces.

For those people who have experienced a range of workplaces, they often bring skills in dealing with difficult workplace situations.



FACT:

The majority of older Australians live in their own homes.

In 2016, 99% of Australians aged 65–74 years, and 76% of those aged 85 and over lived in private dwellings, not residential aged care.¹¹

FACT:

It's never okay to take away someone's choice or right to make their own decisions (even if you think it's being done out of kindness).

The exception to this is if a person has asked you to help or has lost decision making capacity as determined by a doctor.

E.g. a person has chosen to appoint an Enduring Guardian/Guardian and/or completed a Power of Attorney to help them make choices and decisions.

FACT:

All adults have the right to make choices about their own bodies, including the right to informed consent.

In the same way we would expect adults in their 20s, 30s, or 40s to have informed consent in their health decisions, with the right to refuse or accept a treatment or procedure based on risks and benefits, this is also the case with older adults.

An Advance Care Plan developed by an individual gives other people an understanding of that person's choices if they become unable to communicate or lose cognitive capacity.

**FACT:**

Strength, fitness and function can improve at any age with appropriate exercise.¹²

Various studies show that it is never too late to get fit. The human body responds to exercise, no matter what its age (and there are many health benefits).

FACT:

As we age our vocabularies increase, we have a greater understanding of words, and we continue to form new memories and learn new skills.¹³

Acknowledgements and references

There was no point in ‘reinventing the wheel’, so this guide draws on many different pre-existing, well researched language guides, and reports on ageism. Council on the Ageing (COTA) Tasmania was also lucky enough to have really insightful community, and service provider feedback on drafts of this guide.

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If you’d like more information or to see the list of references used in this Guide, please see COTA Tasmania’s website: www.cotatas.org.au.

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If you have comments that you’d like taken into consideration for future versions, please email: admin@cotatas.org.au.



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We value the wisdom of Aboriginal elders past and present and the role they play in continuing to care for Country.

Photo: Jane Henriette

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