A Guide for Addressing Ageism in the Workplace

Southern Melbourne
Elder Abuse Prevention Network
hosted by Better Place Australia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Guide is an initiative of the Framing Age Community of Practice, established for graduates of the Framing Age Masterclass by the Elder Abuse Prevention Networks.

The principles of the **Framing Age Message Guide** inform the Guide.

We acknowledge the advice of Mark Chenery, Common Cause Australia and the contributions of the working group: Dr Kathleen Brasher, John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research, La Trobe Rural Health School; Graeme Westaway and Vanessa Hill, Better Place Australia; Meg Humphrey, Merri Health; Michelle Lord, Bayside City Council; Cathy Bushell, City of Ballarat, and Jo French, Women's Health in the South East.

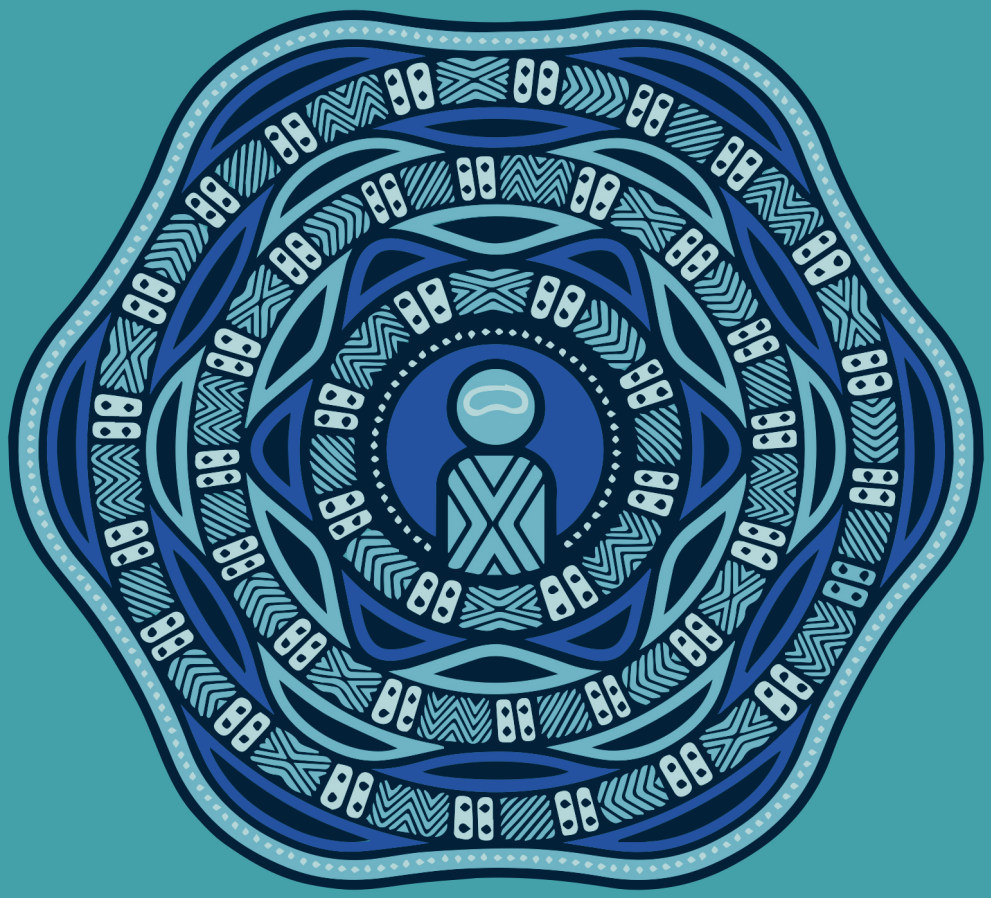
This resource has been made possible with the support and funding of the Victorian Government.

Design: Joy Cho at Better Place Australia. Published October 2024.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, and recognise their continuing connection to Country, waters and community.

We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, to Elders both past and present, and to their children and young people who are the future caretakers of this great land.



INTRODUCTION

We all deserve to be part of a society that respects, values and celebrates everyone at every age. Whilst our communities and workplaces recognise the injustices of racism and sexism, too often, ageism flies under the radar.

Ageism occurs when our actions, attitudes, systems and policies create inequitable opportunities and outcomes based on age. In a workplace context, ageism comes in many forms - from making jokes about being old and generalisations about age groups to not employing someone because of their age. [1]

Ageism can be subtle. It is stubbornly common in the workplace, in part because too many people fail to recognise what it looks like and the negative impact it can have on people.

Ageism can impact people in many ways, such as: [2]

- Poor physical and mental health
- Negative self-image
- Reduced quality of life
- Limited social connections
- Financial hardship and insecurity
- Reduced lifespan
- Greater risk of violence and abuse.

The more we speak up when we hear ageist comments or jokes, the more our co-workers will recognise it as a problem.

This conversation guide has been developed to equip you with a framework and some potential responses when you encounter ageism in the workplace.

ACTIVE BYSTANDING

A bystander is a person who witnesses or is told about ageist behaviour but is not directly involved. In contrast, an active bystander acts to address or correct the ageist behaviour in some way. Sometimes, we don't know how to respond even though we recognise we feel uncomfortable. This can be a difficult task and one that takes practice.

The good news is that active bystanders play a powerful role in making people affected by ageism and discrimination feel safer and more valued and in de-normalising discriminatory behaviours.

When we are an active bystander, we can: [2]

- Send a message to people being ageist that we're not ok with those attitudes or behaviours
- Encourage people being disrespectful or discriminatory to consider their behaviour and change their ways
- Show older people that we support them and their rights.
- Give others the confidence to be active bystanders as well
- Make ageism unpopular in our community
- Create a culture in which ageism is less likely to occur and ageing is celebrated.

ACTIVE BYSTANDING

Many organisations have developed tools to support people in being active bystanders. While these resources have been developed in response to sexism or racism, they are equally applicable to actions seeking to address ageism.

Consider the following questions: [3]

- Do I think the behaviour I'm seeing or hearing reinforces ageist stereotypes?
- What do my workplace's policies and procedures say about behaviour like this?
- Can I encourage more inclusive viewpoints?
- How can I model more positive age-based attitudes or behaviours?
- Do I feel safe to step in? Will management support me if I do? Is this something I'm expected to challenge myself – or am I better off seeking assistance? Is there any risk of escalation here?
- Is acting going to prove helpful? If I were on the receiving end, would I want somebody to step in for me? Will it make a positive difference to a person's behaviour or to the workplace culture?

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Colleagues can be active bystanders in the workplace in a range of ways. These include delegating, checking in, diffusing, calling out and reporting.[4] The order is not hierarchical. Your actions will depend on the context of the behaviour, workplace culture, and confidence in standing up to ageist behaviour.

You may experience emotions about what you saw or heard. You may need to work through these feelings about the situation before addressing the issue to ensure that you act in the most productive way possible. This can involve stepping out of a room, taking a deep breath, and thinking for a moment.

The sections below describe ways of acting against ageism in the workplace while keeping things positive and respectful. They are based on the tips and principles in the Framing Age Message Guide.

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Delegate

Delegation is asking a third party for help. In the workplace, asking your manager or HR personnel to provide support or advice can offset any power dynamic of the situation, provide you and your colleagues with a safe space, and help you gain some confidence.

Check-in

If there is a direct target to an ageist comment and it is not possible or appropriate to act, or you don't feel confident in the moment, you can approach the person targeted with support and understanding.

Consider asking questions such as:

What do you need right now?
Is there something I can do to make things easier?
How can I support you with this situation?
What would you like me to do with this information?
Where would you feel safest having a conversation about what happened to you?
Do I have your consent to share this with another employee who can help?

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Diffuse

If someone makes an inappropriate comment during a professional conversation, you can diffuse the conversation or redirect the topic. This allows you to stay on task and, if appropriate, approach the individual later to have a genuine conversation about the comment.

When diffusing a situation, your tone is everything: be light-hearted and firm.

A colleague might ask, *how old are you?* You might say:

> ***That's not relevant to our work.***
> ***I'd like to move on.***

In a meeting, your colleague leans over to you and quietly says, *'They shouldn't be wearing that at their age'* about your team leader.

You might say,

> ***I don't think people lose the right to choose their clothes at a certain age. Let's focus on the meeting.***

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Calling in[5]

This approach is often used when people want to inform someone, with compassion, that what they've said or done is ageist, harmful and not okay. You choose to respond with curiosity instead of shaming. Use this approach if you know someone isn't intentionally causing harm and/or may not know how their statement or behaviour is harmful.

There is a conversation in the staff room about using TikTok. Your colleague says, *'I'm too old to do that.'*

You might approach them privately and ask:

> ***I'm curious. What do you think your age has to do with using social media?***
> ***What information are you basing that on?***
> ***Why do you say that?***

During a meeting, a colleague forgets the name of a recent training she attended. Another colleague remarks, *'You're having a Senior's moment!'*

You might diffuse the situation by saying, ***'We all forget things.'*** And later follow up with them by asking,

> ***Can you say more about what you mean by 'a senior's moment'?***
> ***I don't think you meant to stereotype anyone because of their age when you said that. Can you help me understand your thinking?***

In many cases, gently questioning the person's action or language enables them to either express a clearly stereotypical attitude or (more likely) realise that the ageist sentiment is not in line with their values. Asking why they think they would say that, or to explain what they mean, or why they made that joke, can invite people to reconsider what they have said.

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Calling out

Calling out is a direct response to a statement, action, or behaviour. You may respond by stopping or pausing the conversation or behaviour as it is happening. This approach is often used if you know that someone is intentionally being ageist, if someone does so consistently in the workplace, and/or is aware of how their statement is a problem but chooses not to adjust or change.

Calling out publicly identifies the ageism, drawing the attention of others to the problem.

During a meeting to plan an engagement session with older adults about a particular issue, your colleague says, 'Shouldn't this be about everyone, not just about older people?'

You might say,

> ***Right now, we are talking about older people and issues that relate to older people.***
> ***Different needs exist at all stages of life, and it is important to consider the specific needs of each cohort.***
> ***Older adults are an important group in our community, and their needs may differ.***

There is a discussion in the lunchroom about older drivers. One of your colleagues suggests that all people over 70 should have their driver's licence revoked.

You might say,

> ***That comment is offensive.***
> ***Everyone's experience of ageing is different – age is just a number.***

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

You attend a webinar about older people's right to intimacy. One of the participants says, *'They shouldn't be doing that at their age.'*

You might say,

> ***Shouldn't we all be able to choose for ourselves what we do no matter our age?***

Your colleague showed the team photos from his recent holiday to New Zealand, where he went whitewater rafting and bungee jumping. Later, another colleague said, *'He shouldn't be doing that at his age.'*

You might say,

> ***It's great that you're thinking about how to keep everyone safe, but I don't think we should judge people's abilities based on age alone.***
> ***I see your point, but it's more about ability than age, isn't it?***

Describing how you reacted to the comment and how it made you feel can provide another perspective and help them think critically about what is appropriate to say or do in the workplace.

> ***That comment is a negative stereotype of growing old or older people and not appropriate,***
> rather than saying, *'You're ageist.'*

You might reference the values of your workplace. For example,

> ***In our workplace, we don't talk about people that way. That's not our culture here. Those aren't our values.***

You might explicitly name some of the values.

> ***[name your organisation] values equity and celebrates diversity. When you said that, I felt you were putting down Jay based on their age. Here, we use differences to encourage our colleagues.***

WHAT DO I SAY OR DO?

Report

Document and report the behaviour. Documentation involves recording or taking notes of the incident. If there was a person targeted, always ask the person what they want to do with your recording or notes. Never post it online or use it without their permission.

For more information on this resource, contact enquiries@eapn.org.au.

REFERENCES

1. Australian Human Rights Commission, Age Discrimination. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/employers/age-discrimination

2. SA Health, Bystander Action for Ageing Well. https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au

3. VicHealth and Enmasse, Bystander Action: What to say and do. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton. https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/EF_Bystander-Action.pdf

4. VicHealth and The Behavioural Insights Team (2019). Take Action: Empowering bystanders to act on sexist and sexually harassing behaviour. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Bystander_Final-ReportPhase2Trials.pdf

5. Haslam, R.E. (2019). Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs. Calling In. Seed the Way LLC. http://www.seedtheway.com/uploads/8/8/0/0/8800499/calling_in_calling_out__3_.pdf

Resources on Ageism

In addition to the References above, the following resources may be helpful:

Common Cause Australia (2021). The Framing Age Message Guide https://eapn.org.au/framing-age-message-guide/

Australian Human Rights Commission (2023). Changing perspectives: testing an ageism intervention https://humanrights.gov.au/changingperspectives

Southern Melbourne Elder Abuse Prevention Network https://eapn.org.au/

Every Age Counts https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/

Celebrate Ageing https://www.celebrateageing.com/our-work.html

Decade of Healthy Ageing https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/topics-initiatives/decade-action-areas/combatting-ageism

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