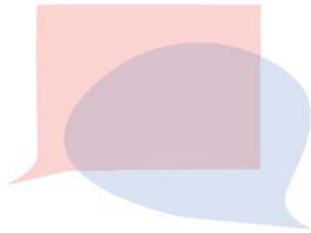


REMOVING BARRIERS SERIES

INTERACTING WITH SENIORS

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE



We may have been misled by the myths of ageing because negative stereotypes about growing older have been constantly reinforced. It is therefore beneficial to understand more about the ageing process and communicating effectively with seniors. This will enable us to better include, appreciate and empower seniors as active members of society, as seniors are equipped with rich experiences to share and many more good years to contribute.

Through this booklet, we aim to help you remove the barriers by debunking some myths surrounding ageing and providing tips on how to better interact with seniors.

ARE YOU AN AGEIST (without even knowing so)?

You can use the following checklist to examine whether you are ageist toward yourself (and others).¹

- Do you avoid doing things you'd like to do because you are afraid your age might make you feel out of place?
- Do you find yourself thinking things like, I can't do that (start a new career, go dancing, take a vacation) because I'm too old?
- Do you feel that it is inevitable that negative and extreme age-related changes will happen to you? Do you feel that there is nothing that you can do about these changes?
- Do you equate looking old with looking bad?
- Do you pretend to others or yourself that you are younger than you are?
- Do you find yourself feeling ashamed of physical signs of ageing such as age spots and wrinkles?
- Do you find yourself avoiding the seniors or frail people in your life?
- Do you find yourself not wanting to think about being a senior because of your own fears (particularly if they are in places that make you uncomfortable, such as nursing homes or hospitals)?
- Do you feel that on issues such as employment or leadership you have few choices because of your age?
- When you hear that someone that you are about to meet is over 75 do you assume that they're "over the hill"?



¹ Navigating the Aging Process, Age Discrimination: Ageism

MYTHS OF AGEING

Myth 1: Seniors are deteriorating physically

Fact:

More and more seniors are staying healthy and energetic longer with increased physical and social activities, improved diet and better healthcare.

Myth 2: All seniors will eventually suffer from dementia

Fact:

Currently only 1 in 10 of those over 60 has dementia. Not only do most people retain their knowledge and skills throughout their lifetime, many people continue to learn and grow even beyond 60 or 70 years old.

Myth 3: Seniors are all the same and they have the same needs

Fact:

Given differences in gender, culture, education, beliefs and socio-economic background, seniors have diverse personalities as well as needs and should be treated as individuals.





Myth 4: Seniors are grumpy and want to be left alone

Fact:

Growing older has no direct bearing on someone's character as our character is shaped by our experiences. Given the opportunity, 68.2% of seniors desire to form new friendships.²

Myth 5: Seniors are poor learners

Fact:

With the right learning opportunities and method of instruction, seniors can make good use of their life experiences to process new information and knowledge, and perform as well as others in training courses.

Myth 6: Seniors are uncreative and unproductive

Fact:

In 2014, 66% of Singaporeans aged 55 to 64 are employed,³ a clear indication that seniors are actively participating in the workforce. A well-managed multigenerational workforce is also considered beneficial to workplace productivity, creativity and innovation, talent attraction, reduced turnover and increased competitive advantage.

² Perception and Attitudes towards Ageing and Seniors Survey (2013/2014)

³ Singapore Budget 2015: Employers have incentives to hire older workers: Amy Khor

DISCUSSING BARRIERS



Understanding common barriers is an important step toward increasing awareness and readjusting our own mindsets. New mindset fosters new understanding and behaviour that will enable us to improve and enrich our interaction with seniors at home, in the workplace and in the community.

Perception

Some of us tend to form hasty opinion of others, not grounded in facts. Our preconceptions may be coloured by our misunderstanding or belief in myths related to seniors. Therefore, we must be conscious about the biases created by such misperceptions and not allow them to distort reality and affect our relationship with seniors.

Tip

Have an open mind – be mindful of our pre-existing perceptions and stereotypes about ageing and seniors. Approach each senior without judgement and allow the current experience to speak for itself.

Lack of Information

We may have limited understanding of the changes (physiological, psychological and social-cultural) that all of us will go through as we age. We therefore make many inaccurate generalisations about seniors' state of mind and needs. This leads us to treat seniors with "special considerations", which creates more barriers.

Tip

Gain better understanding – find out more about the ageing process and the changes that come with it. With better self-awareness, you will not be misled by misconceptions that devalue seniors' skills or ability.

Cultural

All of us have different cultures, values and beliefs due to our backgrounds and life experiences. These shape our opinions and behaviour, and how we interact with others. One may express his or her opinions very straightforwardly to a senior, unaware that such behaviour is actually making the senior less willing to open up.

Tip

Respect and empathise – treat seniors with respect and appreciate them as individuals. You may have different opinions but putting yourself in the seniors' shoes will help you understand their feelings and point of view.

Language

Sometimes we do not speak the same language or dialects as the seniors we are trying to interact with. We may also use slang or technical terms that are hard to understand.

Tip

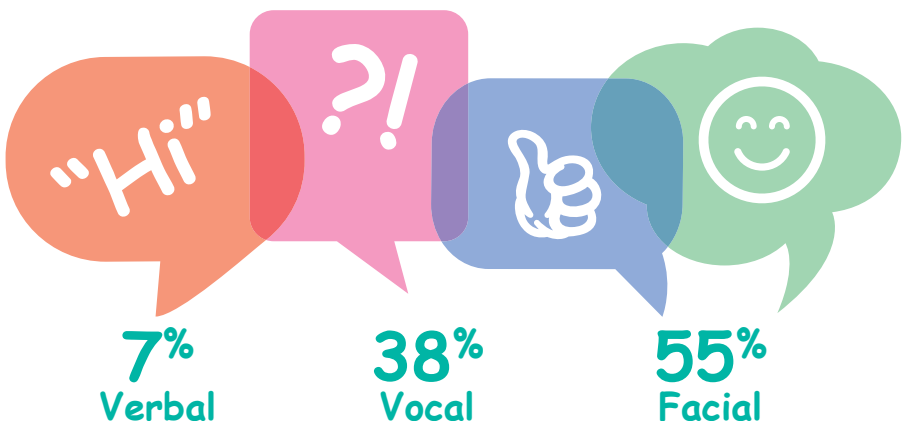
Listen well – Try shifting from verbal to non-verbal and visual communication, such as hand gestures and facial expressions. Draw pictures or play a video, if necessary. The most important thing here is making the effort to communicate, with patience and creativity.



Do you know?

Actual spoken words only constitute 7% of the communication process.

A message pertaining to feelings and attitudes = 7% Verbal (words that are spoken) + 38% Vocal (the way words are said) + 55% Facial (expressions and gestures) ⁴



⁴ Mehrabian, A. (1981). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*.

YOU MAY ENCOUNTER...

Interaction with seniors close to you

While we are busy working or schooling, we may have neglected our senior family members or seniors who are close to us. Making the effort to spend time with them will provide them with the emotional support they need to live each day with joy and fulfilment.

Observations:

- Is there any unhappiness or discontentment between you and your senior family members?
- Do the seniors always have something to look forward to, e.g. hobbies or interests?
- Do seniors have social support, such as friends or neighbours whom they can talk to?
- Is there any unusual reaction or behaviour, e.g. seniors always feeling worried?

Tips:

- If there is unhappiness or discontentment between you and your senior family member, try to resolve the issue with him/her. If you face difficulty solving the issue or communicating to the senior, seek professional assistance (i.e. helplines, counselling services).
- Speak with the senior often to understand their thoughts and needs. Accompany the senior for outings, appointments or try out new activities together.
- Encourage the senior to develop interests and participate in recreational activities, which will help them establish wider social network.
- Take time to find out and understand what is causing the senior to be reacting differently.
- Sign up for caregiving training courses to better equip yourself in your role as caregiver.

“Seniors are like books with no titles, you will be intrigued as you read through the pages and understand more. Take some time to slow down your pace and listen to the seniors’ stories.”

*~ Lim Hwee Er,
Principal Occupational Therapist*

Interaction with seniors in the community

We are usually preoccupied with our own thoughts and activities in crowded malls and busy streets to pay attention to others. There will be times, however, when we interact with seniors in the community and we need to be more attentive to their needs and concerns.

Observations:

- Is the senior accompanied by a family member or friend?
- Does the senior look lost or unsure what to do?
- Does the senior seem worried or upset about something?
- Is there any unusual reaction or behaviour e.g. standing still, looking around for long period of time, pacing?

Tips:

- Approach the senior gently and talk to him/her with a warm smile.
- Find out if the senior has special needs, e.g. visual or physical impairment, and plan your interaction accordingly.
- Be sensitive about how you act and respond respectfully.
- If the senior does not seem to remember anything, check if senior has a Safe Return Card or any form of identification with the contact details of family members.
- If you are volunteering, understand more about seniors' needs, interests and habits. Attend training that will help equip you with relevant skills and techniques to interact with seniors with different needs.

“A firm handshake and a warm smile are most comforting. Open up yourself to the seniors and share information about yourself, family, job or interests. The seniors will slowly warm up to you.”

*~ Loong Lee Lee,
Senior Activity Centre Manager*

Do you know?

Family members and caregivers of persons with dementia are often concerned about their safety and well-being. The Safe Return Card serves as a means of identification if persons with dementia lose their way. The card also enables members of the public to extend appropriate assistance to them. Check out the Useful Resources section to apply!



USEFUL RESOURCES

Sign Up Activities

Council for Third Age	6358 0333	www.c3a.org.sg
RSVP Singapore The Organisation of Senior Volunteers	6259 0802	www.rsvp.org.sg

Helplines

Singapore Silver Line	1800-650-6060	www.silverpages.sg
The Seniors Helpline	1800-555-5555	www.sagecc.org.sg

Counselling Services

O'Joy Care Services	6749 0190	www.ojoy.org
SAGE Counselling Centre	6354 1191	www.sagecc.org.sg
Hua Mei Centre for Successful Ageing	6593 9512	www.tsaofoundation.org

Resources for Caregivers

Alzheimer's Disease Association ▪ Dementia helpline ▪ Apply safe return card	6377 0700	www.alz.org.sg
AWWA Centre for Caregivers	6511 5318	www.awwa.org.sg
Care In Mind		www.careinmind.aic.sg

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS

International Day of Older Persons (IDOP) is an annual international event that recognises the contributions of older persons. Activities organised around the event aim to help seniors build and strengthen existing support networks, and to ensure that they are better included, understood and appreciated in the community.

The National Council of Social Service will be pushing out various initiatives in support of IDOP, and the publication of this booklet is just a beginning. We hope that you have gained more awareness on removing barriers and improving communication with seniors through this booklet. So make a change today – **it all starts with you.**

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Clinical Director, O'Joy Care Services

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