

Tackling ageism through consciousness-raising

This guide is for older people who are interested in starting a consciousness-raising group to share their experiences of ageism and discuss how they might take action on how to improve their lives.

What is ageism?

The World Health Organization defines ageism as: *'Stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age; ageism can take many forms, including prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices, or institutional policies and practices that perpetuate stereotypical beliefs.'*

This is not a definitive answer to the question of what ageism is. You may have your own understanding of ageism, which will come out through your discussions.

What is consciousness-raising?

Consciousness-raising is a way of helping people to recognise injustice by sharing personal experiences and perceptions with others in order to bring about change.

Consciousness-raising discussions help those taking part to see that other people might have similar personal experiences and perceptions to their own.

Ageism is widely accepted around the world. Because of this, it can be difficult to recognise it or see what effect it has. Consciousness-raising gives people a chance explore feelings they may have previously dismissed because they thought these were not important, or because they felt the discrimination they experienced or witnessed was acceptable.

How do I start a consciousness-raising group?

Start by inviting about 8-12 people to come to a discussion. Invite people of different ages, perhaps up to 10 years younger and older than yourself. Try to include people of more than one gender if everyone is comfortable with this. Invite people you may not know well, not just your friends.

Explain that you want to set up a consciousness-raising group to discuss people's experiences and perceptions of ageism, in order to take action against ageism. Explain what consciousness-raising is and what you hope to achieve through the discussions. Use this guide to give people an idea of what they can expect before they agree to join the group.

Ideally, groups should meet once a month for around three hours, but you can make the meetings shorter or less frequent if you wish. You can agree how long and how often to meet at your first meeting.

It often works best to take it in turns to meet in each other's homes. However, make sure everyone is happy with this before deciding where to meet. If you do decide to meet in each other's homes, make sure you won't be interrupted by other people in the house. It's a good idea to provide some refreshments, especially if you are meeting for more than two hours. It is helpful to have a facilitator for each session who will keep track of the time and allow time at the end of the session to discuss when and where you will meet next.

Avoid bringing new people into the group once it has started. It is not fair on them or the rest of the group. Existing members will have already started to get to know each other and discussed private or taboo topics. If other people become interested in your consciousness-raising group, encourage them to start their own group and share this guide with them.

Consciousness-raising meetings have the potential to touch upon difficult topics or evoke painful memories. Before each meeting the facilitator should spend some time thinking about how the participants might be affected by the discussions. If you think it is necessary, the facilitator should provide everyone with the contact details of any additional support services that participants can get in touch with. This should be done at the end of the workshop. However, consider that it is not the purpose of a consciousness-raising group to give advice or solve day-to-day problems but to listen to each other's experiences.



Guidelines for group discussions

Here are some guidelines for organising discussions. They are not set rules. You can create your own guidelines as your consciousness-raising group develops.

- Make sure everyone understands that consciousness-raising is confidential. No one should repeat what is said outside the group.
- Everyone in the group must be given a chance to speak. It is a good idea to allow each person in turn to speak.
- Not everyone has to speak. When your turn comes, you can pass if you wish.
- Don't be afraid of silences. Allow time between each person's contribution for people to think.
- No one in the group should judge or criticise anyone's recollection or views. What someone says is true to them.
- No one in the group should talk over others. The only exception is to ask for clarification. For example, "How old were you?" If you need to do this, be respectful and wait for a good moment to speak.

- Talk about your own thoughts and feelings, not those of other people. Use "I" and "my" rather than "they", "we" or "our".
- Avoid making generalisations. Everyone will have different experiences of a topic. If you generalise, you may offend some people in the group whose experience is different from yours.

What should we talk about?

You can use the questions below to guide your discussion. You can also create your own questions.

You can spend a whole meeting discussing one question or explore many questions. When you first meet, start by picking two or three questions that you like.

Try to avoid leading questions. For example, don't ask people what they are afraid of about getting older, as this presumes they are afraid. Ask them if they are afraid of getting older.

- In your own mind, how old are you?
- What makes someone old or young?
- How comfortable do you feel about telling people your age?
- Do you try to look younger than your age?
- Does getting older affect how you feel about your body?
- Have you ever been treated differently because of your age?
- Is ageing different for men and for women? How? Why? Why not?
- Has anyone told you: "You don't look your age"? If so, how did this make you feel?
- Are you afraid of getting older? If so, why?
- Do you look forward to anything about getting older? If so, what?
- How do you relate to people younger or older than yourself?
- Has getting older changed the way you feel about sex?
- Has getting older changed the way you feel about your health?

Allow about 15 minutes at the end of the session to discuss how people felt about answering these questions.

Then decide together what you would like to talk about at your next session, where it will be, and who will facilitate it.

Questions for specific countries or languages

The following questions are for use in specific countries or languages. They are a selection of common proverbs or phrases provided by HelpAge staff around the world. They show how prevalent ageist terms are across the world. Although the word “ageism” may not exist in your language, ageism takes place everywhere.

Amharic

ካረጅ አይበጅም ተብለው የውቃሉ ወይ? “Kareju Aybeyum”
tebelew yawqalu wey?

Creole

Poukisa ou panse ekspresyon: “Zo granmoun pa pran, lèw granmoun se domino ou jwe” itilize anpil an Haiti? Koman li fèw santiw?

English

How does it feel when you hear someone say: “Mutton dressed as lamb”? Is this statement derogatory?

German

Wie fühlen Sie sich, wenn Sie die folgende Redewendung hören: “Das Alter ist ein Spital, das alle Krankheiten aufnimmt?”

Kenyan slang

Je, waji hisi vipi unaposikia matamshi haya: “Huyu ni mucene, wakati wake umeisha?”

Nepali

“जब मान्छे बुढो हुन्छ सबै रोगहरु उसको लागि तयार हुन्छ” भन्ने उखानले तपाइलाई के-कस्तो महसुस गराउँछ ?

Russian

Когда Вы слышите фразу “Старость не радость”, что Вы об этом думаете? Что Вы чувствуете? Вы согласны с этой фразой?

Spanish

¿Cómo se siente cuando escucha la frase: “Más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo”?

Swahili

Unajisikiaje usikiapo: “Wazee wamepitwa na wakati”? Msemu huu unausikia mara kwa mara au mara moja tu?

Thai

รู้สึกอย่างไรเมื่อได้ยินคำว่า แก่กะโหลกกะลา

คุณรู้สึกว่า การเรียกผู้หญิงสูงวัยบางคนว่า มนุษย์ป่า เป็นสิ่งที่ถูกต้องและยุติธรรมหรือไม่

What next?

After several sessions, you might want to decide what action to take. You could arrange to meet a decision maker (for example, your district commissioner), speak to the local media, or encourage other groups to start up.

The idea is that you can take action together. You can challenge ageism and change attitudes to getting older. You can encourage people to swap the shame and denial they may feel about ageing with contentment.

For more ideas, take a look at the Age Demands Action campaign guides at www.helpage.org/adacampaignmanual

Or visit author Ashton Applewhite’s website and read her own consciousness-raising guide at <https://thischairrocks.com>



Age Demands Action is a grassroots movement of campaigners in 60 countries. Older people meet with decision-makers and lobby their local and national governments to push for changes that are most important to them, including pensions and healthcare systems.

www.helpage.org/agedemandsaction

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives. www.helpage.org

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