

In a previous post, I wrote briefly on the phenomenon of ageism and offered some suggestions as to how this prejudice can be confronted and addressed in society. I ended with a quote from Ashton Applewhite in which she eloquently states that when confronted by an ageist statement, one must begin by “Educating others, kindly and tactfully, [in order to send] that change outward like ripples across a pond.”<sup>1</sup> While Ms. Applewhite certainly is not advocating for starting arguments with people when they make ageist statements, speaking up to tell someone that you find implicit bias within a statement they have made may seem like an impossible task to those of us who have a non-confrontational bent to our personalities.

So, how is this kind and tactful education to take place? In my experience, asking a question when you don’t know what to say is a great place to start. In this example, one could ask a question about the intent of the statement. For instance, questions like “What do you mean by that?” or “Can you explain that to me?” could be a way to open up the conversation. It is very likely that the person making the ageist statement did not realize they were saying something offensive. Instead, it is likely that they were trying to be funny, or to deflect their own discomfort with the ageing process. Drawing attention to the statement and asking them to elaborate can be an easy, nonconfrontational way to show that they misspoke, and maybe even begin a good conversation about the prevalence of ageism within our society.

Things might become a little more challenging if the speaker doubles-down. Maybe they did not realize they were making an ageist statement initially, but after it is brought to their attention, they decide to stand by it. Confrontation can make people dig in deeper, especially when the conversation threatens to reveal something they don’t want to see. If this is the case, I would suggest here that questions can continue to be effective, perhaps even more so than

pointing out the speaker's error explicitly. Continue to ask the person to elaborate and listen empathetically to what they have to say. When you ask questions, the other person has to figure out why their comment was questionable; you do not have to explain it to them. In the end, you may not be able to guide them to a place where they experience "cognitive liberation", or freedom from their prejudices, within this conversation. It may even feel like the conversation ends without the other person recognizing that they said something offensive. You may, however, have planted a seed that causes them to think more about their attitudes and beliefs in the future. It can be surprising which conversations stick with us and continue to cause us to think.

At the end of "This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism", Ashton Applewhite offers numerous suggestions for other places to start to begin the work of dismantling ageism. These include ideas for addressing your own ageist thoughts when they pop up, suggestions for language choices to use and language choices to avoid, and finally some ideas for starting a consciousness-raising group around age bias. While I would highly recommend reading the book itself, these resources can also be found at [thischairrocks.com/resources](http://thischairrocks.com/resources).

## References

1. Applewhite A. *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism*. New York: Celadon Books; 2020.