



Elements of Ageism 3

Annoying assumptions about older people

2025

Introduction

National Seniors Australia is a member-based, not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation representing Australians aged 50 and over.

Every year we survey thousands of older people on diverse topics relevant to their lifestyle and wellbeing.

This report is one of four based on a 2024 survey module about ageism.

In 2017 Australia’s Benevolent Society published a foundational report, *The Drivers of Ageism*, which guided the national anti-ageism campaign, EveryAGE Counts.

Drawing on previous research about ageism, that report’s literature review identified three facets of ageism:

- prejudicial attitudes towards the aged,
- discriminatory practices against older people in employment and other domains, and
- institutional policies and practices which perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about older people.

These three facets are widely cited as the working definition of ageism, having been developed by the US gerontologist attributed with coining the term ‘age-ism’ in 1969: Robert N. Butler.

Thinking about ageist stereotypes and prejudices, in 2024, National Seniors Australia asked thousands of older Australians:

“Are there assumptions our society makes about older people that particularly annoy you?”

In all, 2135 people answered the question with a comment.

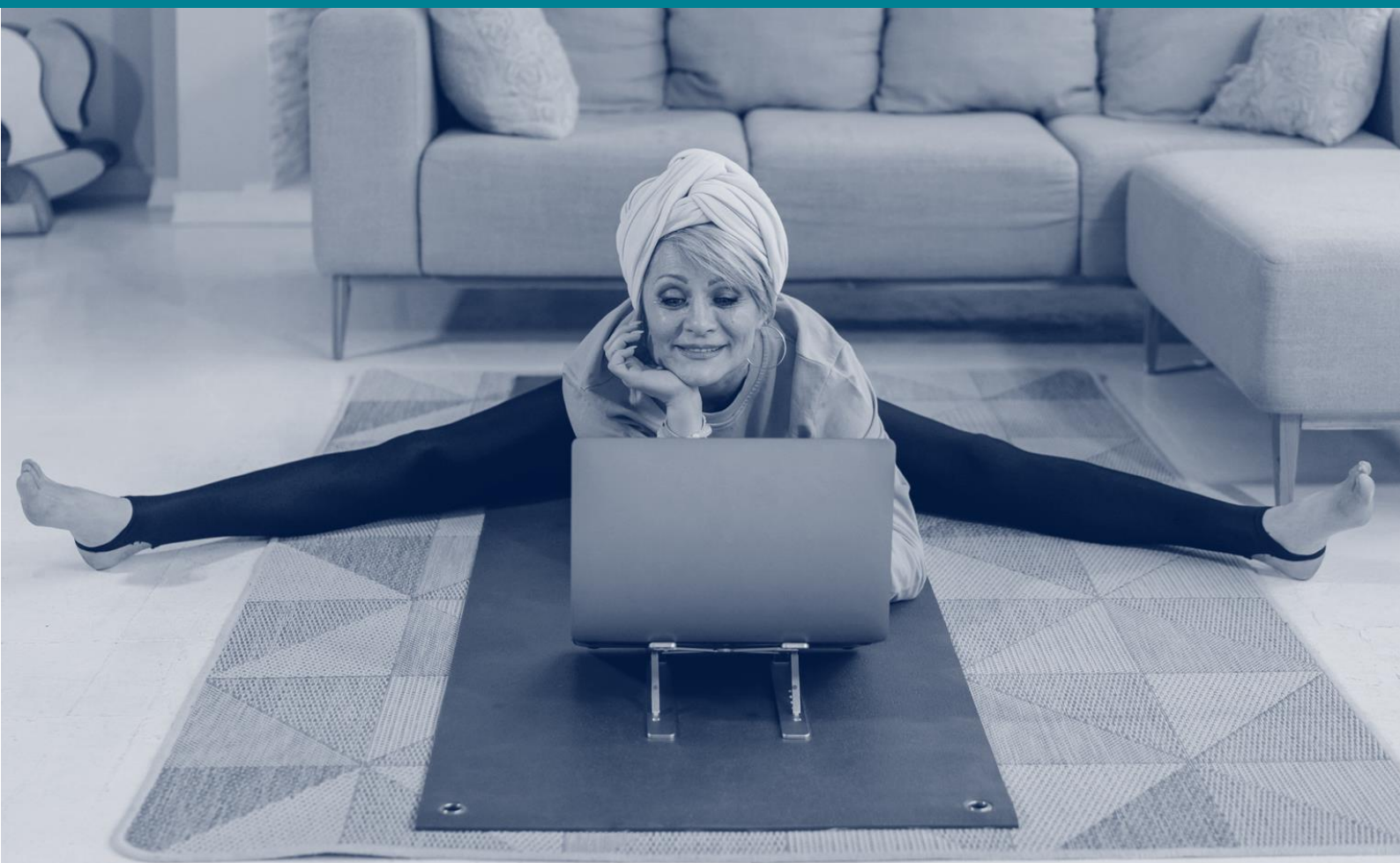
This report summarises the 16 themes present in their responses by reproducing a selection of comments verbatim.

It illustrates the ways older people feel maligned or stereotyped in Australia today because of their age.

5				49		63	75	80
		28	34		52	66	77	
6	11				59	69		82

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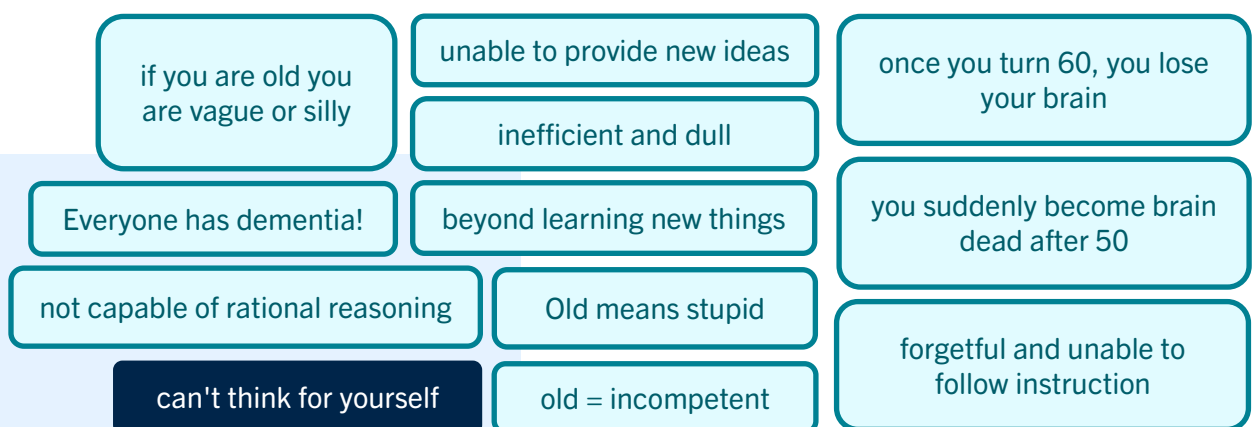
#1: Our bodies don't work

Assumed to be physically feeble, reverting to a childlike state, and close to death.



#2: Our brains don't work

Assumed to be mentally feeble, to have dementia, and unable to learn or feel.



People don't realize or give credit for people having an active and interested brain.

older people don't have feelings or desires as they once had

That we do not have excellent judgement, acuity and often even wisdom. That we are useful vulnerable people to scam and extract money from and advise poorly

don't share the same, or similar, emotions to younger people

the dismissal of experience without logical discussions. The assumption is that you are just complaining without considering why

Complained about procedures at pharmacy when drugs were not supplied correctly. In the investigation, they asked stupid questions which seemed to be based on my incapacity to understand that a 30 year old pharmacist would not make an error.

#3: Our bodies and brains don't work

Assumed incapable of most things, with mistakes and problems attributed to age not human foibles.

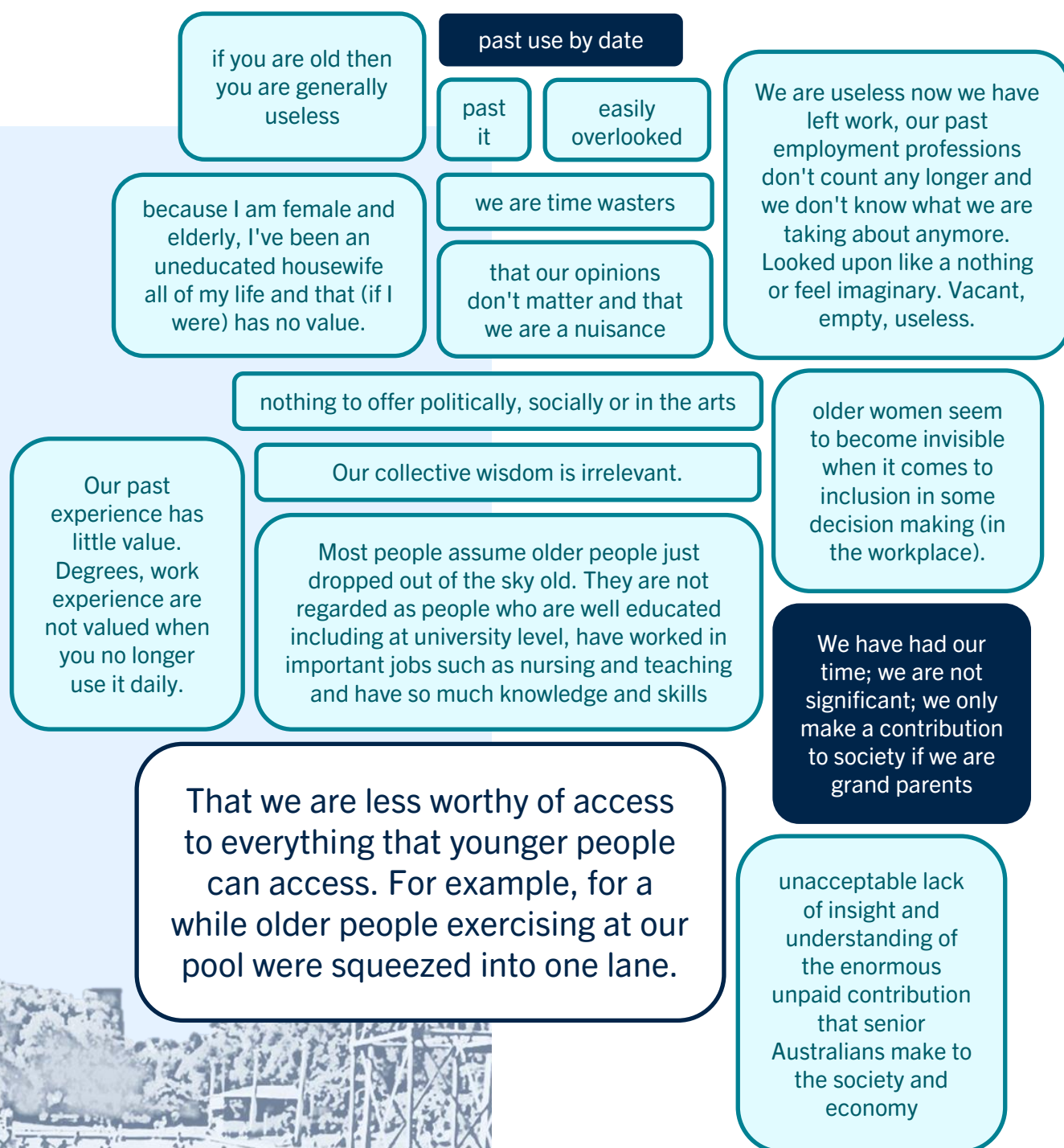


**Assumed to
have no
value, no life,
no capacity
for change**



#4: We have no value

Assumed to be past it and a nuisance, with nothing useful to offer.



#5: Our lifestyle is no life

Assumed to be uninterested, unwilling and unable to have fun, yet always available to others.



Often get 'you must be bloody old now - how are you coping' or you shouldn't be doing that at your age! Why would you want to travel at your age?? How or why would you want to caravan around at your age???

That wouldn't have a sense of humour That I would enjoy going to the seniors club That I'd like bingo That I am boring That I am out of touch That I would sit in front of the TV watching NETFLIX all day.

Expecting me to play terrible songs on ukulele when I really still want to be a punk rocker. Older people are expected to have bad taste and floral lounges.

at the gym at Seniors classes, they regularly change the timetable as though we do nothing else

That we are all retired and therefore have an abundance of free time.

Older people are not interested in fashion. Older retired people have endless time to do anything and everything.

no interests outside craft and being a grandmother

That lawn bowls is for the aged.

need to be entertained and 'jollied' along

#6: Our outlook is stuck in the mud

Assumed to be cranky, to not get it, to resist change.

always negative
and we don't like
or want change

we are stuck
in our ways

that we don't know much 😊

At work they expect you won't
understand jokes of today or lingo.

poor adaptation to
new things

we are grumpy
all the time

won't understand
complicated or new issues

not up to speed with
what's going on in the
environment around you

lack of awareness or interest in
what is going on in the world

That they have no interesting past. It was amusing with the school climate change protests that a number of the young were amazed we were there (Grandmothers for Refugees) and that we had a lifelong history of protest.

Assume you have
always been this age!

That everyone between
60 and 100 have the
same interests.

We have no idea what
it's like to be young.

only talk about trivia
and grandchildren

I am interested in design,
art, travel, literature, film
not whinging about my
ailments and super.

our ideas are
old fashioned
and outdated

**Assumed to be
old-fashioned,
greedy,
technophobic
Earth-
destroyers**



#7: We model our lives on the Menzies era

Assumed to be sweet, conservative, family-oriented oldies who enjoy mid-century culture and values.

Really annoyed that people think I have family to look after me or connect with. No I don't. It's me.

carers should do the hard work (physical and emotional) for nothing if they are not eligible for the carer Payment.

older women are all grandmothers and called nanny or granny and if you don't have children you will die lonely. [...] That lesbians do not exist etc etc That every older person wants to be like the people in the old peoples home on television - with children or teenagers - what a nightmare.

all married couples are sweet old things who love one another dearly and will do anything for each other.

We are unpaid babysitters for our grandkids.

Assumption that older people are against strong action on climate change

That people over 50 only like music and songs from the 1930s and 40s.

That we all like music from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

We don't play computer games.

I dislike being stereotyped. For example, I heard someone say on ABC radio that the Voice referendum failed because all the old people voted against it

older people are not concerned about the environment or climate change. I know many older people who are more concerned about the environment than younger people.

assumptions that older people are less tolerant, more racist, or more prejudiced.

Because 'younger' people are not familiar with history and the changes in societal norms they don't realize that we were the change makers, the first to protest, embrace feminism, fight for women's rights etc etc etc...

I am highly political and have no time for conservatives and lazy ill informed people my own age.

#8: Our finances are a problem

Assumed to be a fabulously wealthy bank of mum and dad or living it up on the public purse.

The grey nomad stereotypes spending their kids' inheritance.

That we take too much money from govt for health. That we don't contribute to society.

that parents will provide financial support no matter what

People assume every old person is on the pension. I am not, but I would like to be.

Asking if I have a pension card.

One assumption which really annoys me is that my adult children (in their 30s) always expect us, their parents, to pay for lunch/dinner when they and their partners are on good pay and we are living off savings (super).

Society assumes that all age pensioners can afford to live well.

People assume that the aged pension is sufficient to live, it is not

They are considered to have all the wealth notwithstanding that they worked hard in their younger years to avoid relying on government and to be self sufficient.

we are well off and don't struggle financially

a drain on society

A former Federal Treasurer [said] words to the effect that "we need to stop the over-60s from becoming a burden on the system".

politicians think we are all as well off as their parents, family and they, themselves, are.

their needs are lesser than the rest of society

people who don't know that many older people started work in the early 60s or earlier and did not get Superannuation until it became compulsory in 1992/3

That older persons should not pose any demands on society - rather they should be self-sufficient.

Society is regularly complaining about rising interest rates and advocating keeping rates low. But this my income. No-one says how bad it is that I receive only one or two percent interest on my savings.

#9: Our skills are behind the times

Assumed to be technologically hopeless, environmentally problematic, and holding up queues.

people assume you know nothing about the internet or mobile phones, and they start explaining them to me.

In the supermarkets by the introduction of self service checkouts. They assume I cannot work them when actually I choose not to. I believe in jobs for people not machines.

Sales assistants in stores are surprised when I hold all my store cards and pay by credit card using my phone. They expect 'old' people to be still fumbling around with cash which I have not used for years.

Younger people assume I don't know how to use computers or mobile phones just because I'm older, when I've been using them since the 1980s. If I don't use a function on my phone it's because I have chosen not to.

that we know nothing about today's appliances e.g cars ovens dishwashers

An ABC radio announcer interviewing a younger person about environmental issues saying, so what is it that you do 'that old, wrinklies' don't understand!

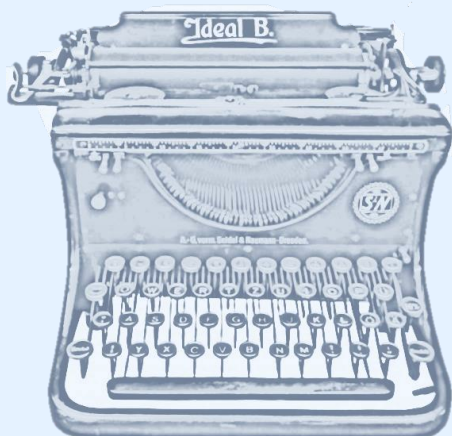
The assumption that some young people have that they "invented" recycling. As older people we recycled from the time we were born so it certainly is not new to us.

that we cram up supermarket aisles by congregating and talking. it is the younger ones that do this.

we don't have skills and our qualifications are outdated

we can't filter information on the net on our own medical conditions. Don't google it!!!

Told we are slow using pedestrian crossings, but they do not understand that i myself saw a child killed on a pedestrian crossing because the car was going too fast and failed to stop.



#10: We suck because we're boomers

Assumed that baby boomers had it easy and caused present-day ills.

greedy selfish baby boomers

to blame for 'global warming'

Taking up space and homes - never mind that we built the infrastructure with our taxes

inflation is our fault

the cause of health fund costs

**Baby Boomers destroyed the planet.
We hoard our wealth.**

Baby boomers are accused of ruining the planet. We used to conserve things much more than the following generations. Our mistake was inventing things that enabled the last 2 generations the ability to be lazy and entitled.

That we had an easy life compared to nowadays.

Everyone who is a baby boomer is rich and doesn't deserve to be.

I'm sick and tired of listening and reading about the RICH and GREEDY Baby Boomers. We also started work when there was NO equal pay for equal work and if women worked in the public service and became pregnant and/or married, they had to resign from their jobs. If women were single they did not accumulate much Super. I'm so angry that I worked my arse off for years and all I've got is a 1 bedroom unit with associated fees such as Rates, Body Corp fees, Insurance, etc and less than \$50,000.00 in the bank. I also did not get any Child Support for my 2 children either.

The housing crisis is not the fault of BBs, some (a lot, especially women) are living on or below the poverty line.

That older people are rich and responsible for wealth being concentrated in too few hands. Young people envy those older people who have worked hard and earned their investments. What is forgotten is the sacrifices made! We did not have the lifestyle that young people want / demand today.

Some consider we are the 'wasteful generation' when we have been more aware about saving & not wasting. [...] We did not have air conditioning in our homes. We walked to school, rode bikes to work or took public transport. We didn't have the opportunity to go to University. We didn't have houses that our parents had worked their adult lives to own.

The assumption that the "Baby Boomer" demographic are all ancient. I am at the end of the baby boomer age group but get lumped in with those 15+ years older.



**Assumed to
conform to
the ‘good
ageing’ ideal**



#11: We conform to the ‘good ageing’ ideal

Conversely, assumed to meet the ‘good ageing’ ideals of great health, sharp mind, up with the latest trends & tech, and continuing to work out of choice.

The three previous sections all capture stereotypes of older people that most of us will recognise. The comments showed many older people find these offensive. Their mode of ageing is different from the stereotypes, and they want that diversity recognised.

Many of them may subscribe to the ‘good ageing’ ideal – an ideal that prizes physical and mental fitness, keeping up with newer cultural trends and technologies, and staying active, including in fun paid work. But many people don’t age that way.

Part of recognising diversity in ageing outcomes is accepting that declines in body and mind can come with age, and adapting to ensure the resulting new needs are met.

It is also about respecting people’s values, preferences, and lifestyle expectations, and enabling people to age in the way that’s right for them.

I feel that society is impatient with the slowness of older people.

[that] I'm too young to rely on a walker when I wouldn't be using one if I didn't need to and also have a fear of falling again

Most public speakers assume older people can hear and comprehend as well as young people.

Allowing room for someone to move a walking stick etc normally back and forwards, without it being knocked from them. Not stopping suddenly directly in front, or walking backwards quickly without thinking. Playing fast moving sport in a public walking area. [...] Able bodied people using the disability toilet and lift rather than wait in the queue. Public transport seats being taken directly under the sign to vacate to someone who needs it, leaving the older person to stand

Not understanding the difficulty and deterioration that comes with aging

I have a tremor in my hands that makes using a computer or writing something down extremely difficult but they don’t understand

Physios who continue to run classes for seniors forcing them to "exercise" resulting in hospitalisation

assume that we can walk long distances and stand for long periods of time like we used to in our 20s.

sometimes the assumptions are true. I notice every year that I am slowing down more and forgetful of some words and remembering people’s names is a challenge.



That we accept
WOKE ideas which I
strongly object to.

that we would like to speak
like Americans and listen
to Rap/ Rap. I call people
who do this Yankers!

That all older people
enjoy being
addressed informally,
by christian name.

Our generation didn't grow up with computers/mobile phones, we've had to learn the basics quickly. People older than me are in trouble as the world moves more and more into paperless options for things. [...] There are computer lessons/ groups but for them it seems scary, remembering that in their day it was common to leave school early. For my age group it's possible but still hard at times.

That everyone has the latest digital device, the most recent apps, and that they know how to manipulate them. [...] Some people like their old device and can negotiate what they need to do, then a new app comes out or an update happens, and the old familiar device is no longer serviceable.

Yes I am slower and definitely not up to speed with technology changes but where is the information, education and guidance for older people to have good knowledge.

The assumption that my values are [old] hat and I should change to what they think - using text when a phone call is my preferred option. Thinking I should spend more time on Facebook to keep up to date with what they are doing rather than having a face to face time with them.

that we all want to work full time - I'm very happy to volunteer and not be in paid work after 45 years of full time work.

I dislike people saying to me, "You're too young to retire." I'm feeling accused of being lazy.

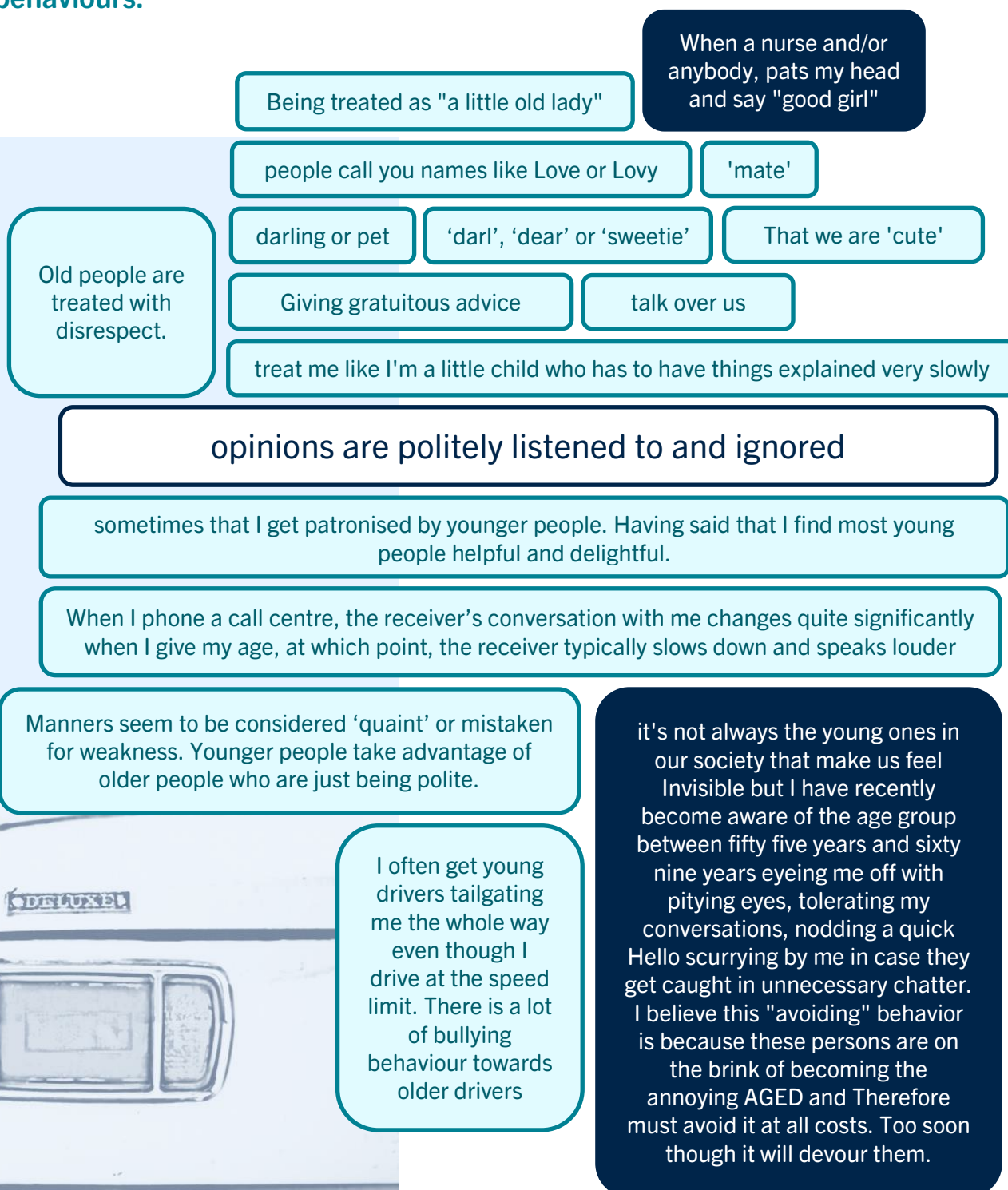


**Behaviours
that result
from or
reinforce the
assumptions**



#12: Annoying things people do because they hold these assumptions

It doesn't stop at attitudes – assumptions manifest in patronising and disrespectful behaviours.



#13: Assumptions about age based on appearance and advertising

Imagery of ageing feeds assumptions which feeds expectations about appearance, and round the circle goes.

Expectations on how bodies should look which do not include older bodies sagging skin etc

Sadly youth is seen as attractive and therefore valued esp for women, immense pressure to look young.

You don't look attractive

an older woman who dresses differently gets called Mutton dressed as lamb

During Covid I stopped dyeing my hair and went white. This can be an advantage as people sometimes offer help which I don't always need but can accept, e.g. at airports

What most annoys me is advertising. Everything is directed towards young people. Young people having fun, wearing clothes etc

Contradictory images of older people - either leisure-only images of going on cruises, couples strolling along a beach hand in hand with sweaters around their shoulders etc or frail people in aged care

Magazines that use 15 yr old girls in moisturiser ads & expect me to believe my skin will look like that in a week if I use their product. My skin did look like that when I was 15!

That we should buy skin products to remove wrinkles.

People being judgemental and guessing our ages just by appearance.

don't let
Dry Skin
make you
look
older



I'm well aware that just five years ago we spent my wife's 65th birthday with friends and relatives in the [USA]. We had a lot of fun. At that time she had just developed the characteristic Parkinson's shake - Now, just six years later, she has become an old stooped over woman that needs help with her toiletries and with getting up out of a chair. The general public see only an old woman with her husband who hold each other's hand when walking (shuffling) down the street.

My husband is younger than me sometimes when I go out with him people think he is my son

#14: Language that reinforces the assumptions

The way older people are talked about in public and the media adds fuel to the assumptions fire.

When I heard a news reader referring to people in their 60s as "elderly" - I think being elderly is dependent on the person - how they feel. I have met people who are still young at 80 and others who are old at 40.

Some of the terms used: elderly geriatric etc. People involved in Road traffic accidents being described as "elderly grandmother" why not just say 65 year old woman?

when a check out person describe 'I have an old lady here' also at train stations same thing applies

It annoys when the press calls a person aged about 60, an aged person. Why mention the person's age?

recently TV channel announced elderly man assaulted. Turns out he was 65. I was so angry that he was described as elderly so I immediately sent feedback stating that at 65 he has only just been able to retire and isn't able to claim the pension yet. So only say elderly if the person is over 80 and even then only if they act elderly as in frail and old. I still haven't had a reply.

Any time someone says 'gee you're fit for your age' - more appropriate would be 'gee you're fit'. Age is irrelevant

Constantly told I am 'remarkable' for my age [...] I'm told I'm 'sprightly', whatever that means.

That I have not let myself get fat as lots of older women do!

We are the "grey army"

I particularly hate the media focus on gen Z, baby boomers etc. Every generation has good and bad examples, it is just divisive.

Anyone who says 'ok Boomer'

There are no people older than the Baby Boomers. They have no idea that there is the Silent Generation, many of which are still alive.



Conclusions



Conclusions

Stereotypes of any kind are not helpful

The verbatim comments reproduced in this report can only be a taste of the more than 2000 comments we received in response to this survey question. But each reproduced comment was chosen to represent an aspect of its theme, and together they represent the dominant sentiments within the comment set.

In most of the themes, people objected to stereotypical assumptions made about older people by our society's media, governments, and individuals – including sometimes older people ourselves.

These are the cliches we expect to hear about ageing bodies and minds – that they are losing their ability to function and therefore older people cannot work or look after themselves.

They're the cliches about the lives of older people – that they are empty and valueless aside from grandchildren, lawn bowls, and complaining about change.

And they are cliches about the experiences and values of the current generation(s) of older people – that they are wealthy, conservative, digitally incompetent, and have destroyed the world.

The objections commenters raised to these age-related cliches show us that stereotypes are often untrue, and that resorting to them can be insulting, disrespectful and even cruel.

However, one of the themes (#11) reveals that rejecting these concepts of ageing out of hand – denying that they are ever true – can also leave people behind.

For example, the cliché presumes older people have poor computer skills, and a lot of digitally adept commenters objected to this. Yet the cliché is sometimes true. So to assume the opposite – that all older people are fine with digital technology now – leaves behind those who struggle with the internet, mobile phones, and the rest.

This is even more acutely the case for general physical and mental abilities, which can decline with age. No one wants to be stereotyped as deficient but if our society fails to provide supports to people who need assistance, they will suffer more.

The obvious response to these apparent contradictions is a simple one: we should stop making assumptions about people based on their age.

All of us must learn to listen to what a person says they can do or what they say they need, rather than presuming to know. There are many ways bodies age, and many ways people choose to live their later years. Older people are just as diverse as younger people in experiences and opportunities. Stereotypes are unhelpful, so simply replacing one with another is not the answer.

Two archetypes of ageing

Unfortunately, our culture fosters fear of the changes that can occur with age, especially if they impinge on an older person's independence, necessitating assistance or care.

This is partly what leads us to create an **alternative, idealised concept of ageing** in which people in their later years continue to live as they always did – just without the burdens of debt and dependent family. They are fit in body and mind, they are adept at technology, they are up with current socio-cultural developments, and they dabble in work to stay active and have fun. They have time to travel, volunteer, and have wonderful relationships. They have choice, agency and independence. They have it all.

The two archetypes – experiencing decline or achieving 'good ageing' – are familiar to most of us through media imagery of older people.

A commenter in theme #13 put it brilliantly, writing that there are two common yet:

Contradictory images of older people - either leisure-only images of going on cruises, couples strolling along a beach hand in hand with sweaters around their shoulders etc or frail people in aged care.

Both these archetypes of ageing are possible in later life. Realistically, most of us will experience something in between.

But many of us would object to the clichés that place us in the 'declining' basket. The comments in the first half of this report illustrate that.

On the one hand this is reasonable. We all want to be seen, respected, and accepted for who we are. Assumptions are infuriating.

On the other hand, when we ourselves as older people strongly object to being thought of as *that sort of old*, it sometimes indicates a filament of internalised ageism too.

Some comments in theme #14 hint at this dual perspective on later life possibilities. A few respondents protested against media reporting conventions that associate chronological ages with the 'old age' image. Media stories do this by using words like 'elderly', 'grandmother' or 'aged' irrespective of a person's physical and mental capabilities. It is these words that the respondents did not like.

For example, one person wrote:

recently TV channel announced elderly man assaulted. Turns out he was 65. I was so angry that he was described as elderly so I immediately sent feedback stating that at 65 he has only just been able to retire and isn't able to claim the pension yet. So only say elderly if the person is over 80 and even then only if they act elderly as in frail and old.

In today's Australia, in which lots of people are living much longer lives, it does indeed seem crazy to call a 65-year-old person 'elderly'.

The stigma of decline and dependence

However, the real problem is not that there are two kinds of older people who belong to different ages and need different labels.

The problem is our compulsive desire to differentiate between the idealised archetype of 'lifestyle' ageing and the feared archetype of 'declining' ageing.

The negative associations with old age that result from this differentiation are arguably what lies at the foundation of ageism. Those negative associations affect us all.

The impact of the differentiation and the negative associations was articulated well by one of our respondents, whose comment appears in theme #12.

The respondent, who gave their age as 75 years, wrote:

it's not always the young ones in our society that make us feel Invisible but I have recently become aware of the age group between fifty five years and sixty nine years eyeing me off with pitying eyes, tolerating my conversations, nodding a quick Hello scurrying by me in case they get caught in unnecessary chatter. I believe this "avoiding" behavior is because these persons are on the brink of becoming the annoying AGED and Therefore must avoid it at all costs. Too soon though it will devour them.

As with many things in life, the problem is social stigma – in this case, the stigmatisation of decline and dependence on others.

Our individualist social norms and ideals tend to elevate the principles of independence, self maintenance, and the absence of a need for special consideration.

Perhaps what we need, in contrast, is a culture that views care and support as ways of honouring a person, and that cultivates positive feelings towards caring for another, of being honoured to do it.

We then must stop making assumptions about older people. We are a very large sector of Australian society, and we cannot be so easily boxed.

Methods

The information in this report comes from the 12th National Seniors Social Survey, which was conducted in February 2024. Anyone aged 50 or older who resides in Australia is welcome to participate in the NSSS. The survey received ethics approval from Bellberry Ltd prior to implementation (approval 2023-11-1424).

The survey included a module about ageism. Responses to one open-ended question – “Are there assumptions our society makes about older people that particularly annoyed you?” – were analysed for this report using the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke.

We identified themes via inductive analysis guided by a critical realist approach that aimed for accuracy and objectivity in interpreting respondents’ views.

Quotes from survey respondents were selected to illustrate some of the variety and prevalence of ideas expressed. Where possible they were reproduced verbatim, occasionally omitting or altering parts for clarity or anonymity (indicated with square brackets []). Minor typos were corrected for readability (no brackets). We retained all other phrasing idiosyncrasies.

When inviting people to participate, we strive for greater inclusivity and maximising participation, rather than numerical representativeness. This is especially relevant to open-ended questions such as the one analysed for this report, because people’s unique experiences are the focus, not statistical patterns, and some demographics are more likely to write a comment than others (on any topic, not just ageism).

For comprehensive information about the ageism module, see our companion report, *Elements of Ageism 1*.

Sample

The percentages below characterise the demographic traits of the 2135 respondents who indicated there were assumptions our society makes about older people that particularly annoyed them. No question was compulsory, so some rows do not add up to 100%.

Age group	50-64 years 11%	65-74 years 53%	75-84 years 32%	85+ years 4%
Self-rated health	Excellent 12%	Good 55%	Fair 25%	Poor/very poor 8%
State or territory	ACT 4%	NSW 24%	NT 1%	QLD 32%
	SA 8%	TAS 2%	VIC 19%	WA 10%
Gender	Female 63%		Male 37%	Non-binary 3 people
Education	School up to Year 10 11%		Year 12 or cert/dip 38%	Degree or higher 47%
Savings including super	<\$100k 26%		\$100k-\$500k 24%	>\$500k 30%
Not metro	Regional 28%		Rural 8%	Remote 1%
Diversity groups	First Nations, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander 1%			LGBTI 2%
	CALD background 3%	Living with disability 9%		Veteran 4%

*Survey data unweighted.

The head office of National Seniors Australia is located in Brisbane/Meanjin but we represent older people from across this great continent.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and waters in which we operate, the Turrbul People, and all other First Nations, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander people.

We honour and value their continuing cultures, contributions, and connections to Country, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

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