



## Breaking Down Barriers Between Age Groups

To end ageism, people of all ages must work together. However, our age-based assumptions and stereotypes keep us apart. We can be dismissive of those who are younger and older and opt to not associate with people of other ages. How many of us have relationships (outside of our families) with people who are not close to our age? How often do we avoid connecting with other people because they are a different age from us?

Ageism undermines our ability to work together to drive change—and it's time to break that barrier.

It's not easy to overcome stereotypes about—let alone share power with—people who may have different opinions and experiences. But we really aren't all that different; we share core values across age groups and life stages.

Inspired by Ashton Applewhite's [call to break down the barriers](#) between age groups, we convened a working group of people of different ages to discuss what we can do. We shared where our age had been an advantage and where it had been held against us. We brainstormed about how we have broken down barriers between age groups and dreamed about what we could do next. This will be an ongoing conversation, but here are some tips from that discussion on where to begin.

### Strategies for dismantling barriers across age

#### Start with Ourselves

We all have biases. It's part of being human. These mental shortcuts can be useful and help us navigate our daily lives. However, not all assumptions are useful, and some storylines we've absorbed are downright harmful. Thankfully, when our ideas are no longer helpful, we have the power to change them. The first place to start is with ourselves.



Have you ever thought that you are too old or too young to speak up, join in, or try something new? This is internalized ageism. Think about how much time and energy we put into looking younger and how often we judge other people on how well they live up to standards of appearance or physical ability. We put people down for looking too young or not “aging well.”

Our age does not define our value. People of all ages have unique things to offer. When we are open to other perspectives, we can find better solutions.

Where to start? Consider language ([Communication Guide](#)) and how you talk about aging and people of other ages. Want to see how bias feels in action? Take the [Implicit Bias Test](#). The words we use and stories we tell reflect and reinforce our beliefs. As we start to understand and dismantle our stereotypes and prejudices, we find new and better stories about age.

The one place we can start right now is in our own minds.

### **Lead with relationships over assumptions**

Next, consider how we interact with other individuals. It takes a conscious effort to set aside our assumptions when we meet people who are not just like us. Our preconceptions get in the way of connecting with others.

Our stereotypes often go unquestioned. After repeatedly hearing that younger people can't focus or that older people can't adapt to change, we stop questioning these assumptions.

Instead, start with curiosity. Ask questions and listen. Importantly, even when a stereotype seems to fit a given individual, remember that we are all more complex than a stereotype, and that relying on generalizations gets in the way of relating to other people.

It's not us and them—it's just us.

Start by building relationships from openness, not assumptions:

- Ask questions and be curious. Listen before you speak.



- Find common values. We will not all agree, but we share core values and needs.
- [Call in](#) instead of calling out. Shaming breaks connections.
- In an organization, focus on the shared mission you are working toward together.
- Consider training and facilitation to help teams work better together.

Need ideas for listening and relationship-building tools? There are many out there on topics like [looping](#), [bridging](#), and [nonviolent communication](#).

## **Create a Culture of Collaboration**

Are you part of an organization or group? We can organize group interactions to facilitate better working relationships between people of different ages.

Many organizations value collaboration between functions (e.g., administration and staff, or sales and accounting), but collaboration is also crucial between people with different life experiences, such as age and other aspects of identity.

Collaboration is more than having a seat at the table for different people. For instance, it isn't enough to have a younger voice on a board otherwise made up of older people if everyone doesn't have equal opportunities to contribute. It often takes a conscious effort to listen to and learn from everyone.

Ask yourself questions like:

- In your group or team, does everyone have a chance to contribute ideas?
- Are ideas from people of different ages given equal consideration?
- Are differences in skills and experience valued?
- Do people get equal time to speak? Do some people speak over others?
- Are there opportunities for everyone to take on responsibilities and lead?
- Is it looked down upon in your team culture to want or accept training or mentoring?
- Does your team separate into subgroups based on age?

## **Accessible for All**



Another consideration for organizations is accessibility for all ages and abilities. Consider the needs of people in various stages of life and with different abilities. Do the facilities, schedules, and policies take into consideration factors like disabilities and caregiving responsibilities?

Just because something has always been done one way, doesn't mean it has to stay that way. Times change and we need new processes and resources. We have the most [age-diverse workplaces](#) we've ever had. At the same time, technology has made new things possible for everyone.

Ask people what they need and be open to making changes. Some questions to consider:

- Could you vary schedules or routines so they are convenient for everyone?
- Are you training people in new systems, regardless of age?
- Can everyone access and use the resources and spaces you are using for your work?
- Are you using multiple methods to reach people with different communication needs?
- Do team activities give equal consideration to the abilities and interests of all?

## **Co-Leadership and Co-Mentoring**

Another way to help break barriers between generations is to foster co-leadership and co-mentoring. Start by making sure that people of all ages have a voice. Include stakeholders from a range of ages on committees, planning groups, and team activities. Ask everyone for input and take into consideration all viewpoints; don't just give them a token listen.

Mentoring can occur in all directions, from older to younger and vice versa, as well as between people of the same age with different levels of experience. No one has all the skills and knowledge. If you are a leader, start by modeling this attitude to foster a culture that normalizes learning from one another. Consider establishing formal mentoring programs across ages and experience levels.



To take it further, you can experiment with [co-leadership](#), where people of different ages share decision-making.



We all have something to offer. Ultimately, to see our organizations succeed, we need to find ways to share power, share knowledge, and eventually transfer power between people of different ages. To do that, we must break the barriers between age groups.

For more, stay in touch with us at the [On Aging Institute](#), a hub for learning and collaboration for professionals and students of all ages involved in all aspects of aging.

**Thanks to the panel members of the On Aging 2025 session that inspired this resource:**

Ashton Applewhite, Old School Hub

Marci Alboher, CoGenerate

Donna Butts, Generations United

Ilonka Walker, Generations United

Ashley Stevens, The Dementia Guru

Christina Peoples, Gero-What?!

Danielle Sanders, Arizona Office of State Long Term Care Ombudsman Program