

ASHTON APPLEWHITE: THIS CHAIR ROCKS & CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

Ageism globally is a major societal problem that includes stereotyping of older people, racism, delivery of age service provisions, elder abuse, and similar which impacts on people aged sixty-five and over. In a new paradigm embracing conscious aging these attitudes are being challenged by various advocates. Ashton Applewhite is one of many leading pioneers and through her books, website presence, lecture tours, including a presentation at the United Nations, above aging issues are raised.

In her seminal book “This Chair Rocks” Applewhite, her ‘manifesto against ageism’ attempts to bring aging discrimination into a wider public forum. Applewhite suggests one strategy is to consider forming a local “Consciousness Raising Group.” Applewhite provides a set of proposed group guidelines that can be easily implemented in small local group gathering at private homes. These provide both facilitator and participants with potential questions, and suitable group format. In 2019 my wife and I attended a public lecture given by Applewhite at the UTAS Menzies Centre in Hobart Tasmania, as part of her Australian sponsored “Every Age Counts” nationwide tour. We were both delighted and inspired by the content. A “Manifesto” background brief from the above book along with details of how to form your own “Conscious Aging Group” follow.

—Philip Crouch, Tasmania, 2020

ASHTON APPLEWHITE: THIS CHAIR ROCKS “MANIFESTO” BACKGROUND

“From childhood on, we’re barraged by messages that it’s sad to be old. That wrinkles are embarrassing, and old people useless. Author and activist Ashton Applewhite believed them too—until she realized where this prejudice comes from and the damage it does. Lively, funny, and deeply researched, This Chair Rocks traces Applewhite’s journey from apprehensive boomer to pro-aging radical, and in the process debunks myth after myth about late life.

The book explains the roots of ageism—in history and in our own age denial—and how it divides and debases, examines how ageist myths and stereotypes cripple the way our brains and bodies function, looks at ageism in the workplace and the bedroom, exposes the cost of the all-American myth of independence, critiques the portrayal of elders as burdens to society, describes what an all-age-friendly world would look like, and concludes with a rousing call to action. Whether you’re older or hoping to get there, this book will shake you by the shoulders, cheer you up, make you mad, and change the way you see the rest of your life. Age pride!”



The following information is drawn from “Who me Ageist?” How To Start your own Conscious Aging Group. **No one is born prejudiced, but attitudes about age—as well as race and gender—start to form in early childhood.** Over a lifetime they harden into a set of truths: “just the way it is.” Unless we challenge ageist stereotypes—*Old people are incompetent. Wrinkles are ugly. It’s sad to be old*—we feel shame and embarrassment instead of taking pride in the accomplishment of aging. That’s internalized ageism.

ASHTON APPLEWHITE: 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 in order to understand concretely how they are oppressed and who’s doing the oppressing. This shows them that “personal problems”—such as not being able to get a job, being belittled, or feeling sidelined—are actually widely shared political problems.

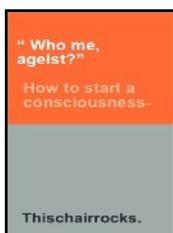
Because ageism is so pervasive and unchallenged, its effects can be difficult to pinpoint. **CR** groups allow participants to express feelings they may have dismissed as unimportant, and to recognize that feelings of inadequacy are actually a result of being discriminated against. By sharing truths, vulnerabilities, and experiences, participants become more aware of how they feel and what forces shape those feelings.

- **Explore our own internalized biases** about age and aging: the myths and stereotypes that each of us has internalized over a lifetime, often unconsciously. **CR** provides a safe space for this essential first step.
- **Discover how myths and stereotypes** about aging, both positive and negative, shape our lives, and what other opportunities and choices are available to us.
- **Break down barriers** and connect in ways that celebrate our shared humanity and the cycles of life. People often feel competitive with people much younger or older than they are, or isolated from them.
- **Get to the root of the social** and economic forces behind ageism: who benefits and who pays.



- **Acknowledge that we can't dismantle ageist thinking and behavior on our own**, because ending discrimination requires collective action. Part of the problem is thinking, “ This is only my problem.”
- **Swap shame and denial of aging for acceptance and age pride.**
- Take action**, using conclusions the group has arrived at as the basis for our theory and strategy.

**CONFRONTING AGEISM ISN'T JUST A MATTER OF PERSONAL WELL-BEING:
...IT'S A SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE.**



For some people, consciousness-raising will only create internal change. This is completely valid. Ideally, the process will radicalize others to participate in whatever actions are necessary to end discrimination on the basis of age. Historically, when prejudice and discrimination go unchallenged, they stop being identified as oppression and become “normal” or “natural.”

Consciousness-raising exposes these ways of thinking as social constructs that we can change. **Consciousness-raising is the first step in a process of social change** that involves conversation, collaboration, activism, art, advocacy, and eventually legislation. When one group struggles for social equality, it helps other disempowered groups.

The civil rights movement did more than work towards equal rights for people of color in the United States. It also spread the idea that discrimination based on anything other than the content of a person's character is unethical and unacceptable, and that no one should accept second-class citizenship.

The women's movement not only improved women's lives, it paved the way for more progressive views of the workplace, gender, and family. Now it's time to mobilize against discrimination on the basis of age.

ASHTON APPLEWHITE: SUGGESTED GROUP GROUND RULES

- (1) Show up.** No group will work unless its members take it seriously and commit to attending.
- (2) Arrive on time.**



- (3) 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. Just listen carefully.
- (4) No cross-talking.** Wait for the person who is speaking to finish what she/he has to say. Don’t interrupt except to ask a specific informational question or to clarify a point. Take notes if you want to remember something you’d like to say when it’s your turn. *Everyone will get a chance to speak.*
- (5) What happens in the room stays in the room.**
Consciousness raising discussions are confidential.
- (6) It is vitally important that each person speaks and that no one dominates the discussion.**
One way to ensure this is to go around in a circle, which also helps the discussion stay on topic. Another is to supply each member with several poker chips, which get tossed in the middle each time they talk.
- (7) 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.”
- (8) Don’t challenge someone else’s experience.**
What another person says is true for him or her. Instead of invalidating a story that seems off base, share your own story. Watch for body language and nonverbal responses, which can be as disrespectful as words.
- (9) Don’t be afraid to disagree—respectfully.**
The goal is not to agree, but to gain a deeper understanding. It’s important to communicate honestly and speak up if we perceive things differently. But assert your opinions respectfully and refrain from personal attacks. Focus on ideas.



(10) Participate to the fullest of your ability.

Progress and community depend on the inclusion of every individual voice. The more you put into the experience, the more you'll get out of it.

(11) Try not to give advice.

The purpose of consciousness-raising is not to help participants solve day-to-day problems, but to help us gain strength through the knowledge that other people share many of our feelings and experiences.

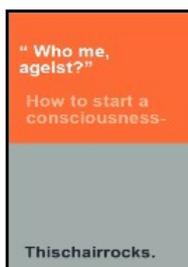
(12) Sum up.

After everyone has related their personal experience with the topic, the group works to find common threads and see what conclusions can be drawn. This is when we begin to discover the nature of the social forces that oppress us all.

(13) These are suggested guidelines, not inflexible rules.

Feel free to make—and break—your own. It's very important, however, for members not to 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. Try taking two breaths after each person has finished speaking instead of jumping in to fill the void.

ASHTON APPLEWHITE: A SAMPLE OF AGEISM DISCUSSION STARTERS



- How do you think aging differs for men and for women?
- How do you feel when someone says “ You look great for your age!”
- What, if anything, are you looking forward to in the next decade?
- How about the decade(s) after that?



- How do you think aging differs for men and for women?
- How do you feel when someone says “ You look great for your age!”
- What do you fear about growing older?
- What’s surprising about getting older?
- How do you feel about people offering you a seat on the bus?
- When and how should people offer assistance?

- What do you think about relationships with a big age difference?
- Do you think that younger people should have priority for organ transplants?
- How would you feel about using a cane? A walker? A wheelchair?
- Do you think there are certain clothes that older people shouldn’t wear?
- Should older people in physically demanding jobs, like firemen and doctors, have mandatory physical exams? What about older drivers?
- How do you relate to people significantly older or younger than you?
- Do you have friends of all ages or mostly peers? What’s the basis for your cross-generational friendships?
- Has getting older changed the way you feel about sex?
- What do you think of the term “ageless?” How about “anti-aging”?
- Do you see value in living to be very, very old?



Suggested resources:

<https://www.bookdepository.com/This-Chair-Rocks/9781911545262>

<https://thischairrocks.com/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/ashton_applewhite_let_s_end_ageism

Consciousness Raising: Ashton Applewhite

<https://thischairrocks.com/resources/>

