

# Identify and challenge ageism during COVID-19



The Inner East Primary Care Partnership (IEPCP) is working with the seven Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) local governments to tackle ageism.

COVID-19 has exposed ageism in many forms. This document highlights the impact of COVID-19 on ageism and provides guidance for local governments and other organisations on framing and responding to ageism at this time.

*The way we portray and support older members of our society is a moral, social, and economic issue that concerns us all. Advocates need to shape messaging so that it appeals to justice, illustrates what ageism looks like, and uses inclusive language.*

(Stanford Social Innovation Review, May 2020)

## Some examples of how ageism has been exposed during COVID-19:

- Older people blamed for restrictions.
- Age highlighted in reporting of deaths.
- Older people called on to take a disproportionate load of the economic fallout.
- Calls for aged based rationing of health care.

## Are older people more vulnerable to COVID-19?

A sole focus on the effects of the virus on “vulnerable” groups creates distance and difference, causing disengagement and blaming others. “Older” people (a group spanning 30-40 years) are defined as vulnerable during COVID-19 simply because of their chronological age, the passage of time since birth.

- By generalising older people as highly vulnerable, frail and burdensome, we risk creating a perception that their lives are less valuable, or even expendable, and that we have no obligation to prevent their deaths.
- Biological age is a more appropriate indicator of physiological decline, clinical outcomes and life expectancy. Our chances of survival depend on our lifestyle, activity level, immune system and pre-existence of certain diseases and conditions. Health care rationing should be based on individual and clinical considerations.
- The share of persons living with pre-existing conditions might be higher among older people making them more at risk or more susceptible to the more severe impacts of the virus.
- Offering support is not a choice or a charity, it’s a human rights obligation. We all have an equal right to access support and care if we find ourselves in a situation of vulnerability, simply because we are humans. Chronological age does not change that.
- Older people have the right to be treated fairly and make decisions about their own lives.

## Shared experiences and shared action

Whilst older people are more at risk of complications from COVID-19, it is not an “older person’s disease”. Emphasize the connections between each and every one of us: make it about “our” actions and responsibilities to each other; all of us are connected and dependent on each other.

- We must work together to manage the pandemic and keep all of us safe. Nobody is immune from COVID-19, avoiding the spread is everyone’s responsibility.
- Keeping only one section of the population under confinement is discriminatory and deprives society of many individuals who are active and support the economy, their families and communities.
- Overwhelmingly older people have complied with self-isolation requests and have done their part to protect themselves and the broader community.
- Policy responses to COVID-19 should apply to all.
- We need all generations to pull together and ensure all Australians benefit from post-COVID recovery.

## Language and labels

Using language that “other-ises” older people—such as “they,” “them,” and “those” pronouns—reinforces paternalistic attitudes toward older people. Ageing does not happen to someone else; we are all ageing. Replacing “they” or “them” with “we” and “us” counters ageist thinking and creates a sense of solidarity.

- Avoid labels that suggest weakness or separation from society: use person-first phrasing so messages can’t be dismissed as being for someone else. For example, replace “the elderly” with “older people” or “older adults”, “seniors” with “people aged 60 and up”, “vulnerable groups” with “people more at risk”.
- Replace “what older people need” with more-inclusive wording such as “what we need when we’re older” to convey a sense of shared stake and common purpose.
- Avoid “saviours and victims” as this reinforces boundaries and differences between groups (them vs us). We can all prepare for everyone’s health situation and protect those most at risk.

## Work

- Older workers should receive equal treatment and be given equal opportunities to be kept connected to their workplace in anticipation of returning to work post COVID-19.
- Standing down older workers ahead of other age groups is age discrimination.
- There are significant barriers, including ageism, in the way of older people getting another job.

*“Older people are us. They are our family members, our caregivers, our workers and neighbours”* (HelpAGE International 2020)

The information in this document was sourced from:

**EveryAGE Counts 2020. Position statement April 2020 and Communication and messaging guide for coalition members, Sydney**

[https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/ageism\\_in\\_the\\_time\\_of\\_covid\\_19](https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/ageism_in_the_time_of_covid_19)

**EachOther 2020. Ageism in the age of COVID-19, UK**

<https://eachother.org.uk/ageism-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>

**Frameworks Institute 2020. Framing COVID-19 – Topic #3: Widening the circle of “we”, USA**

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/framing-covid-19.html>

**HelpAGE International 2020. Age Demands Action: Hear our Voices – Toolkit to challenge ageism in the time of Covid-19, USA**

<https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/covid19-older-peoples-stories/>

**Stanford Social Innovation Review, May 2020. Editorial: Advocating for age in an age of uncertainty**

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/advocating\\_for\\_age\\_in\\_an\\_age\\_of\\_uncertainty#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/advocating_for_age_in_an_age_of_uncertainty#)

#### Other links:

**Australian Human Rights Commission – Age Discrimination Commissioner, Kaye Patterson**

Ageism and COVID-19 media release.

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/news/ageism-and-covid-19>

**Global Centre for Modern Ageing 2020. Finding a Silver Lining. SA. Research**

<https://www.gcma.net.au/covid19/2020/4/6/julianne-parkinson-invites-you-to-take-part-in-our-covid-19-study-8lfxk>

**Huffington Post 2020, Just because I’m 90 doesn’t mean I’m ready to die, USA**

Individual story from New York

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-am-old-not-disposable-coronavirus-pandemic\\_n\\_5ea7295dc5b6a30004e67306](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-am-old-not-disposable-coronavirus-pandemic_n_5ea7295dc5b6a30004e67306)

**Old School COVID-19 and ageism. Resources and information**

<https://oldschool.info/#covid19>

**The Conversation 2020. Out with the old: Coronavirus highlights why we need new names for aging, USA.**

General article on the importance of language and ageism

<https://theconversation-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/theconversation.com/amp/out-with-the-old-coronavirus-highlights-why-we-need-new-names-for-aging-131380>

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