

Challenging Ageism – Top Tips

It is important to encourage people to talk more about ageism and to change our attitudes towards older people and ageing.

Be Positive – Be Kind

Be kind about the ways we ask people to reconsider something. Many people have taken on negative ideas about older people without even realising it. The best way to help people to change the way they see something is to be positive and not to make people feel that they are being attacked. It may be an older person who has taken on negative ideas about themselves and so encouraging them to see things differently in a supportive way is important.

Be calm and respectful in the way you challenge something you think is ageist. Say why you think it is ageist and make some suggestions about how it could be changed.

Look out for ‘Everyday Ageism’

Everyday Ageism refers to commonly used sayings and behaviours. Negative comments about older people are part of our everyday language and can be seen as ‘harmless banter’ which can make it hard to tackle. Birthday cards show us how many negative beliefs about ageing and older people are presented as jokes, like this example:

“40 years old. It’s probably time to start lying about your age”

Using humour can be a good way to get people to talk more about ageism, like in this example from Ashton Applewhite:

“I stopped blaming my sore knee on being 64. My other knee doesn’t hurt, and it’s just as old.”

Challenging assumptions

Generalising and making assumptions based on someone's age is very common. Assuming that all younger people are great at using their mobile phones and the internet, and that all older people struggle with this, is a good example. Of course, some young people have difficulties with this, and many older people are very skilled with these technologies.

Forgetting is often associated with older people, but again we should be careful about the assumptions we make about this as ageing does not necessarily cause memory difficulties. Some health conditions more commonly faced by older people, like dementia, can cause memory problems but not all older people will develop this condition, in fact only 7.1% of all people over the age of 65 have dementia.*

Someone may say:

“Oops, I forgot to get the milk... I had a senior moment”

A good answer may be:

“We can all forget things whatever our age, I think we should avoid the phrase ‘senior moment’ because it sounds negative and it does suggest that it is only older people who are forgetful.”

Never too old to...

The phrase ‘Too old to...’ (dance, drive, go to the gym, or wear a particular outfit) can limit people's expectations about trying new things and being adventurous.

Avoid patronising older people

Sometimes, when older people say or do everyday things (like swearing, referring to sex, working, going to the gym), they can be seen as funny, remarkable or surprising, but this can be very patronising.

Challenge name calling

Phrases like 'old fart', 'grumpy old man' and 'old hag' are common and even when used in a jokey way are harmful and should be challenged.

Old does not mean unattractive

"You look good for your age"

There is a sting in the tail of a comment like this; it could be seen as a compliment, but underneath this statement is a belief that older people are not attractive.

"Thank you for the compliment, but when you say 'for my age' it sounds like you are saying that older people generally aren't attractive – I think we are!"

Bust some myths

There are a lot of stories in the media about the increasing number of older people in our society and that people are living longer. Often, the way this is presented suggests that this is going to be a problem, that older people are a 'burden' and that this will have negative economic effects. However, these ideas have been questioned, and if you want to challenge these beliefs, use the information in these reports to encourage people to see older people as assets rather than burdens.

The Centre for Ageing Better published The State of Ageing which has a lot of myth busting information (2023/24 report, <https://ageing-better.org.uk/the-state-of-ageing-2023-4>

The Ready for Ageing Alliance published a report which looks at The Myth of the Baby Boomer

EngAgeNet published A New Narrative on Ageing which explores a more positive approach to our ageing society

That Age Old Question published by the Royal Society for Public Health explores how ageism affects our health and wellbeing

Our downloadable document Ageism and Ageing in the UK also has useful information to help you challenge these myths

Being realistic

Being real about some of the hard things some older people face is important too; this might include things like health problems or disabilities. Making things more accessible and providing good services to support people is the way forward. We can still be positive about being older because we know that life is a 'mixed bag' and actually this is the case for all of us, whatever age we are.

Learn more about ageism

To see more examples of ageism and learn more about how to challenge these beliefs take a look at these websites:

<https://www.sunlife.co.uk/life-cover/over-50-life-insurance/over-50-data-centre/ageism/>

<https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/>

<https://ageing-equal.org/learn-about-ageism/>

<https://oldschool.info/>

For more information, contact:

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* Source: Prince, M et al (2014) Dementia UK: Update Second Edition report produced by King's College London and the London School of Economics for the Alzheimer's Society. Taken from: <https://www.dementiastatistics.org/statistics/prevalence-by-age-in-the-uk/> on 24/9/19