

HOW WILL YOU AGE STRONG?

Guide to community
conversations on
aging and ageism



INSTRUCTIONS FOR FACILITATORS

Welcome! Consider this document an invitation into a conversation happening around the world—one about how we create the kind of communities in which each of us wants to grow old. This movement starts in our own neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. The following is a guide to starting community conversations and raising awareness around aging and ageism. This guide is for municipalities, universities, businesses, and anyone else with an interest in bringing up what we so rarely talk about: the fact that we are *all* aging, but live in a world that often forgets or undervalues the contributions of its older people.

We intend for this community conversation guide to accompany the materials of the #AgeStrong campaign started by the City of Boston. The campaign includes a video featuring older Bostonians, and some accompanying images. Although these materials tell the stories of Boston residents, their messages provide fodder for learning and exploration that will be relevant in any community.

Suggestions for success:

1. Groups of about ten participants are the ideal size. Conversations about aging can occur between two people, or in a room of a hundred—and we therefore hope this guide will be used in many different contexts, with many different group sizes and compositions. But keeping the group around 10 people, or at most 20, helps you ensure that every voice is heard. If the group is very large, consider splitting participants up into groups of about 10 for the conversation.
2. The questions in this guide are ordered thoughtfully, but the best strategy is to review the prompts in advance and guide the discussion to each question in whatever order makes sense given the flow of the conversation. And of course, feel free to drop any questions that don't make sense for your purposes.
3. The ideal length of time for this set of prompts is about 90 minutes. This allows for you to have everyone introduce themselves at the beginning of the conversation, and perhaps to conduct an icebreaker. (One idea: have everyone write their age on their nametag, and as they introduce themselves, they can talk about how it felt to announce their age to the group.)
4. This guide was designed to be “age-flexible”—it can be used among groups of age peers, or with a multigenerational crowd. Consider inviting the following groups in your community: college students, youth group members, scout troops, school clubs, parent teacher association representatives, attendees of senior centers, fraternal organizations (e.g. Rotary, Knights of Columbus, or Elks), or veterans' agencies.
5. Most of the discussion is meant to occur among members of one larger group, but for some questions, consider having each participant turn to someone next to them and discuss in pairs or small groups, and then have them share something *their partner said*. This strategy will help you avoid “discussion hogging” and encourage everyone to participate. If a lot has been said on a particular topic, remember that you can always summarize what has already been stated before moving on to the next question. And don't be afraid to allow for some moments of silence while people think after you pose a question.
6. Before beginning, it's helpful to ask participants to suggest some conversational norms for the discussion—for example, “confidentiality,” or “one speaker at a time.” Write down the list your participants generate on a whiteboard or flipchart. This exercise establishes respectful intentions and orients participants toward the kind of conversation they want to have.

7. You may notice participants use the language of age to describe qualities of people that are *not* age-related—for example, people may say they’re “young at heart,” or “feel younger” than their age. You might consider asking them what they mean, or gently helping them disentangle age from other qualities like vibrancy, purpose, and joyfulness.
8. Reflect on ways to maximize the accessibility and inclusivity of your ageism discussion for persons with physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments.
9. HAVE FUN! We hope this guide sparks insights about where ageism is present where you live, and what kind of collective action your community is ready to take to confront it.

Step 1. Suggested Script for Opening up the Discussion:

Today we are here to have an interactive discussion about the concept of ageism. Specifically, this community conversation program was designed to accompany the materials of the #AgeStrong campaign started by the City of Boston. The campaign includes a video featuring older Bostonians, and some images telling their stories. The purpose of the campaign was to promote positive images of aging and encourage people of all ages to consider the question, “how do you age strong?”

Suggested Supply list:

1. Name tags
2. 1 set of printed images without text
3. 1 set of printed images with text
4. A white board/large writing surface and markers
5. OPTIONAL: Mechanism for projecting a video (audio/visual)

We will share the elements of this campaign with you today and hopefully have a discussion among ourselves about how our community treats residents of all ages. There is a series of questions that will guide our discussion, but we want everyone to feel comfortable sharing at any time and we encourage you to question one another and exchange ideas and perspectives.

{GENERATE A LIST OF CONVERSATIONAL NORMS}

To get started and become a little more familiar with one another, I want to start with a fun question:

{CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING OR COME UP WITH YOUR OWN}

1. What is your favorite thing about getting older?
2. What does “being strong” mean to you?

Step 2. Pass out the printed images with *no* text. Ask participants to pass them around so that each person gets a chance to see multiple images.

- What words come to mind looking at those photos? Describe what you see. Does anything about these people surprise you?
- How do you *think* people will treat you as you get older?
- How do you *want* people to treat you as you get older?
- Do you ever make jokes about your own age? What kinds of jokes do you make? Why do you think you make those jokes?

Step 3. Pass out printed images *with* text. Ask participants to pass them around so that each person gets a chance to see and read from multiple pages.

- What strikes you in what these people say about themselves? What will you remember from them? Does anything they say about themselves remind you of yourself, or someone you know?
- You may notice these people don't appear to have serious physical or cognitive impairments. What could it mean to "age strong" even if your body or mind isn't quite the way it used to be?
- What are the negative parts of getting older?
- What are the positive parts of getting older?
- Does age matter?
- What would be different about the world if we changed our thinking about getting older? Why does the way we think about aging matter?

Step 4. Show the video.

- Why does the woman in the video ask, "You didn't think that, right?"
- How would you explain ageism to someone who had never heard of the concept? Turn to your neighbor and each take a turn trying to explain it to the other.

Person A gets one minute to explain it to Person B, and Person B gets one minute to explain it to Person A. Then ask participants to raise their hand if they want to share an interesting idea or phrase their partner said. Afterward, share this definition of ageism from the World Health Organization:

*"Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age."*¹ Note that this definition does NOT state that ageism only affects older people; ageist views can be held against other age groups, too.

- Where do you see ageism in our community? Can you name a specific place where it appears?
- In what ways is our community already combatting ageism? In what ways could we do better?
- What hinders us from combatting ageism? What makes it difficult to change our thinking about age?
- Where might there be discrimination against *younger* people in our community?

Step 5. Conclude the discussion.

- Think of an older person you know, or have known, and that you care about. What would you want someone passing this person on the street to know about them?
- What is one new thought, or action you would like to do, that you take away from this discussion? Given what we've talked about today, what can we *do* about ageism in our community?

Make a list on a whiteboard or flipchart of participants' suggestions.

¹ World Health Organization. (2020). *Ageism*. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/>

Suggested Closing Script:

We're grateful you joined us for this conversation about something that all of us are doing—growing older. We hope you will take the new insight you just named with you today and fold it into it in your daily life. This conversation is a key step in our work to create a community in which people of all ages are welcomed and respected. Thank you!

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Cover Art: Rose Coveney, University of Massachusetts Boston

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