

# IS AGEISM HOLDING YOU BACK?



HOW INTERNALISED ATTITUDES ABOUT AGE CAN LIMIT YOUR LIFESTYLE, AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

We all know what ageism looks like when it comes from others - those frustrating moments when we're overlooked, dismissed or underestimated simply because of the number on our birth certificate. What's less visible - yet often just as limiting - is the ageism we place on ourselves. Recent research from National Seniors Australia reveals that one-third of older Australians are holding themselves back from activities they'd love to try, simply because they feel self-conscious about their age.<sup>1</sup>

## Understanding internalised ageism

We often talk about ageism in the workplace, but its impact doesn't stop when we leave paid employment. It can follow us into retirement in subtler ways - like hesitation, doubt, or the quiet voice that says, "That's not for someone my age." The National Seniors survey showed that this self-consciousness stems from various sources - anticipated negative reactions from others, concerns about physical appearance, and fears about being the only older person in the group.

This internal voice of doubt can be powerful. It's the hesitation before joining a gym class, the reluctance to try something new, or the automatic self-exclusion from certain activities. These thoughts might feel personal, but they're often reflections of broader societal attitudes about age that we've unconsciously absorbed.

## When self-consciousness holds us back

The National Seniors Survey identified specific activities people commonly avoid due to age-related self-consciousness:

- Physical activities topped the list, with many avoiding swimming, fitness classes, and sports
- Social and cultural events, particularly live music venues and festivals
- Learning opportunities, from formal education to new hobbies
- Travel adventures, especially solo trips or more challenging destinations
- Group activities where they might be the oldest participant



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These self-imposed restrictions come at a real cost to our wellbeing: physical activities are essential for maintaining health and independence. Social connections through group activities and community involvement support mental health and cognitive function, while learning new skills keeps our minds sharp and provides a sense of achievement. While skipping an event here or there may not seem like a big deal, these small decisions can add up.

## Finding your confidence

Moving past age-related self-consciousness starts with small steps:

### Create a supportive environment

- Look for off-peak gym times when the atmosphere is more relaxed
- Research classes specifically designed for seniors
- Start with community centres that typically attract diverse age groups
- Join local walking groups or exercise clubs that welcome all fitness levels

### Bring support

- Ask a friend to join you in trying something new
- Connect with others through local community groups or online forums
- Find a workout buddy through your local fitness centre
- Join group activities where you can meet like-minded people

## Question your assumptions

When you catch yourself thinking “I’m too old for that,” pause and ask yourself why. Would you say that to a friend your age? Often, our harshest age-related judgments are reserved for ourselves.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

### Start with what interests you

Don’t force yourself into activities just because they seem “age appropriate.” Follow your genuine interests, whether that’s dancing, singing, art, learning a new skill or language, or joining a book club.

### Take it step by step

Begin with a beginners’ class or a trial session. Many organisations offer free first classes or short-term trials. This allows you to test the waters without committing long-term.

### Find your tribe

Research shows that people who find the right group are more likely to stick with activities. Look for:

- Groups that match your pace and interests
- Instructors who understand different ability levels
- A mix of ages and abilities that makes everyone feel included

### Speak up

Most instructors and group leaders are happy to accommodate different abilities and comfort levels - but they need to know what works for you. Don’t hesitate to:

- Ask for modifications that suit your needs
- Request additional explanation or demonstration
- Share any concerns about particular movements or activities

### Creating positive change

The National Seniors research shows that people who push past age-related self-consciousness often discover their fears were unfounded. Many find welcoming communities and new passions that enhance their retirement years. By participating in activities you enjoy, regardless of age, you’re helping create more inclusive spaces for everyone.

Remember, age is just one aspect of who you are. Your interests, abilities and desire to try new things are equally important parts of your identity. By challenging internalised ageism, you’re not just improving your own retirement experience - you’re helping create a more age-positive society for everyone.

<sup>1</sup> <https://nationalseniors.com.au/uploads/2024-NSA-Elements-of-Ageism-2-09.10.24.pdf>

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