

Every WORD (& gesture) Counts

A guide to taking ageism out of aged care

Language is powerful

Language is never neutral: the way we talk about and interact with older people matters. If you automatically think that “old equals bad” and “young equals good,” – if you have never even questioned that - those internalised beliefs will be reflected in what you say and do and potentially cause harm. Changing our language can be the first step toward changing our attitudes and beliefs. It’s a good place to start if we want to end ageism.

Why do we need a guide?

It’s easy to unknowingly use ageist language and behaviours, even when you mean to be kind and helpful. It’s called ‘benevolent ageism’, and it can be avoided if we stop and think about what we say and do. As someone who works in aged care, kindness and care are undoubtedly part of your values. But some of the language and behaviours we’ve learnt over time can be patronising and insulting and leave people feeling disempowered.

This guide contains simple tools and practical advice to help you communicate with your

clients in ways that respect people’s rights and support their independence and capacity to retain their autonomy, power and dignity.

Who is it for?

This guide has been developed for all the people who work in the aged care system:

- Support workers
- Nurses and healthcare workers
- Allied healthcare workers
- Managers and administrative staff
- Others, like Volunteers, family members, friends and carers

What is ageism?

Ageism means treating someone unfairly just because of their age. It includes **stereotyping** (how we think), **prejudice** (how we feel) and **discrimination** (how we act). Ageism is a particular problem for older people because of our society’s widespread acceptance of negative attitudes and beliefs about ageing and the value of older people.

Why do we need to end ageism?

Ageism causes people harm. When you are made to feel you have less value than other people because of your age, it can affect your physical and mental health and wellbeing and lead to a shorter lifespan. When other people make negative assumptions about your importance and your capabilities, they can use this to try and justify treating you badly. Many older people experience this. It might be being ignored, getting bad service in a shop or restaurant, or missing out on jobs and educational opportunities. It might be having your concerns dismissed or not being offered certain medical treatments. It can also lead to many forms of abuse.

The Language Challenge



Ageism is not always obvious, so here are some common terms and WHY we should try to AVOID them:

- **'the elderly'** – this term lumps all older people under a single label simply because they are all over a certain age... and what age? Are people in their 60s the same as people in their 90s, 80s or 70s? There is just as much diversity among older people as there is any other age group.

Elders

In some Indigenous cultures, countries and religions, the term 'elder' has a very particular meaning. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for example, *Elders* are highly respected for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and community service. They are recognised as a custodian of knowledge and lore. There are other factors – not just age - that determine whether someone is recognised as an Elder in their community. Because of this very specific meaning for Aboriginal and other indigenous cultures, and the general connotation of wisdom, many people are uncomfortable with adopting the term themselves.

Also, when you put 'the' in front of a group of people, it creates an 'us' and a 'them' - and that usually means a difference in value and power.

- **'the ageing population'** – this should only be used when talking about a statistical population trend. News media outlets are big culprits in talking about 'population ageing' and the economy. No generation or group of people should ever be made to feel they are a problem or burden because of their existence.
- **'seniors'** – many people prefer this to other terms like 'the elderly' because it suggests a position of status in society. But the problem remains: calling all older people 'seniors' still lumps them together as if everyone is the same – just under a different banner, that comes with its own particular image. Another complication is that, in our society, we earn seniority for having certain skills, knowledge, attributes and behaviours. Giving anyone seniority just because of their age, and regardless of their character and behaviour, is unfair in this sense.
- **'Elders'** – like 'seniors', some people love this term while others hate it, and the reasons are similar. Like 'senior', there is an implied authority and wisdom in the title of 'elder' that doesn't automatically come with age. Importantly, however, for some groups there is also a particular cultural meaning associated with the term that needs to be considered.

It's about what you SAY

Instead of saying...	Say this!	Avoid saying this
the elderly; the aged; old people; oldies; old folk; senior citizens; seniors; the ageing; people who are ageing	Older people; older Australians; older adults	geriatrics; 'geris'; ancients; codgers; pensioners; OAPs; dinosaurs
old woman/man; old lady/gentleman; elderly woman/man; elderly lady/gentleman; senior citizen; senior; retiree	Older person; older adult; older Australian OR: Describe who they are in relationship to you eg: client; client's sister/brother/husband/wife/grandmother/grandfather/older relative; neighbour; etc	'senior cit'; old codger; old coote;
Dear, sweetheart, honey, sweetie, darling (and other overly-familiar terms);	Ask the person how they would like to be addressed. Check which they prefer – their first name or a more formal address (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Dr)	old dear; old thing; granny/grandpa (very disrespectful when used in a generalising manner. Such terms should only be used when you have a close relationship with the person and/or their permission)
person suffering from dementia; victim of dementia; dementing; demented; senile; becoming senile; senile dementia	Person with dementia Person living with dementia/ Alzheimer's disease; Has a diagnosis of dementia/ Alzheimer's disease; Has a cognitive impairment;	demented old man/woman dementing; senile; vacant; losing their marbles; dotty; off with the pixies; in la-la land
nursing home; old people's home; old age home; old folks' home	Aged care home; residential aged care facility (technically correct but not well liked); care home	God's waiting room

It's also about what you DO

Do:

- Speak to clients as adults
- Listen attentively and respect the client's right to make choices and decisions
- Have respectful body language. Maintain eye contact for important conversations and have equal eye level if possible
- Always ask if it is OK before getting started on tasks and check the person's personal preferences. - if there is anything they want you to do or not do?
- Focus on a client's future and the decisions they can make to affect their future.

Don't:

- Speak to clients in a sing-song voice you might use to speak to a child, or overly simplify your language and tone
- Assume you know what is better for the client
- Stand to have discussions if the client is sitting or lying down – having someone towering over you can be intimidating
- Jokingly refer to an older person as a young lady or young buck or telling someone 'they look good for their age'/ 'young at heart'. This can reinforce there is something wrong with a person's age and youth is unquestioningly better.

The future is respect

Times are changing – there is a groundswell of support for changing unacceptable behaviours and treatments in aged care settings and in society generally. The Aged Care Royal Commission’s recommendation for a new human rights based Aged Care Act, that puts older people at the centre, will mean big changes for aged care. The United Nations, with the support of the 194 Member States of the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also developed a global campaign to combat ageism. We can play our part in this new future when we can:

- Recognise the negative attitudes and beliefs we might have held for a long time about ageing and older people
- See how these ageist attitudes and beliefs are reflected in the things we say and do - and how we say and do them
- Understand the harm that is caused to individuals, communities and society generally by ageism
- Use this guide to make changes to the way we communicate and behave.

We can all play our part in creating a respectful, safe, empowering experience for people who use the aged care system – for clients, family members, friends and ourselves. This is where it starts. It’s up to us.



Aged care without ageism

If we can change ageism in aged care, there will be benefits for everyone.

Aged care clients will feel confident to speak up, have greater control over their lives and feel more empowered to live their best life.

Those who work with clients will see the whole person first, not the tasks that need to be done. They will have more meaningful and rewarding relationships with clients. They will feel empowered and proud of their work.



About this guide

This resource has been developed in partnership with the Brisbane North PHN, the healthy@home consortium, and the EveryAGE Counts campaign.

EveryAGE Counts is a national coalition of organisations and a grassroots campaign of individuals dedicated to highlighting the social, economic and civic impacts of ageism experienced by older people, and building an Australia that no longer tolerates it.

www.everyagecounts.org.au

This project is supported by the Australian Government Department of Health. Although funding for this Language Guide has been provided by the Australian Government, the material contained herein does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Australian Government.



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