

“Who me, ageist?”

**How to start a
consciousness-raising
group**

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Contents

- 3** **What is ageism?**
- 4** **What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?**
- 6** **Suggested ground rules**
- 8** **A few other pointers**
- 9** **Sample discussion-starters**
- 11** **Towards a radical age movement**
- 12** **Anti-ageism resources**

What is ageism?

Ageism is stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of a person's age. Influenced by social movements that were challenging racism and sexism, Dr. Robert Butler coined the word "ageism" in 1968. It is the last socially sanctioned prejudice.

We experience ageism any time someone assumes that we're "too old" for something—a task, a haircut, a relationship—instead of finding out who we are and what we're capable of. Or "too young;" ageism cuts both ways, although in a youth-oriented society elders bear the brunt of it.

Like racism and sexism, discrimination on the basis of age serves a social and economic purpose: to legitimize and sustain inequalities between groups. It's not about how we look. It's about how people in power assign meaning to how we look.

Stereotyping—the assumption that all members of a group are the same—underlies ageism (as it does all "isms"). Stereotyping is always a mistake, but especially when it comes to age, because the older we get, the more different from one another we become.

No one is born prejudiced, but attitudes about age—as well as race and gender—start to form in early childhood. Over a lifetime they harden into a set of truths: "just the way it is." Unless we challenge ageist stereotypes—*Old people are incompetent. Wrinkles are ugly. It's sad to be old*—we feel shame and embarrassment instead of taking pride in the accomplishment of aging. That's internalized ageism.

A key part of ageism is denial: our reluctance, even in midlife, to admit that we are aging. Its hallmark is the irrational insistence that older people are "other," not us—not even future us. This denial blinds us to ageism in ourselves, and perpetuates it in a thousand ways. When we see people as "other"—other color, other nationality, other religion—their welfare seems less of a human right. That's one reason five out of six incidents of elder abuse go unreported. Another is internalized ageism: many older people don't feel they deserve help and are ashamed to ask for it. By blinding us to the benefits of aging and heightening our fears, ageism makes growing older in America far harder than it has to be. It damages our sense of self, segregates us, diminishes our prospects, and actually shortens lives.

Unless we confront the ageism in and around us, we lay the foundation for our own irrelevance and marginalization. The critical starting point is to acknowledge our own prejudices, because change requires awareness. That's where consciousness-raising comes in.

What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?

Consciousness-raising (CR) is a tool that uses the power of personal experiences to unpack unconscious prejudices and to call for social change.

Participants tell and compare their stories in order to understand concretely how they are oppressed and who's doing the oppressing. This shows them that "personal problems"—such as not being able to get a job, being belittled, or feeling sidelined—are actually widely shared political problems. Because ageism is so pervasive and unchallenged, its effects can be difficult to pinpoint. CR groups allow participants to express feelings they may have dismissed as unimportant, and to recognize that feelings of inadequacy are actually a result of being discriminated against. By sharing truths, vulnerabilities, and experiences, participants become more aware of how they feel and what forces shape those feelings.

Consciousness-raising can be used to:

- Explore our own internalized biases about age and aging: the myths and stereotypes that each of us has internalized over a lifetime, often unconsciously. CR provides a safe space for this essential first step.
- Discover how myths and stereotypes about aging, both positive and negative, shape our lives, and what other opportunities and choices are available to us.
- Break down barriers and connect in ways that celebrate our shared humanity and the cycles of life. People often feel competitive with people much younger or older than they are, or isolated from them.
- Get to the root of the social and economic forces behind ageism: who benefits and who pays.
- Acknowledge that we can't dismantle ageist thinking and behavior on our own, because ending discrimination requires collective action. Part of the problem is thinking, "This is only my problem."
- Swap shame and denial of aging for acceptance and age pride.
- Take action, using conclusions the group has arrived at as the basis for our theory and strategy.

Confronting ageism isn't just a matter of personal well-being. It's a social justice and human rights issue.

For some people, consciousness-raising will only create internal change. This is completely valid.

Ideally, the process will radicalize others to participate in whatever actions are necessary to end discrimination on the basis of age. Historically, when prejudice and discrimination go

What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?

unchallenged, they stop being identified as oppression and become “normal” or “natural.” Consciousness-raising exposes these ways of thinking as social constructs that we can change.

Consciousness-raising is the first step in a process of social change that involves conversation, collaboration, activism, art, advocacy, and eventually legislation. When one group struggles for social equality, it helps other disempowered groups. The civil rights movement did more than work towards equal rights for people of color in the United States. It also spread the idea that discrimination based on anything other than the content of a person’s character is unethical and unacceptable, and that no one should accept second-class citizenship. The women’s movement not only improved women’s lives, it paved the way for more progressive views of the workplace, gender, and family.

Now it’s time to mobilize against discrimination on the basis of age.

Suggested ground rules

- 1. Show up.**
No group will work unless its members take it seriously and commit to attending.
- 2. Arrive on time.**
- 3. Listen actively.**
Pay close attention to the person who is speaking—not only to the words they're using but to the message they're trying to convey. Defer judgment. Just listen carefully.
- 4. No cross-talking.**
Wait for the person who is speaking to finish what he or she has to say. Don't interrupt except to ask a specific informational question or to clarify a point. Take notes if you want to remember something you'd like to say when it's your turn. Everyone will get a chance to speak.
- 5. What happens in the room stays in the room.**
Consciousness raising discussions are confidential.
- 6. It is vitally important that each person speaks and that no one dominates the discussion.**
One way to ensure this is to go around in a circle, which also helps the discussion stay on topic. Another is to supply each member with several poker chips, which get tossed in the middle each time they talk.
- 7. Speak personally and specifically from your own experiences.**
Try not to generalize about others or to talk in abstractions. Use "I" instead of "they," and "we" instead of "you."
- 8. Don't challenge someone else's experience.**
What another person says is true for him or her. Instead of invalidating a story that seems off base, share your own story. Watch for body language and nonverbal responses, which can be as disrespectful as words.
- 9. Don't be afraid to disagree—respectfully.**
The goal is not to agree, but to gain a deeper understanding. It's important to communicate honestly and speak up if we perceive things differently. But assert your opinions respectfully and refrain from personal attacks. Focus on ideas.

Suggested ground rules

10. Participate to the fullest of your ability.

Progress and community depend on the inclusion of every individual voice. The more you put into the experience, the more you'll get out of it.

11. Try not to give advice.

The purpose of consciousness-raising is not to help participants solve day-to-day problems, but to help us gain strength through the knowledge that other people share many of our feelings and experiences.

12. Sum up.

After everyone has related their personal experience with the topic, the group works to find common threads and see what conclusions can be drawn. This is when we begin to discover the nature of the social forces that oppress us all.

13. These are suggested guidelines, not inflexible rules.

Feel free to make—and break—your own. It's very important, however, for members not to cross-talk, even if it feels formal or artificial at first and even if people are interrupting out of enthusiasm. That's what enables people to go deeply into their experience, and to listen deeply. Try taking two breaths after each person has finished speaking instead of jumping in to fill the void.

A few other pointers

The most effective groups will have members of all ages, sexes, and sexual orientations, and who are ethnically and culturally diverse.

At the first meeting each person can give a little personal background, talk about why they're here, and say what they hope to get out of the discussion. A good icebreaker in the very beginning is to discuss something everyone has read.

Eight to twelve people is a good size for a group if everyone is to get a chance to speak. Groups usually meet at least once a month, for about three hours. Another option is shorter but more frequent meetings; the group can decide. Skipping meetings or perennial lateness isn't conducive to intimacy and growth. By the same token, it's not a good idea to add people after, say, the third or fourth meeting.

Groups usually meet in a different person's home each time. Food and drink is always a good idea. The group should have privacy, with no partners or housemates around.

On a rotating basis, a volunteer facilitator can keep the group on track and ensure that there will be time for a "summing up" at the end of the meeting, as well as for administrivia (like choosing a discussion topic and location for next meeting).

The group may want to periodically devote an entire meeting to evaluating goals and airing any dissatisfactions. If problems arise, it's often because the group is careless about using the consciousness raising technique. Issues can often be eliminated simply by paying particular attention to the discussion format, for the next few meetings at least.

Many groups begin with a "check-in" so each person can have a chance to share. A member may ask the group focus on a personal issue, or someone else may suggest it. Try to identify the main emotion involved (e.g., loneliness, anger, dependency) and use this as the topic for the meeting.

Once your group has begun, you'll find that other friends want to join. Some will want to come as guests, but consciousness-raising really depends on participation. Keep a list of people who express interest. After your group has been meeting for a while, you'll have enough experience for a few of you to help a new group get started. Attend the first meeting or two, to make sure the new group gets off on the right track. Before you know it, you'll have several groups in your area, and will begin to feel that you really belong to a movement.

After a while, your group might want to begin study or action projects. For example, during the Women's Movement of the 1970s, a group in California joined the picket line of women factory workers who were protesting discriminatory hiring practices, another group in Washington, D.C. held hearings about the Pill, and several groups began newspapers and magazines.

Sample discussion-starters

Refer to this list when you need to, use questions you like, and ignore those you don't. You might spend an entire meeting on a single aspect of a single topic. You might proceed by "going around" to see what's on people's minds, or discuss a current event. At the end of the meeting, some groups choose a topic for the next one, so people have time to think about it.

- In your own mind, what age are you? What does that mean to you?
- What makes you see someone else as old or young?
- What does it mean when someone says, "I don't feel old."
- Do you think you should tell people your age?
- Does age affect the way you think and feel about your body?
 - Do you think you look younger/older than your peers?
 - How do you feel about trying to look younger?
- Have you personally experienced ageism?
- How is discrimination on the basis of age different from other kinds of discrimination?
- What do you like about being your age?
 - What do you dislike?
- What's new in your life that you attribute to age?
 - Any changes in attitude, views, interests?
 - Do people treat you differently? How so?
- What, if anything, are you looking forward to in the next decade? How about the decade(s) after that?
- How do you think aging differs for men and for women?
- How do you feel when someone says "You look great for your age!"
- What do you fear about growing older?
- What's surprising about getting older?
- How do you feel about people offering you a seat on the bus? When and how should people offer assistance?

Sample discussion-starters

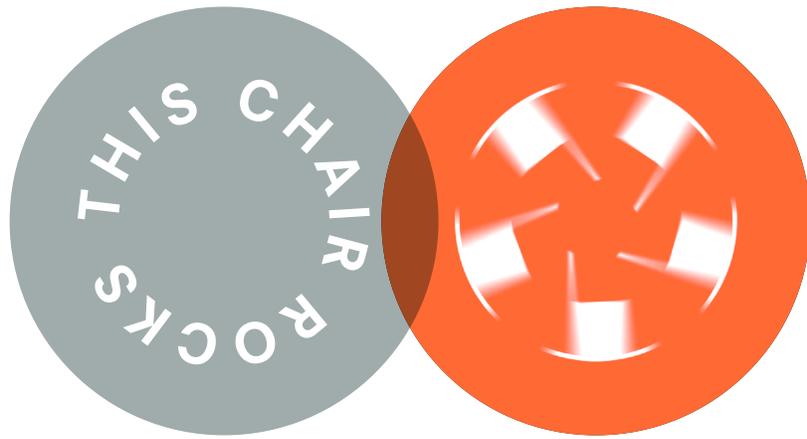
- What do you think about relationships with a big age difference?
- Do you think that younger people should have priority for organ transplants?
- How would you feel about using a cane? A walker? A wheelchair?
- Do you think there are certain clothes that older people shouldn't wear?
- Should older people in physically demanding jobs, like firemen and doctors, have mandatory physical exams? What about older drivers?
- How do you relate to people significantly older or younger than you?
- Do you have friends of all ages or mostly peers? What's the basis for your cross-generational friendships?
- Has getting older changed the way you feel about sex?
- What do you think of the term "ageless?" How about "anti-aging"?
- Do you see value in living to be very, very old?
- How do you envision the last third of life: decline, continuum, growth?
- How would an age-blind society look and feel different?
 - What would you miss, and why? What would be harder, and easier?
- What do you think of the phrase "age pride?"

Towards a radical age movement

We need new social visions that will inspire and support people to grow and participate actively throughout their entire lives. No age-segregation or pitting generation against generation—we want a society that works for us all. We can't leave it to "experts" to tell us how to age "successfully," nor to an aging-industrial complex that sees older adults as a dependent group of consumers.

It's up to us. It's time for a grassroots nationwide effort that challenges traditional notions of aging and introduces new ideas for building co-creative and interdependent communities. Working together we can:

- Challenge ageism – in ourselves, social practices, policies, and institutions
- Create new language and models that embrace the full life journey;
- Create new paradigms in society so that adults can participate fully consistent with their capabilities and ambitions at all stages of life;
- Celebrate the contributions of older adults toward innovating, changing and repairing the world;
- Create a more compassionate and interdependent society that supports the wellbeing of people of all ages;
- Inspire and help develop cross-generational communities where people of all ages enjoy the gifts and capacities they have to offer;
- Bring dying and death out of the closet.



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