



Building Empathy for Older People

Perspective-Taking and Perspective-Getting with Older Adults

Empathy Training Series

BWRS Description: These exercises give participants an opportunity to try out two of the most common methods of building empathy with the goal of connecting with and better understanding older adults. The exercises could be used separately, but they could also be used as a part of a series at a longer event.

Overview: These exercises create opportunities for participants to practice perspective-taking and perspective-getting with older adults in order to build empathy. Group discussion and individual journaling time will follow each exercise to help participants to process their thoughts. These exercises can be done with any number of people as long as they can be separated into smaller groups.

Category: diversity; communication skills; dialogue; reflection

Level: These exercises are suitable for all levels.

Bonner Outcomes: Critical Thinking and Perspective Taking
Communication Skills
Diversity and Intercultural Competence
Empathy

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Participants will practice perspective-taking and reflecting on the experiences of older adults
- Participants will practice perspective-getting through conversation with older adults
- Participants will reflect on their experience in group discussion and individual reflection

How to Prepare:

In this guide, there are two different exercises. Each exercise has 4-5 activities. The facilitator can choose whether to pick one or to do both exercises, given their own time limits. Please review the sections below for a detailed explanation of each exercise.

Exercise # 1: Perspective-Taking

Suggested time: 60-65 minutes (with 30-minute optional addendum)

Materials:

- A room equipped with tables and chairs
- Internet access, computer, projector, and screen
- A large, rectangular piece of paper (like butcher paper or oversized construction paper), big enough to add all participants' post-it notes.
- Masking tape
- Post-it notes
- Paper and pens for reflection time

How to prepare:

1. Make sure that each table has at least one stack of post-its, some paper (at least one piece for every chair), and pens.
2. Use masking tape to hang a large piece of paper on the wall. Position the paper horizontally so that multiple participants will be able to approach it simultaneously.

Brief Outline:

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1) Introduce the activity | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 2) View documentaries about old age | suggested time 20-30 minutes |
| 3) Group reflection | suggested time 10-15 minutes |
| | (optional addendum of 30 minutes fits in here) |
| 4) Individual reflection | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 5) Wrap up | suggested time 5 minutes |
| | Total: 60-65 minutes |
| | (90-95 minutes with addendum) |

Part 1) Introduce the activity

Suggested time: 5 minutes

Welcome the participants. Make sure everyone knows everyone else's name. Feel free to use a short icebreaker such as:

Welcome, everyone! To get us started today, let's make sure we all know each other. Let's go around one at a time and share our name and one of our favorite genres of music.

Then, you can begin to introduce the exercise. Start by asking participants about their experience of relating with older adults.

Today, we are going to try to better understand the perspective of older adults. By a show of hands, how many of you know an older adult (age 70+)? How many of you regularly relate to an older adult? For those of you that do relate to an older adult regularly, how many of you feel like you know pretty well what their everyday life is like?

Ask a few participants to briefly share one word that sums up their impression of what life must be like for the older adults in their life (e.g.—fun, sad, happy, fulfilled, frustrated, etc.).

Express appreciation for the responses that were given, then state the goal of the exercise.

Thank you for all for sharing. Some of us have regular contact with older adults, and some of us do not. Even those of us who do have regular contact may have some difficulty understanding the mindset of people who are of a much older generation than us.

Today, we are going to watch a couple of documentaries that give some older people a chance to voice their opinions about aging and their daily life.

Part 2) View documentaries about old age

Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

This activity involves participants watching two documentaries about aging and the lives of older adults. There are suggested documentaries for use in this section. Other documentaries could work as well, as long as the discussion questions are tailored to fit those particular films.

First, we are going to watch this film, Junk Mail. As you watch, try to notice what kinds of feelings are expressed by each of the people portrayed, either verbally or through physical action.

Show the video at this URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/415809/a-story-of-growing-old/>

After showing this film, introduce the next one. In depth discussion will happen after both films are complete. However, *Junk Mail* is an emotionally heavy film, so a sensitive transition may be required before moving into the more light-hearted second film, *The Blessings of Aging*.

Let's take a moment to acknowledge the many emotions in the film Junk Mail. What were some of the emotions that you picked up on?

Allow a couple of participants to call out answers. Then, thank them for sharing and introduce the next film.

Thank you for sharing your responses. We'll get another chance to discuss Junk Mail in a little while. But first, we're going to watch one more short documentary called, "The Blessings of Aging." This one has a lighter tone, and it addresses a different perspective on aging. As you watch, pay attention to the feelings that are expressed by the people featured in the film.

Show the video at this URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-blessings-of-aging>

Part 3) Group reflection

Suggested time: 10-15 minutes
(Or 40-45 minutes with addendum)

This activity has a short individual component that will involve each participant writing a short answer in response to a prompt and posting it on a large piece of paper. Then, there will be group discussion afterward.

Step 1 - Posting thoughts on the wall

Since everyone has been sitting for so long, make an invitation to stand up and stretch. Then, invite participants to use post-it notes and pens to write down their responses to the following prompts:

1. How did you feel when watching these films?
2. Did these films remind you of someone you know? If so, write down that person's name and/or relationship to you.

Once participants have written their responses on the post-its provided, they can post their responses on the large piece of paper on the wall.

After about 2-3 minutes, tell everyone to remain standing by the wall. Choose a couple of the post-its to read aloud and then make a transitional statement into the group discussion portion of the activity.

Thank you, everyone, for these great responses. It is important to take note of the feelings that bubble to the surface when we are given insight into someone else's experience. This practice will help us to build empathy.

Now we're going to move into a group discussion time to reflect on the experiences of the people in the films that we watched.

Step 2 - Group discussion

Ask everyone to divide into groups of three.

Here are some questions for discussion:

1. How did you feel when watching the documentaries?
2. What are some similarities and differences between the people featured in the films? What factors do you think play an important role in their quality of life?
3. In these films, what were some of the challenges that you saw, heard, or inferred that older people face with aging? What are some ways to mitigate these challenges?

Notes:

- The repetition of the question about the participants' feelings is intentional. Discussing their feelings first may make it easier for participants to answer the more complex questions.
- If you have additional time (about half an hour) and you would like to deepen discussion by introducing the topic of ageism, try adapting one of the scenarios on page 8 of this document from the We Are Canada: Examining Ageism lesson plan: https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2016/10/Examining-Ageism-Diversity-and-Inclusion_MIDDLE-YEARS.pdf. After examining the case study, adapt question 3 from the group discussion above to get the group talking about the problem of ageism and what action can be taken to mitigate it.

Part 4) Individual reflection

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Invite participants to reflect silently on their experience through writing.

Here are some reflection questions:

1. If you could ask any one of the people featured in these films a follow-up question, what would it be?
2. When you think about the older people in your life, how much of their situation do you think is similar to the ones depicted in these films?

Part 5) Wrap up

Suggested time: 5 minutes

Ask participants to finish up writing their last few sentences. Offer some words about how building empathy takes some curiosity, the ability to listen and to observe, just like the group did during this exercise. Include any other observations and encouragement about group discussion and interaction here.

Exercise #2 Perspective-Getting

Suggested time: 90-120 minutes

This exercise involves conversation between younger and older adults. Often, the best way to build empathy is simply to get to know someone who is different from oneself. It is easier to understand how a person feels and why they feel that way by interacting with them and listening to them. The activities in this workshop provide opportunities

for participants to practice conversing with and listening to people across a significant age gap.

Materials:

- A room equipped with tables and chairs
- Arts and crafts materials like paper, stickers, glue, scissors, glitter, tissue paper, marker pens, colored pencils, etc.
- Paper and pens for individual reflection and writing down a couple of lists—two or three pieces of paper per person should be enough

How to Prepare:

Invite older adults to be conversation partners for this workshop. You can invite people that you know personally like family or friends, or you can partner with a local senior center to ask if they would like to arrange to meet together as a special event.

NOTE

If you want to adapt this exercise for online use, hold training sessions or tutorials for older adults beforehand to make sure that they know how to navigate the online video conferencing software as well as any other collaborative platforms you may want to use.

Helpful Articles:

Typical definitions of empathy involve trying to take the other person's point of view, imagining oneself in their shoes. Harvard Business Review gives a compelling case for why simply asking people what they think is better than imagining what they think. For best preparation for this exercise, read "Research: Perspective-Taking Doesn't Help You Understand What Others Want" at the following link:

<https://hbr.org/2018/10/research-perspective-taking-doesnt-help-you-understand-what-others-want>

In her article in Adult Development and Aging News, "Can you really simulate aging, and more importantly, should you?" Toni Bisonti, a professor who teaches on aging and ageism, explains why empathy for older adults should be fostered through conversation rather than demeaning activities like simulations. Read more at this link:

<http://www.apadivisions.org/division-20/publications/newsletters/adult-development/2019/04/empathy-elderly>.

For an idea of how conversations between students and older people can nurture respect and empathy, check out this half-hour documentary, "Aging in America - Life stories project," at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ykd1t2D6yk>.

Brief Outline:

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|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1) Introduce the activity | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| 2) Conversation time | suggested time 35-45 minutes |
| 3) Artistic response | suggested time 25-30 minutes |
| 4) Group sharing time | suggested time 10-15 minutes |
| 5) Individual reflection | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 6) Wrap up | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| | Total: 90-120 minutes |

Part 1) Introduce the activity

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Welcome the participants. Make sure everyone knows everyone else's name. Feel free to use a short icebreaker such as:

Welcome, everyone! Today we're going to have some intergenerational discussion. To get us started, let's see who all is with us. By a show of hands, how many of you were born after the millennium, in the 2000s? How many of you were born in the nineties? The eighties? The seventies? The sixties? The fifties? The forties? Any earlier than the forties?

Note: If the context in which you are working has less diversity than that depicted in the above sample, try to feature in your icebreaker the expected birth decades of those in attendance. For instance, if you have two distinct groups of people, one born in the 2000s and the other born before the 1940s, there is no need to ask about the decades in between. To catch any outliers, you can always ask at the end, "Did I miss any decades?" Have people raise their hands and say which is their birth decade.

Then, you can begin to introduce the exercise.

It is a wonderful gift to have interaction between people who have different life perspectives. But sometimes it can be challenging to understand the perspective of someone of a different age than ours, simply because our generational cultures may emphasize different values or goals.

Today, we are going to try to reach across the age gap in order to better understand each other. We're going to engage in some good conversation, discussion, and even a little artwork to help us in this process!

Part 2) Conversation time

Suggested time: 35-45 minutes

In this activity, older guests will be matched with younger participants. Before they go into their groups for conversation, everyone will reflect privately about what they expect their conversation with their partner to be like. Then, they will be given time to converse with their conversation partner.

Step 1 - List of Assumptions

Announce that younger participants will soon be matched with older guests for conversation. Have everyone write down a list of some of their concerns, hopes, and assumptions about how their conversation might go. These lists are entirely for private use and individual reflection at the end of the exercise. They will not be shared with others.

Everyone may also use this time to write down ideas for conversation topics or questions to use during their conversation, but this is optional.

Note: Some people may have a difficult time coming up with questions on the spot. It is okay for them to struggle through this. However, if some people request help with conversation topics, a list of generic questions may be provided for them to work from. See the handout at the end of this document for a list of sample questions and conversation points.

Give everyone 5 minutes to complete this step, then send a signal to wrap up.

Step 2 - Divide into groups

Have everyone divide into groups such that each older guest is matched with one or two younger participants. Allow some time for people to move to sit near their group members, if necessary.

Step 3 - Conversation

Indicate that this activity will involve organic conversation in small groups. Say a few words about the benefits of organic conversation on building empathy.

Now we're going to move into a time of conversation. During this conversation, get to know your partner a little better. The topic of the conversation is you! Tell each other about yourselves. If you prepared some specific questions or talking points, feel free to bring those up. Otherwise, just let your conversation flow organically.

Organic conversation is a great way to build empathy because it gives you the chance to ask follow-up questions for clarity. When you have the chance to listen and respond with questions, you can understand someone else's point of view more easily, why they feel the way they do about certain issues, etc.

Encourage group members to listen well and to have a good time.

After about 25-35 minutes, send the signal to everyone to wrap up their interviews and to give their attention to the facilitator.

Part 3) Artistic response

Suggested time: 25-30 minutes

This activity involves younger participants and older guests reflecting on their experience of their conversation through art. Sometimes, it can be difficult for people to express their feelings about what someone has just told them. Using art can circumvent some of that difficulty by providing an indirect medium of expression. As participants explain their art, they will be expressing their feelings.

Invite everyone to think about one idea, statement, or story that their conversation partner shared with them. They will use the provided art materials to express their feelings in response to this idea, statement, or story. Indicate that everyone will have about twenty minutes to complete their artwork and that they will share their artwork with their partner afterward.

Think about one idea, statement, or story that really stuck with you from your partner's sharing during your conversation. Use any of the provided materials to create a piece of art that describes your feelings about that idea, statement, or story (example: if your

partner told you story that made you sad, draw a picture that represents your sadness about that story). You will have about twenty minutes to complete your piece of art.

After about twenty minutes, signal for everyone to put their finishing touches on their artwork. Invite them to share their artwork with their partner.

Part 4) Group sharing time

Suggested time: 10-15 minutes

Ask the group how the conversation and artistic response experience was for them. This is not a time for deep analysis, just initial reactions.

How was that for everyone? Was it hard, interesting, surprising, fun? How so?

Note: Asking questions about everyone's experience with the exercise breaks the ice for sharing their feelings through presenting their art.

Then, anyone who wants to share their artistic response with the whole group may do so. Cap sharing time at about one minute per person.

Part 5) Individual reflection

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Invite participants to reflect on their experience through writing.

Here are some example reflection questions:

1. Refer to the list of concerns, hopes, and assumptions that you made before your conversation. How did your experience with your conversation partner compare to your expectations?
2. Did you learn anything new about interacting across an age gap? Did you learn anything about yourself in the process? If so, what?

Part 6) Wrap up

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Ask participants to finish writing their last few sentences. Include any other observations and encouragement about group discussion and interaction here. Offer a few words of gratitude to the older adult guests for taking the time to come and participate in this event.

Credits:

Developed in 2022 by Naomi M. Wong, Princeton Seminary Field Education Intern to the Bonner Foundation.

Resources:

Bisconti, T. L. (2019, April). "Can you really simulate aging, and more importantly, should you? Adult Development & Aging News." <http://www.apadivisions.org/division-20/publications/newsletters/adult-development/2019/04/empathy-elderly>

Eyal, Tal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley. "Research: Perspective-Taking Doesn't Help You Understand What Others Want," in Harvard Business Review, October 9, 2018. Accessed March 6, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2018/10/research-perspective-taking-doesnt-help-you-understand-what-others-want>.

Kirkwood Media. *Aging in America - Life Stories Project*. Directed by Kirk Luther Monson. Aug 28, 2018. Documentary, 30:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ykd1t2D6yk>.

Schweitzer, Jenny. *The Blessings of Aging*. Directed by Jenny Schweitzer. Post on The New Yorker released on November 15, 2018. Documentary, 4:58. <https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-blessings-of-aging>.

Sutton, Jeremy. "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>

Voyager Films. *Junk Mail*. In "A Vignette of Growing Old," by Jaclyn Skurie for the Atlantic Selects Series. November 17, 2015. Documentary, 10:51. <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/415809/a-story-of-growing-old/>.

WE Charity. "Examining Ageism." Accessed April 14, 2021. https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2016/10/Examining-Ageism-Diversity-and-Inclusion_MIDDLE-YEARS.pdf.

Questions for Exercise #1 Group Discussion:

1. How did you feel when watching these films?
2. What are some similarities and differences between the people featured in the films? What factors do you think play an important role in their quality of life?
3. In these films, what were some of the challenges that you saw, heard, or inferred that older people face with aging? What are some ways to mitigate these challenges?

Questions for Exercise #1 Individual Reflection Time:

1. If you could ask any one of the people featured in these films a follow-up question, what would it be?
2. When you think about the older people in your life, how much of their situation do you think is similar to the ones depicted in these films?

Sample Conversation Points and Questions for Exercise #2 Interview:

- Tell me about a time when you learned something new about yourself
- What is one thing you hope to accomplish?
- What is something you really enjoy?
- What kind of progress do you hope to see in society?
- Can you share one pearl of wisdom or piece of advice with me? How did you gain this wisdom?
- What do you think matters most in life?
- What is something you wish more people knew about you?
- Have you ever had to move on after a disappointment? If so, how did you do it?
- What do you value in a friendship?

Questions for Exercise #2 Individual Reflection Time:

1. Refer to the list of concerns, hopes, and assumptions that you made before your conversation. How did your experience with your conversation partner compare to your expectations?
2. Did you learn anything new about interacting across an age gap? Did you learn anything about yourself in the process? If so, what?

Potential Scenarios for the Optional Addendum to Exercise #1:

A. On a rainy Saturday afternoon, Sarah, a retired school teacher, decided she would join the group outing at her retirement home. The group was visiting the local shopping mall and Sarah thought it would be a good opportunity for her to get some exercise and maybe buy a new book. After visiting a few clothing stores, Sarah decided to look around the crowded bookstore. Sarah loves books and has been an avid reader her entire life. After a few minutes of browsing the bestsellers section, an employee approached her, asking Sarah if she is able to read the text or if she wanted him to read her the description on the back of the book. Sarah was hurt and offended and left the bookstore without making a purchase.

B. When Robert was laid off after 45 years at his job, he decided to look for new job opportunities online. After applying for a position at a new marketing agency in downtown Toronto, he was called to come in for an interview the following week. When Robert showed up for the job interview he told the receptionist that he was there for a job interview for the intern position at the company. The woman let out a little laugh, and asked Robert if he knew how to work a computer. After his interview, Robert was told that the culture of the company might not be the right fit.

C. Betty had been retired for five years when she decided she wanted to take up a new hobby. She had always enjoyed cooking but decided that she would try a new hobby. While looking through the newspaper one Sunday morning, she noticed an advertisement for ballet classes at the local community centre. After much hesitation, Betty decided she would take a chance and attend the registration that afternoon. After showing up, Betty was nervous when she found herself surrounded by young adults; she felt old enough to be their grandmother. The girls around her whispered and giggled, subtly pointing fingers and acknowledging Betty's presence at the ballet registration. Betty felt ashamed and decided to go home.

D. When Tom graduated high school, it was his dream to attend university for a degree in science. But his help was needed with the family business and Tom decided that helping his family was the right thing to do. While having coffee with a friend one day, his friend asked what Tom's biggest dream was—it was still to receive his university degree. After much convincing from his friends and family, Tom decided to apply for university. On his first day of class, he received many confused looks from his peers as well as a few questions from students who mistook him as the professor. At age 67, Tom was nervous to be in a classroom with people much younger than him and he spent his first few weeks trying to ignore the stares he received each class.

From page 8 of WE ARE CANADA | Examining Ageism (https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2016/10/Examining-Ageism-Diversity-and-Inclusion_MIDDLE-YEARS.pdf)