

THE AGE FRIENDLY MEDIA GUIDE

Guidance for use of language
and images to avoid ageism
when telling stories about
older people



**Decade
of healthy
ageing**

**Aotearoa New Zealand
National Forum**

He Oranga Kaumātua | He Oranga Tāngata

September 2025



“the ways that we talk about and portray our older population could have a big impact on the wellbeing of older people”



About this guide

This guide is designed as a practical tool to support New Zealand's news, media and communications practitioners to respectfully tell stories about older people. It will help you find the right imagery and words to portray older people with respect, dignity and in a way that accurately represents the rich diversity across our older population.

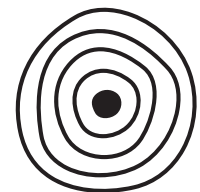
Though well intentioned, so much of New Zealand's news and media portrays older people in a negative way and often reinforces stereotypes and beliefs. Making small but meaningful changes to how we talk about and portray our older population could have a big impact on the wellbeing of older people.

About Us - The Aotearoa New Zealand National Forum for the Decade of Healthy Ageing | He Oranga Kaumātua, He Oranga Tangata

This guide has been produced by the Aotearoa New Zealand National Forum for the Decade of Healthy Ageing | He Oranga Kaumātua, He Oranga Tangata. In keeping with the goals of the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, this group is working to improve the experience and foster the wellbeing of older people in Aotearoa New Zealand. It aims to bring about transformational change, combat ageism, and make New Zealand a better place for all of us as we grow older.

The following organisations are members of the National Forum: The Selwyn Foundation, Age Concern New Zealand, Age Concern Auckland, the Office for Seniors, the Māori Women's Welfare League, Grey Power NZ, Carers NZ, Alzheimers NZ, NZ Council of Christian Social Services, Presbyterian Support NZ, Dementia NZ, Access NZ, Rauawaawa Kaumātua Charitable Trust, the Retirement Commission, the Aged Care Commissioner, NZ Aged Care Association, Haumaru Housing and Eldernet.

The group also benefits from the insights and expertise of: Carole Gordon MNZM, specialist advisor in social and political gerontology; Dr Ngaire Kerse MNZM of the University of Auckland's Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences; Ron Paterson, Emeritus Professor of Law at the University of Auckland and former Health and Disability Commissioner; and Edwina Pio ONZM, Emeritus Professor (New Zealand's first Professor of Diversity) and Director of Diversity at the Auckland University of Technology.

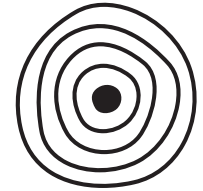


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What is ageism?

The World Health Organization defines ageism as the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards others or ourselves based on age.

Stereotypes are generalised ideas or beliefs about a group of people. They can be harmful when the stereotype doesn't apply to many in the group. *“Older people can't learn new things.”*

Prejudice refers to the attitudes or feelings that people have about members of other groups. These may be a mixture of positive and negative, though they are often negative. *“Older people are all rich and enjoy financial security at the expense of younger people.”*

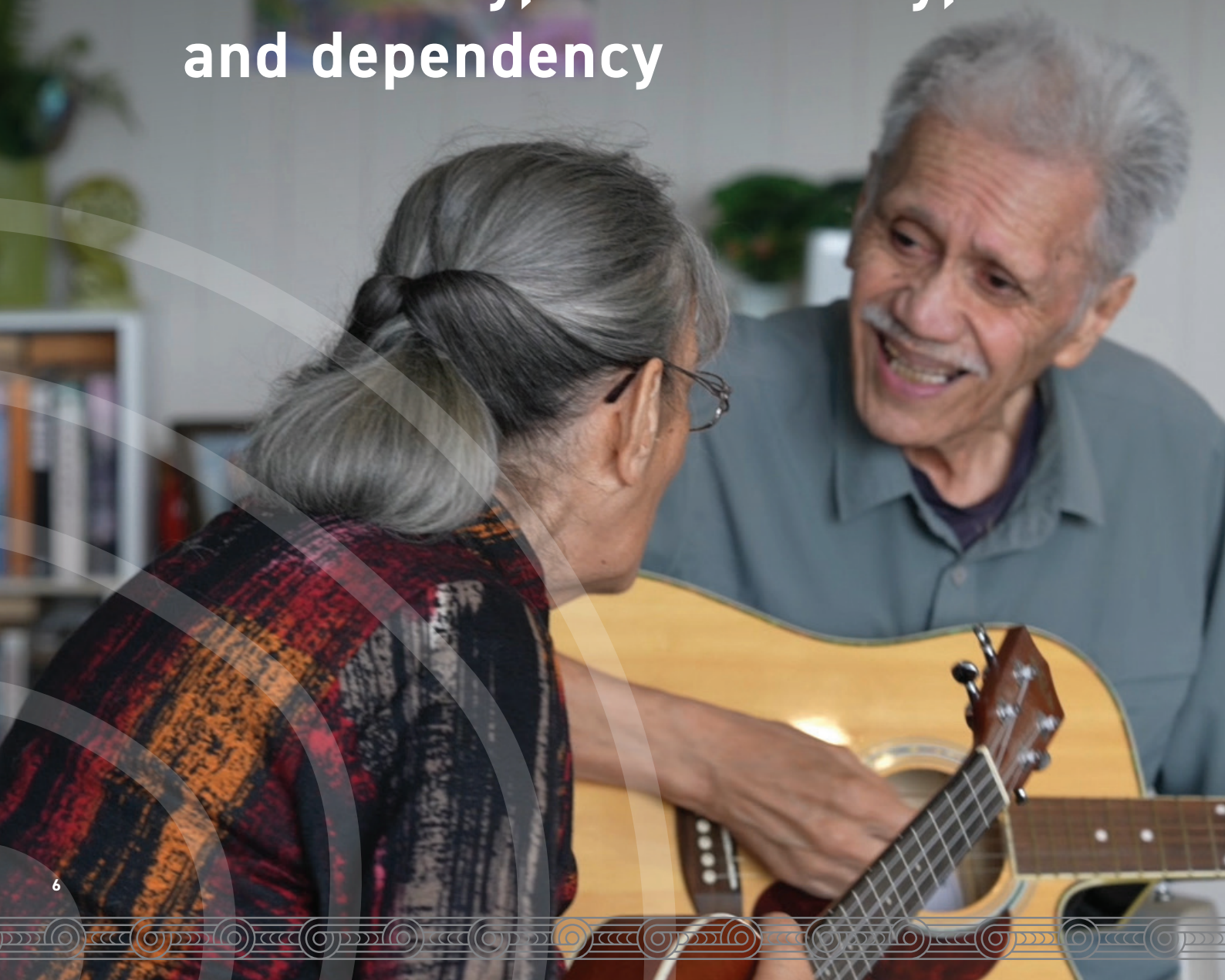
Discrimination means treating people unfairly because they possess certain characteristics. This can mean treating people unfairly because of the ideas held about them due to stereotypes and prejudice. *“A gym refusing a 76-year-old man membership solely on the basis that his age makes him too frail.”*

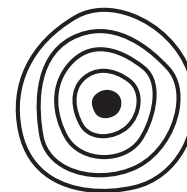
Ageism is widespread in society, including in workplaces, the health system and stereotypes that we see on TV, advertising and in the media. Although ageism can apply to any age group, this guide focuses on ageism towards older people.

Age friendly communications principles

Based on international best practice, the following five communication principles will help you ensure older people are represented fairly and equitably in your stories.

1. Shift associations with frailty, vulnerability, and dependency





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Being older doesn't necessarily mean you are frail, vulnerable, or dependent. Older people continue to contribute to society, communities, their workplaces, the economy and their families/whānau. They have a wealth of intelligence, wisdom and cultural knowledge.

People's contributions and meaning in life continue as they grow older, including with diagnoses of age-related conditions, such as dementia mate wareware. It is also worth noting that most older people do not develop dementia mate wareware.

Telling stories about the contributions older people make to their communities or how they get involved in local events is one way to start shifting these negative associations; focusing on what older people can do rather than what they can't do.

There is a lot of diversity in the older age group. It is important that communications reflect this. Our stories should avoid making assumptions about the characteristics of people or groups based on age, as not everyone over 65 is the same. Unpacking or disaggregating data can shift assumptions about later life and help us understand experiences across age, ethnicity, ability, gender and sexual orientation.

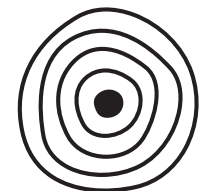
- ✓ Embrace realistic depictions of ageing. People don't have to 'look young for their age' or run marathons to enjoy later life.
- ✓ Give older people a voice in your work. Personal stories and experiences can highlight the diversity of people in later life.
- ✗ Avoid focusing only on portrayals of later life as a time of frailty or assume a life stage means a person has age-specific likes or interests.
- ✗ Don't reinforce ideas that 'successful ageing' is wholly down to an individual's actions. Research clearly shows that how we age is more often a product of our environment, rather than our personal choices.

Telling realistic stories about older people will sometimes involve communication about poverty, crime and health. It's important to consider whether age is an important factor in the story and to avoid catastrophising, by carefully selecting language and putting the story in a broader context. It's also important that stories of hardship are not the only stories told about older people.



2. Use preferred terminology





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Use terms that are precise and accurate.

The term older person/people is respectful and should be the standard if there is a clear need to reference the age of a person or group. When it is relevant to be age-specific, use “people who are 65 years and older”. If possible, ask people what term they prefer, but here are a few dos and don’ts:

Use

Older person
Older people
Older Kiwis
Older individuals
People in later life
Later life
Elderhood
Seniors
Mature
Elder (note that this term has specific meanings in some cultures)
Kaumātua
Kuia
Taua
Whaea
Kōroua
Kōeke
Koroheke
Poua
Matua
Pa Metua
Mātāpuputu

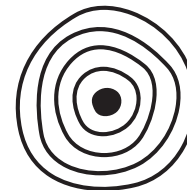
Avoid

Old person/people
Pensioner
Elderly/the elderly
Retiree
Boomer
Dear
Young at heart
Nana (unless it’s relevant to the story)
Old lady
Grandmotherly

- ✓ Try to avoid euphemisms. Language should show an understanding of a person’s situation without pitying them. It’s best to use language that is objective. Many people prefer direct language, for example referring to “dying” rather than “passing”.
- ✓ You may also want to ask for people’s preferences about how others in a story are referred to (e.g. some people may prefer “partner”, “husband/wife” or “loved one”).
- ✗ Making jokes using clichés and phrases.
- ✗ Referring to someone as ‘grandfather or grandmother’ if it isn’t relevant.
- ✗ Don’t call people in retirement villages or rest homes “patients” – they are residents who are living in their own home, even where extra help and assistance is required. We also suggest using specific language when referring to where people live, (for example, differentiate between “retirement villages” and the various forms of residential aged care, such as rest-home level and hospital-level care).

3. Avoid 'othering' and compassionate ageism





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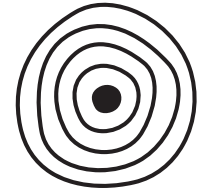
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Avoid using terms and language that evokes undue pity and makes older people sound like a distinct and different group separated from the rest of society.

- ✓ Always refer to people by their names.
- ✓ Where possible try to use inclusive language (e.g. find ways to replace “they” or “them” with “we” or “us”. Instead of saying “what old people need”, try saying “what we need when we’re older”).
- ✗ Avoid compassionate ageism, a well-intentioned but paternalistic mindset, where older people are portrayed as vulnerable and requiring protection.
- ✗ Don't state someone's age or diagnosis unless it is relevant. However, if you must state someone's age, be specific and avoid generalising.
- ✗ Try to avoid using sensationalised language, both negatively (e.g. 'vulnerable', 'desperate' and 'terrified') and positively (e.g. 'beloved' and 'smiling').

4. Help build relationships between generations





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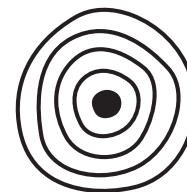
Many of the phrases we use inadvertently create the impression of 'intergenerational conflict' between older and younger generations.

Most people don't believe – for example – that older people benefit at the expense of younger people, or that differing views across generations are divisive.

- ✓ Position information about population ageing in a way that is neutral, thus allowing for a balanced presentation of opportunities and challenges.
- ✗ Avoid metaphors that equate old age with a crisis or create the impression that ageing and older people are a societal burden:
 - grey / silver tsunami
 - demographic cliff
 - dementia crisis
 - bed blockers.
- ✗ Don't mistake age for wealth. Many older people are living on low incomes or don't have a lot of assets, so making sweeping statements about the wealth of older generations is misleading and creates an inaccurate sense of competition for resources between generations.
- ✗ Avoid inaccurate 'boomer' v 'millennial' tropes. These mask the diversity that exists within generations, the value to all citizens of positive intergenerational engagement and encourages unnecessary social divisions.

5. Think carefully about imagery





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Imagery used alongside stories about older people often caricatures later life and portrays older people as sad, lonely and frail. This is particularly concerning when the image does not reflect the context of the story.

It is important to show diverse, realistic, and positive representations of older people. At times, this may mean showing older people that are receiving help or that are unwell, but these should not be the only images we use.

- ✓ Keep images positive but realistic. Avoid unrepresentative images such as older people skydiving or running marathons.
- ✓ Use imagery from Aotearoa New Zealand wherever possible rather than relying on pictures that don't reflect the diversity of our population.
- ✗ Avoid close-ups of wrinkly hands clasped together. The widespread use of this kind of imagery reinforces stereotypes and ageist perceptions.
- ✗ Not all older people have a disability and if they do it is not necessarily visible. Avoid defaulting to images that feature older people with mobility aids such as walking sticks, wheelchairs, or mobility scooters.

Here are some examples of images to illustrate how best to avoid perpetuating ageism in your choice of photos.





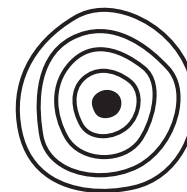






Cultural perspectives on ageing





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While ageism is widespread, we know that it is less prevalent in some contexts. Many people living in New Zealand hold the utmost respect for older people and view ageing as a natural part of life.

Older Māori hold significant mana. They are valued by their whānau, hapū and iwi for upholding Māori culture and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and legacy.

They are often viewed as anchors in their community, taking on important leadership roles, leading their family units and caring for children. Some older Māori often have specific roles and responsibilities, including as speakers of te reo Māori and holders of mātauranga Māori.

The word kaumātua is often used to refer to older Māori. However, we suggest checking preferred terminology before using this term. Some use the word kaumātua to refer to older Māori with specific cultural knowledge, skills or leadership abilities. Others use the word to refer to all older Māori or to all older people.

In Pacific cultures, matua are traditionally revered, treasured and seen as the cornerstones of their families. In most cultures, matua look after the extended family, hold knowledge of their collective lands and genealogies and have leadership roles in their communities and churches. They teach others based on their experience and are often looked to for guidance.

These roles are considered lifelong, with no notion of retirement. In some Pacific cultures, reaching this stage of life is less about being a certain age and more about reaching a level of maturity or wisdom. Older age is viewed as a time where people can make the biggest contribution to their communities, by building the strength of their families and descendants.

Filial piety is considered a central concept of family care in many Asian contexts, though the norm differs across cultures. It refers to prioritising the concerns of the older generations and creates a lifelong expectation of care for older people. This devotion is reciprocal, with everyone's wellbeing seen as crucial to the strength of the family unit. Filial piety requires practical support for older generations, as well as emotional support.

This is often reciprocated by older people who take care of their grandchildren. Older people are viewed with respect, reverence and are valued members of their family units and communities.

These cultural differences can clash with the widespread ageism found in New Zealand society. Older people may find that they are treated well by their family and community but have a very different experience in the workforce or when accessing services.

Changing cultural contexts, along with colonisation and racism have also impacted traditional cultural norms and in some cases ageist attitudes have been introduced. When telling stories about older people, it is important to be cognisant of these nuances.



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Changing the conversation

We don't always think carefully about what we say and can perpetuate ageism without even realising it. When you hear people using ageist stereotypes or displaying ageist attitudes, try to explain how the language they use can impact people.

Sharing stories and personal experiences that challenge common stereotypes can be an effective way of changing people's perception of later life and showing that the ageing process is different for everyone.

Everyone will age, therefore let's change the narrative and invest in our future wellbeing together. The Aotearoa New Zealand National Forum for the Decade of Healthy Ageing | He Oranga Kaumātua, He Oranga Tangata was established in 2023 in response to the global UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030).

A collaboration of leading organisations and professionals that provide services for or advocate on behalf of older people and their families/whānau, the National Forum is focused on improving the experience of ageing in Aotearoa New Zealand and providing a platform for transformational change. Learn more at: www.nzdecade.org.nz.



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