

Strategies for combatting ageism through age-positive language

Introduction

The National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) advocates for the use of age-positive language and imagery in all research that involves older people. [Ageism](#) refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age.¹ Ninety percent of Australians believe that ageism exists in Australia, and 83% believe that ageism is a problem.² Most Australians (63%) report experiencing ageism within the past five years.²

Like any form of prejudice and discrimination, ageism strongly impacts wellbeing. An analysis of the consequences of ageism on older peoples' health, encompassing data from 45 countries and over 7 million participants, reported that ageism led to significantly worse health outcomes in 95.5% of the 422 studies examined.³ The health consequences of ageism are far-reaching, and can include:

- Physical and mental illness
- Cognitive impairment
- Reduced longevity
- Poor quality of life and wellbeing
- Risky health behaviours
- Denied access to healthcare and treatments
- Lack of work opportunities
- Devalued lives of older people
- Exclusion from health research

Combatting ageism is one of NARI's strategic objectives. This objective aligns with the World Health Organisation's Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health (2017).⁴ [Anyone who works with or for older people has a role to play in achieving this important goal.](#) Simple actions are among the strongest determinants of ageism, including the ways in which we portray older people.⁵

Suggested Strategies

NARI promotes the following strategies for an age-positive approach in research about older people (Table 1).

Table 1. Suggested strategies for combatting ageism through age-positive language

Strategy	Points for Reflection	Poor Example	Better Example
Use neutral terms	Do the terms I use to describe a person or group of people challenge or perpetuate stereotypes about older people?	- Old person - The elderly - Seniors	- Older person - Older people
	Could I be more specific and/or objective?	- Older participants - A person who is physically challenged - Institutionalised elderly	- Participants aged 65-85 - A person with a disability - People living in residential aged care
Use strengths-based language	Does my language place the person or the 'problem' first?	Dementia sufferer	Person with dementia OR person living with dementia OR person with a diagnosis of dementia
	How can I move away from focusing on deficits or limitations?	Mary described being a diabetes sufferer	Mary described how she manages the challenges of living with diabetes
	Am I using opportunities to highlight the strengths of older people?	Participants aged 65 and over were slow to adapt to the iPad-based technology	Participants aged 65 and over demonstrated their adaptability when mastering technology that was new to them
Avoid generalisations and assumptions	How can I represent the heterogeneity of older people?	Older people rely on others to help them with day-to-day activities	Some older people access support for day-to-day activities
	Have I included the voices and preferences of older people?	We know that older people want to live a quiet life	When asked, older people in Melbourne told us that they want more opportunities to be active in the community
Use age-positive imagery	Do the images I use to represent a person or group of people challenge or perpetuate stereotypes about older people?	- Images that portray older people as 'onlookers' - Images that only portray older people as frail and/or care-dependent	- Images that portray older people as active participants in society and in meaningful activities - Images that are reflective of the diversity in older peoples' physical fitness and independence

More Information

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Additional Resources

- Centre for Ageing Better Age-Positive Image Library
<https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com>
- World Health Organisation Age-Friendly World
<https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/>
- Dementia Australia Dementia Language Guidelines
<https://tinyurl.com/2d6wubr4>
- EveryAGE Counts
<https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/>
- Ageing Equal
<https://ageing-equal.org/>

References

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3. Chang ES, Kanno S, Levy S, Wang SY, Lee JE, Levy BR. Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. PloS one. 2020 Jan 15;15(1):e0220857.
4. Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health. World Health Organisation. 2017. Available from: <https://www.who.int/ageing/WHO-GSAP-2017.pdf>
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