

Guidelines for Communicating With, To and About Older Adults

Sheree Kwong See, PhD
Professor of Psychology, University of Alberta
and
Alberta Seniors Advocate

Ageism

Geriatrician Robert Butler coined the term ageism in the 1960s¹. While it was identified as a concern over 50 years ago, it remains a contemporary issue.² Ageism refers to the systematic stereotyping of and prejudice against older people. Ageism is shown in our attitudes toward growing old and our stereotype driven interactions with older people. Ageism is common in Canadian society³; even young children show ageism toward older people.⁴ Holding negative views of aging has been linked with poor health outcomes for older individuals.^{5,6}

Recognizing the detrimental impacts of ageism, The World Health Organization's theme for the 2016 International Day of the Older Person (October 1) was *Take a Stand Against Ageism*.⁷ In 2017, the Canadian Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors named addressing ageism a priority focus.⁸

Ageism in Communication

Ageism can be shown in communication with, to and about older adults. Research shows that there are stereotypes about aging language and communication abilities (e.g., beliefs that all older people are hard of hearing, ramble on).^{9,10} Interactions guided by stereotypical beliefs can

¹ Achenbaum, W. A. (2014). Robert N. Butler, MD (January 21, 1927-July 4, 2010): visionary leader. *The Gerontologist*, 54(1), 6-12. doi:10.1093/geront/gnt015

² Ayalon L., & Tesch-Römer C. (Eds.) (2018) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-73820-8>

³ http://www.ageismore.com/getattachment/Research/Revera-Report-on-Ageism-Independence-and-Choice-A/Independence_and_Choice_Report_2016.pdf.aspx

⁴ Kwong See, S. T., Rasmussen, C., & Pertman, S. (2012) Measuring children's age stereotyping using a modified Piagetian conservation task. *Educational Gerontology*, 39(3), 149-165. Doi:10.1080/03601277.2010.515891

⁵ Levy, B. R. (2003) Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes. *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 58B, P203-P211. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/58.4.P203>

⁶ Levy, B. R. (2009) Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 332-336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x>

⁷ https://www.who.int/ageing/events/idop_rationale/en/

⁸ https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2017/09/federal_provincialandterritorialministersresponsibleseniorsme.html

⁹ Ryan, E. B., Kwong See, S., Meneer, W. B., & Trovato, D. (1992). Age-based perceptions of language performance among younger and older adults. *Communication Research*, 19 (4), 423-443. Doi: 10.1177/009365092019004002

¹⁰ Rust, T., & Kwong See, S. (2010). Beliefs about Aging and Alzheimer's Disease in Three Domains. *Canadian Journal on Aging / La Revue Canadienne Du Vieillessement*, 29(4), 567-575. doi:10.1017/S0714980810000590

lead to over accommodation in communication (both verbal and nonverbal) with older people that can be patronizing (see Appendix A). Patronizing communication is driven by beliefs associating older age with dependency and incompetence. Patronizing communication can also be driven by a desire to be nurturing and benevolent. The tendency to accentuate positivity in communication with, to and about older people can unwittingly reinforce age stereotyping and ageism.

Guidelines for Avoiding Ageism in Communication

Awareness of ageism as it manifests in communication is key to beginning to address ageism.

- Do not let stereotypes dictate interactions with an individual. Focus on the individual and make adjustments in speech and behavior based on the individual.
- Do not let stereotypes guide communication choices to/about older adults.

As a guideline, before making a communication accommodation/modification, ask yourself

- is it appropriate for the individual?

For example, you may be inclined to begin speaking loudly because of a belief that older people are hard of hearing. Be aware of your bias and discern if this accommodation is appropriate for the older person you are communicating with.

- is it sensitive to individual differences amongst older people?

For example, you may be inclined to use larger font based on a belief associating older age with poor vision. Be aware of this bias and when possible, acknowledge the heterogeneity that exists amongst older people and provide adjustable font size.

As a guideline, avoid positive or negative age stereotype perpetuating language. Ask yourself

- is there is an implied message I do not intend?

Example: “The Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair program helps seniors update their homes so they can maintain their independence”.

Implies seniors lose independence, reinforcing a dependency stereotype.

Better: “The Seniors Home Adaptation and Repair program provides a low-interest loan to assist seniors renovate or repair a home”.

Example: “When you can no longer live independently, you may need to access Alberta’s continuing care system”.

Implies all older people will eventually require institutionalized care, which is not true.

Better: “If you can no longer live independently, you may need to access Alberta’s continuing care system”.

As a guideline, avoid “us” versus “they/them” and “our” language. It can be isolating and seen as patronizing.

Example: “The senior population is larger than ever before. This is creating opportunities for governments to place value and build on the contributions that our seniors have made, and continue to make to our communities, our workplaces and our families.

Better: “The senior population is growing. This is creating opportunities for governments to build on the contributions of seniors”.

As a guideline, check yourself by substituting in for the term “senior” any stigmatized group before you write it, say it or implement it. Ask yourself

- how would this go over?

Example: “The senior population is larger than ever before. This is creating opportunities for governments to place value on and build on the contributions that our seniors have made, and continue to make to our communities, our workplaces and our families”.

Substitute: “There are more women than ever before. This is creating opportunities for governments to place value and build on the contributions that our women have made, and continue to make to our communities, our workplaces and our families”.

Appendix B summarizes these guidelines for communicating with, to and about older adults that is sensitive to ageism and its biasing effects on communication choices. These guidelines are suggestions to start the process of addressing ageism by increasing awareness.

Appendix A

Features of Patronizing Communication

When you over accommodate based on stereotyped expectations:

Verbal

Nonverbal

A. Vocabulary

- Simple
- Few multisyllabic words
- Childish terms
- Minimizing words (e.g., *just*, *little*, *short*)
- Pronoun modifications (e.g., over inclusive *we*, exclusive *we*, avoidance of *me/you* in favor of name substitutions)

B. Grammar

- Simple clauses and sentences
- Repetitions
- Tag questions
- Imperatives
- Fillers
- Fragments

C. Forms of address

- First names and nicknames
- Terms of endearment (e.g., *sweetie*, *dearie*, *honey*)
- Childlike terms (e.g., *good girl*, *naughty boy*, *cute little man*)
- Third-person reference

D. Topic management

- Limited topic selection and topic reinforcement (e.g., focus on past, shallow, task oriented, or overly personal/intimate)
- Interruptions
- Dismissive of other-generated topics
- Exaggerated praise for minor accomplishments

A. Voice

- High pitch
- Exaggerated intonation
- Loud
- Slow
- Exaggerated pronunciation

B. Gaze

- Low eye contact
- Staring
- Roll eyes
- Wink

C. Proxemics

- Stand too close
- Stand over a person seated or in bed
- Stand too far off

D. Facial expression

- Frown
- Exaggerated smile
- Raised eyebrows

E. Gestures

- Shake head
- Shrug shoulders
- Hands on hips
- Cross arms
- Abrupt movements

F. Touch

- Pat on head
- Pat on hand, arm, shoulder

Table adapted from:

Ryan, E. B., Hummert, M., & Boich, L. (1995). Communication predicaments of aging: Patronizing behavior toward older adults. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 14, 144-166.

See also:

Giles, H., & Gasiorek, J. (2011). Intergenerational communication practices. In K. W. Schaie & S. L. Willis (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging* (7th ed.) (pp. 233-247). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.

Appendix B

Improving Communication With/To/About Older Adults

Be Aware

- Do not let stereotypes dictate interactions with an individual. Focus on the individual and make adjustments in speech and behavior based on the individual.
- Do not let stereotypes guide communication choices to/about older adults.

Guidelines to consider

- Before making a communication accommodation/modification, ask yourself
 - is it appropriate for the individual?
 - is it sensitive to individual differences amongst older people?
- Avoid positive or negative age stereotype perpetuating language. Ask yourself
 - is there is an implied message I do not intend?
- Avoid “us” versus “they/them” and “our” language. It can be isolating.
- Check yourself by substituting in any stigmatized group for the term “senior” before you write it, say it or implement it. Ask yourself
 - how would this go over?

A further resource

Communicating with adults: An evidence-based review of what really works (free download from the Gerontological Society of America):

http://www.agingresources.com/media/2015/04/GSA_Communicating-with-Older-Adults-low-Final.pdf

This resource covers cognitive and sensory changes that tend to occur in aging and also discusses the role of age stereotypes in communication.