

AGEIST? RACIST? WHO, ME?

**A GUIDE TO STARTING A
CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUP
AROUND THE INTERSECTION OF
AGEISM AND RACISM**

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Credits

What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?

Consciousness-raising (CR) is a tool that uses the power of personal experiences to unpack unconscious prejudices and to call for social change.

Participants tell and compare their stories to understand concretely how they are oppressed and why. The process exposes “personal problems”—such as not being able to get a job, feeling invisible, or being excluded—as widely shared social and political problems.

CR groups allow participants to express feelings they otherwise may have dismissed as unimportant and recognize that feelings of inadequacy are a result of discrimination. By surfacing and sharing truths, vulnerabilities, and experiences, participants become more aware of how they feel and what forces shape those feelings.

Consciousness-raising helps us:

- Explore our own biases about race and age: the myths and stereotypes that each of us has internalized over a lifetime, often unconsciously, and may have expressed/reinforced in our interactions. CR provides a safe space for this essential first step.
- Discover how myths, stereotypes, and shared histories about race and aging shape our lives and affect our options—career choices, educational opportunities, leisure activities, etc.
- Break down barriers and connect with others in ways that celebrate our shared humanity.
- Acknowledge that we can't dismantle ageism or racism on our own, but we can figure out ways to enact change in our own lives. Ending discrimination requires collective action.
- Move away from thinking either “This is only my problem” or “This isn't my problem.”
- Swap shame and denial for acceptance and pride. Use conclusions the group arrives at as the basis for individual and collective action.

Consciousness-raising focuses on our own stories. However, confronting bias is more than just a matter of personal well-being. It's a social justice and human rights issue that involves layers of personal bias, interpersonal dynamics, and larger systems.

Laying the Groundwork

Defining ageism and racism

- **Age bias is prejudice and/or discrimination based on age.**
We're ageist any time we make an assumption about someone, or a group of people, based on how old we think they are. Age bias affects everyone, but in a youth-centric culture, older people are more marginalized by it.
- **Racial bias is prejudice and/or discrimination based on race and/or ethnicity.** We're racist any time we make an assumption about someone, or a group of people, based on what racial or ethnic group to which we think they belong. Racial bias relies on an invented hierarchy generally based on skin color and even skin tone within a racial or ethnic group. In a white-supremacist culture, being white or white presenting conveys privilege.

Ageism and racism are both entrenched systems that assign an arbitrary value to human beings. Ageism and racism show up in our interactions with other people, institutions like schools and places of worship, and history and policies. They also show up within ourselves. Much internalized and implicit age and/or racial bias is unconscious.

Defining ageism and racism cont'd:

All discrimination serves a social and economic purpose: to legitimize and sustain inequity between groups.

It's not about how we look. It's about what people with power want our appearance to mean.

We live under capitalism, which benefits from sorting people according to our social and economic “usefulness.” Discrimination is profitable. As author and educator Amos Wilson observed: “If you want to understand any problem in the US, focus on who profits from it, not who suffers from it.”

Everyone ages differently—physically, cognitively, and socially—and experiences ageism differently. Likewise, individuals and communities of color hold multiple identities and encounter discrimination in various ways. An older Black woman, for example, experiences ageism differently than her white counterparts and racism differently from her Latinx counterparts. People don't relate to white supremacy in the same way either.

The term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) emphasizes the unique history and marginalization of Black and Indigenous individuals and communities.

“There's no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't lead single-issue lives.”

- poet and activist Audre Lorde

Laying the Groundwork

Understanding intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes **how different forms of oppression compound and reinforce each other.**

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a glaring example of the intersectional nature of vulnerability itself. The narrative at the beginning of the pandemic was that elders and people with underlying conditions were most at risk. Better tracking revealed other populations also at high risk: Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people were dying at far higher rates than white people. Being younger did make people less vulnerable to the virus. Being white should not have. The risk factor here isn't race. It's racism: the cumulative effect of living in marginalized, economically disadvantaged communities with reduced healthcare access. Older BIPOC were at the highest risk of all.

Just as different forms of oppression compound and reinforce each other, **activism, too, is intersectional.**

When we confront white supremacy (the belief that white people are superior), we not only make the world a better place in which to be Black, we make it a better place in which to be old, and vice versa. We also make the world a better place in which to be female, be disabled, be queer, or poor, come from someplace else—in other words, to be seen by the dominant culture as lesser in any way. It's all one interconnected struggle.

Understanding Ageism and Racism

It's important to acknowledge that people will come to the group with different understandings of ageism and racism. Encourage everyone to continue to learn more about both topics, whether on their own or together.

Where to Start:

To learn more about ageism, visit OldSchool.info - the Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse.

We recommend starting with:

- [*This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*](#) - by Ashton Applewhite
- [*Let's End Ageism*](#) - TED talk by Ashton Applewhite
- [EveryAGE Counts](#) campaign
- [Let's Dismantle Ageism](#) workshop guide
- [*The language of ageism and how we use it against ourselves*](#) - Who Cares? What's the Point? podcast episode

**We acknowledge these are mostly white voices, a shortcoming in the field that we hope this guide will help rectify.*

Where to Start Cont'd:

To learn more about racism, visit [Scaffolded Anti-Racism Resource](#) curated by Anna Stamborski, Nikki Zimmermann, and Bailie Gregory.

We recommend starting with:

- [Racial Equity Tools](#)
- [The 1619 Project](#)
- [A Decade on Watching Black People Die](#) - Code Switch podcast

We also suggest:

- [My Grandmother's Hands](#) by Resmaa Menakem
- [White Rage](#) by Carol Anderson

To learn more about intersectionality:

- [The Urgency of Intersectionality](#) - TED talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw
- [Intersectionality Matters!](#) - podcast
- [None of us is free until all of us are free](#) - TED Talk by Yoruba Richen
- [Diverse Elders Coalition](#)- advocating for elders of color, American Indian elders, and LGBT elders

Creating a Group that Runs Smoothly

Forming the group:

- **Diversity.** If the group is diverse—across age and race/ethnicity, as well as other cultural identities and demographics—members will benefit from a broad range of personal experiences. However, more important than the composition of the group is its commitment to honest, deep reflection, and doing the work. If your group isn't very diverse, talk about it—out loud. What perspectives and experiences are missing? Discuss why this is the case and how you could reach beyond your core group to include those voices.
- **Size & frequency.** Seven to ten people is a good size for everyone to get a chance to speak. Groups usually meet at least once a month.
- **Logistics.** A volunteer facilitator can keep the group on track and reserve time at the end of the meeting for summing up and administrivia (like choosing a discussion topic and location for the next meeting).

Building a foundation of understanding and trust:

- **Avoid tokenism.** Keep in mind not all BIPOC are experts on racism, and not all older people are experts on ageism. Don't expect—or invite—anyone to speak for an entire group of people. Being inclusive means acknowledging and respecting each member's unique experience and perspective.
- **Be aware of taking up space.** Ask members to reflect on whether or not they generally feel heard in a group setting. Encourage everyone to participate.
- **Get curious about what arises.** Curiosity enables us to change our minds and grow.
- **Be open to correction and vulnerability.** We all say things that land the wrong way and/or are interpreted differently than we intended. If something you said is called out, notice your defensiveness. Take a breath instead of reacting. Acknowledge what you heard, and consider the impact of what you said. Later, when you have time, reflect on how you might untangle the bias that led to the call-out.
- **Sit with discomfort.** That's when we grow. Sitting with our discomfort is the hardest, bravest part of culture change. Keep in mind that everyone holds ageist and racist beliefs, and we can't challenge bias unless we're aware of it.

Building a foundation of understanding and trust cont'd:

- **Affirm the importance of confidentiality.** Make the group a safer space. “Things we learn here we take out into the world. Things we say here stay in the room.”
- **Assume good intentions, but don't be afraid to point out problematic statements or ideas.** Ageism and racism are entrenched between our ears and in the world around us. Dismantling them requires us to acknowledge and confront our own biases and, if necessary, to challenge others to do the same. Accept open-ended discussion. Questions don't have to be resolved by the end of the meeting. Instead of trying to achieve closure, suggest that members reflect on the question/issue until you reconvene.

Getting started:

These are suggested guidelines, not inflexible rules. Feel free to make, and break, your own. *However, it's essential members not interrupt or cross-talk*, even if it feels formal or artificial at first, and even if people are interrupting out of enthusiasm. That's what enables people to go deeply into their experience and to listen deeply. Instead of jumping in to fill the void, try taking a big deep breath after each person has finished speaking.

- **Show up, on time.** No group will work unless its members take it seriously and commit to attending. Skipping meetings or perennial lateness isn't conducive to intimacy and depth.
- **Each person speaks**, and no one dominates the discussion. There are a few ways to ensure this:
 - Go around the room counter-clockwise or around the zoom alphabetically.
 - Use a timer with a one-minute warning.
 - Use a landing-airplane hand gesture to signal that it's time to wrap up.
- **Speak up and step back.** Encourage quieter members to speak up if inspired. Invite the more extroverted to explore listening first. A good rule of thumb for more privileged folx is to take a deep breath when you feel the urge to speak; someone else may need that beat to feel comfortable chiming in. It's a dance that will get easier as you all come to know each other better. Be kind to yourself and one another.

Getting started cont'd:

- **Speak personally and specifically** from your own experiences. Try not to generalize about others or to talk in abstractions. Use "I" instead of "they" and "we" instead of "you."
- **Don't challenge someone else's experience.** What another person says is true for them. Instead of invalidating a story that seems off-base, share your own story. Watch your body language and your nonverbal responses, which can also convey disrespect
- **Listen actively.** Pay close attention to the person who is speaking—not only to the words they're using but to the message they're trying to convey. Defer judgment. Listen to understand, not to frame your response. Give the speaker space to be, and be with the speaker in that space.
- **No cross-talking.** Wait for the person who is speaking to finish. Do not interrupt. Take notes if you want to ask a clarifying question or remember a point you'd like to make. Everyone will get a chance to speak.
- **Don't be afraid to disagree**—respectfully. The goal is not to agree but to gain a deeper understanding. If you see things differently, it's important to say so. But be respectful and focus on ideas.

Getting started cont'd:

- **Don't give advice.** The purpose of consciousness-raising is not to help participants solve day-to-day problems but to help us gain strength and clarity as we see other people sharing many of our feelings and experiences.
- **Be mindful of “tone policing,”** which is a way of closing down communication because a group member shares feelings, ideas, or experiences in a frustrated, intense, or emotional way.
- **Sum up.** After everyone has contributed their personal experience with a given topic, work together to find common threads and conclusions. This is when we uncover the social forces that underlie discrimination.

Once you've started meeting regularly:

- **You'll find other people might want to join.** Keep a list of people who express interest. After your group has been meeting for a while, you'll have enough experience for a few of you to help a new group get started. Attend the first meeting or two to make sure it gets on the right track. Before you know it, several groups will be underway, and it'll begin to feel like you belong to a movement.
- **After a while, your group might want to begin study or action projects.** For example, during the Women's Movement of the 1970s, a group in California joined the picket line of women factory workers protesting discriminatory hiring practices. Another group in Washington, D.C., held hearings about the Pill, and several groups began newspapers and magazines.
- **Growing vs. crumbling.** If problems arise, it can be because the group has drifted from the consciousness-raising technique. Sometimes "problems" are just part of forming—and forging—a group. Try beginning with a "check-in," so each person has a chance to share what's on their mind. Every so often, the group may want to devote an entire meeting to evaluating goals and airing any dissatisfactions.

Sample Discussion-Starters:

Note: many of these discussion-starters contain more than one question. It may be helpful to begin by addressing them individually. For instance, discuss the first question, then the second, then talk about how your responses intersect and inform each other.

- When did you become aware of your race? How about your age? How has the way you felt about your race changed over time? How about your age?
- Who do you spend your free time with? Are they close to you in age? Do they identify the same way you do racially/ethnically? Which differences seem easier to connect across, and which are harder? Why do you think this is so?
- Share a time you experienced or witnessed job discrimination. How might ageism and/or racism been at play? Looking back, is there something you wish you'd said or done?
- Which is more challenging for you to talk about, ageism or racism? Why? Why do these tend to be separate conversations? Which one do you know more about, and why? What are some of the things you could learn more about or work on unlearning?
- Do you ever joke about race? Ethnicity? How about age? What makes it okay—or not? What if you're making fun of yourself? What's it like to be on the receiving end? What are some ways to respond to this kind of casual bias?

Sample Discussion-Starters Cont'd:

- What worries you most when you think about getting older? How does fear drive ageism? How is it different from fear based on race/ethnicity? Why are responses from white people likely to differ from those of BIPOC?
- Have you ever said, "Age is just a number"? Or heard someone say, "You can't be that old!" What's behind statements like these? How do they compare to someone saying, "I don't see color," or, "There's only one race: the human race?"
- How do you feel when someone calls you out for being ageist or saying something racist? How about when someone calls you out for being racist or making ageist comments? Why do these two labels carry different weights?
- Share a time when you said or did something that reflected your own marginalized identities. Have you used anti-wrinkle or skin-lightening products, for example, or considered using them?
- What ages and races are best represented in advertisements and on movie screens? Share some examples. Who's selling what, and to whom? What are the underlying messages?
- The US population is steadily growing, both older and less white. How do you feel about those trends? What are some of the implications for power structures, majorities, and coalition-building?

If you want to dig deeper:

- In what ways is Western culture youth-centric? In what ways is Western culture white/Euro-centric? How are these related?
- What do nursing homes and prisons have in common? How are they different? How do the ways older BIPOC interact with these institutions differ from the ways white elders or young BIPOC might do so?
- Can you think of discriminatory practices or attitudes that disproportionately affect older people? (Imposing an age cut-off for medical treatment, for example, or using language like “digital native” in a job description.) How about some that disproportionately affect BIPOC, such as higher incarceration rates? How do they intersect in the lives of older BIPOC? Consider arenas like the workplace and the healthcare system.
- When and where should we strive for communities that are race- and age-diverse? What purpose do self-segregated spaces serve (HBCUs, for example, and retirement communities for people “55+”)? Note: the answer will vary depending on the space.
- All prejudices, including racism and ageism, are socially constructed ideas, which means we make them up. The concept of race was invented to enable and justify oppression. Chronological age, in contrast, is a biological fact. How does this difference inform ageism and racism?
- Racism typically takes on a familiar form throughout someone's life. When it comes to age, we move into and out of privilege. How does this inform power relations over time?
- What does an unflinching look at our shared history reveal about the origins of racism and ageism? In the world? Within us? Who profits and who pays?

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