Age without limits

Photos that help people to age without limits

A step-by-step guide

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What is ageism, and why is it an important issue?

Ageism refers to stereotyping, discrimination or prejudice directed towards a person because of their age[1].

Evidence shows ageism can have a hugely damaging impact on us as we get older – on our health, on our job prospects and the way we live our lives, and on wider society and the economy.

Ageism is widespread in the UK. It's embedded in our institutions and social groups, and even accepted as normal by those who are on the receiving end of its prejudice.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

About Age Without Limits

Age Without Limits is a campaign from the Centre for Ageing Better to challenge ageism for the benefit of us all as we grow older.

We aim to spark a debate and conversation about what ageism is and to change the way we all think about ageing.

Find out how at **AgeWithoutLimits.org**

Why does imagery matter?

- **How we are represented as we grow older can have a profound impact on other people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours towards us** – this is particularly important if some or all of those representations are negative or stereotypical. More worryingly, we often internalise those negative misconceptions about ageing that we are bombarded with everyday. They become a self-fulfilling prophecy, affecting the way we perceive ourselves, and what we think we are capable or worthy of, limiting the kinds of activities we do, even the way we dress.

- If we're barely represented at all in, for example, TV adverts – just one in four TV adverts feature characters aged 50 or older and one in 20 feature characters aged 70 or older[2] – **it can make us feel invisible and irrelevant**.

- If the few images we do see of older people **reinforce the negative ideas and harmful stereotypes about growing older they can impact on our self-esteem**. They might, for example, maintain the ageist idea that older people are a homogenous group, despite having very different experiences and being increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, health and wealth, interests and lifestyles[3].

- Representing older people via images of wrinkly hands both dehumanises them and discounts their individuality and experience. It sustains the **stereotype that ageing is predominantly about frailty, decline and dependency - an association that is commonly overestimated** – just 1 in 10 people aged 65 and over are defined as frail[4].

- An important contribution to challenging the stereotypical way in which older people are represented is to **increase the visibility of realistic and authentic portrayals of older people** – and images are a powerful way to do that.

What are we doing about it?

The Centre for Ageing Better launched the Age-Positive Image Library in January 2021 to provide alternatives to passive, stereotypical images and to capture the myriad of ways we live as we age.

We're really proud of the fact that the Age-Positive Image Library gives people access to free, realistic, and authentic images of people aged 50+.

We've worked hard to make sure the image library reflects the broadest possible range of people and interests in later life, including photos of people from different backgrounds and communities and in different settings for example LGBTQ+ and disabled people, tackling climate change and older women at work.

If you would like to get better at finding and using photographs that support a more enlightened and realistic view of ageing but you're not sure where to start, this guide is for you.

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Five top tips

Here are 5 top tips for taking and using age-positive photos

1 Avoid negative associations with ageing

Don't rely on images that perpetuate negative associations with ageing. In the media, older age groups are often depicted in a way that focuses on frailty, decline and a loss of independence – reinforcing the stereotype that older people are an object of pity, rather than people who are able to direct their own lives.

Examples include older people photographed in medical and social care settings who seem sad and disempowered, or older individuals in muted colours and passive poses. News stories often use photos of wrinkly hands to illustrate stories about older people, regardless of topic, which can be seen as dehumanising.

2 Don't ignore diversity

Like all age groups, people aged 50 and over are not a homogenous group. It is important to reflect a range of people in your imagery which represents different characteristics including gender, race and ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, geography and more.

Check out our free image library for more inspiration

3 Don't be bound by outdated social norms

Whatever topic you are using images to illustrate, make sure you include a range of age groups. Getting older doesn't mean you stop contributing to and being part of society in different ways or that you stop having varied interests or activities. But that often gets overlooked and older people become less visible in the media we see. For example, if you're illustrating a story about work, remember that a third of the workforce is over 50 – your photography should reflect that. Don't shy away from using imagery of older people for topics often associated with younger people such as studying, socialising and sex – older people should be part of the story you tell on these issues too.

4 The answer isn't super ageing!

While on the face of it, people doing extraordinary things in their later lives might seem like a good antidote to the generally negative images we see of ageing, extremely positive photos of older people skydiving or running marathons isn't very balanced either. And for some it might set an unrealistic ideal of what we should be achieving as we get older. Inspiring photography is of course important – but using a range of images that show people's different experiences is key.

5 Accept that you won't always get it right

None of this is a perfect science – we are all learning how to do it better. So, keep an open mind, keep questioning what you're doing, how you're using imagery and how it might be received. Showing an interest in taking more authentic photos of ageing and reading this guide is a fantastic first step, so congratulations!

References

1   Ageism includes ageist attitudes whereas age discrimination refers to actual treatment (e.g. being denied resources, being insulted etc).

2   Centre for Ageing Better (2023) Ageism, What's the harm. Available online: **ageing-better.org.uk/resources/ageism-whats-harm**

3   Centre for Ageing Better (2023) State of Ageing. Available online: **ageing-better.org.uk/summary-state-ageing-2023-4**

4   Public Health England (2017) Mental health and wellbeing: JSNA toolkit. Available online: **gov.uk/government/publications/better-mental-health-jsna-toolkit/7-living-well-in-older-years** [Section 2.3 Frailty]