



Elements of Ageism 2

Missing out on activities through age self-consciousness

OCTOBER 2024

Introduction

National Seniors Australia is a member-based, not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation representing Australians aged 50 and over.

Every year we survey thousands of older people on diverse topics relevant to their lifestyle and wellbeing.

This report is one of four based on a 2024 survey module about ageism.

“Are there any activities you would like to try that you have chosen not to do because you are self-conscious about your age?”

Ageism comes in many forms. We examine several of them in this series of four research reports about older Australians' experiences of ageism.

Ageism can include explicit discrimination or exclusion of a person because of their age. This is often the result of negative stereotyping or prejudices against certain age groups.

These behaviours and assumptions can in turn be reinforced by popular culture, including ageist jokes and cliched media representations of older people.

Unfortunately, ageism can also infect the inner worlds of older people, causing them to feel overly self-conscious about their age. This report examines that angle on ageism.

In 2024 we asked respondents to the National Seniors Social Survey if there were any activities that they would like to try but had not done because of age self-consciousness.

In total, 2600 people wrote a comment that answered the question. While two-thirds of them said 'no', the remaining third (839 people) said yes – they had excluded themselves from some activities for this and related reasons.

Read on to find out more.



Contents

Introduction _____	2
Physical activities _____	4
Other activities _____	10
Ageism or ability? _____	16
Survey methods and sample _____	19





Physical activities

Self-consciousness about bodies

Physical activities are the most common type of activity older people exclude themselves from because of age.

More than 580 respondents – over two-thirds of the yes group – mentioned they would like to continue or learn physical activities but stopped themselves because of age-related self-consciousness or other reasons connected to age.

We here define physical activities as those centred on bodily mobility, control, fitness, flexibility, and/or strength.

Around 420 people mentioned a broad range of specific physical activities – listed in the adjacent column.

Around 160 commenters discussed physical activities without specifying any in particular.

Activities specified

- **Land athletics:** walking, running, marathon, park run, hiking, bushwalking
- **Water athletics:** swimming, surfing, body surfing, beach and pool visits, aqua-aerobics, snorkelling, scuba diving, water slide, jetty jumping
- **Winter sports:** snow skiing, ice-skating
- **Flexibility, strength, and balance training:** yoga, tai chi, Pilates, balance class
- **Gym:** boot camp, exercise classes, aerobics, Zumba, exercise machines, weightlifting, CrossFit, indoor climbing, trampolining, sauna
- **Riding:** horse-riding, cycling, mountain biking, BMX, scootering, roller-skating
- **Boating:** sailing, yachting, rowing, kayaking, canoeing, kiteboarding, paddleboarding, standup paddleboarding
- **Team sports:** rugby league, rugby union, soccer, walking football, basketball, volleyball, netball
- **Individual/pair sports:** tennis, squash, table tennis, pickleball, golf, croquet, ten-pin bowling
- **Adventure sports:** white-water rafting, long treks, mountain climbing, monument climbing, tree climbing, rock climbing, canyoning, abseiling, ziplining, bungee jumping, base jumping, tandem parachuting, skydiving, gliding, hot air ballooning, paragliding
- **Martial arts:** self-defence, karate
- **Dancing:** clubbing, disco, rock n roll, swing, Latin, ballroom, ballet, limbo, breaking, burlesque, pole dancing, line dancing
- **Home maintenance:** climbing ladders, roof work, gardening, mowing, cleaning, hanging washing
- **Physical work skills:** CPR training (requires kneeling), hospitality work
- **Everyday physicality:** ascending or descending stairs or steep slopes, walking on uneven terrain, lifting heavy objects
- Two people mentioned lawn bowls in the context of feeling too young for them. One also mentioned croquet in this context.

Reasons for not participating 1

Other people's ageist behaviours stop people from doing activities they love.

Some respondents shared experiences of how other people's explicitly or implicitly ageist attitudes or behaviours inhibited their participation in an activity.

I have snow skied since I was a young adult and now find that there is an assumption that it is a sport for young people.

I love to swim and try to, but I have had some people make fun of me.

I didn't like going to Gyms because of the feeling I got from young people not moving fast enough. Have finally found a good one where I am accepted by all age groups.

I used to go to the gym but gave it away after hearing comments - about time he acted his age etc

I wanted to join gym But when age asked thought it might not be for me

I recently started a Pilates class and am well able to do the exercises with others in the class. But the teacher repeatedly offers easier options (which I don't need) only to me. This makes me self conscious.



Reasons for not participating 2

Anticipation of embarrassment because of expected attitudes is also a barrier.

Some survey respondents were hesitant to start new activities in front of others because they assumed they would face poor responses to their age.

Embarrassment was a prominent theme among these comments.

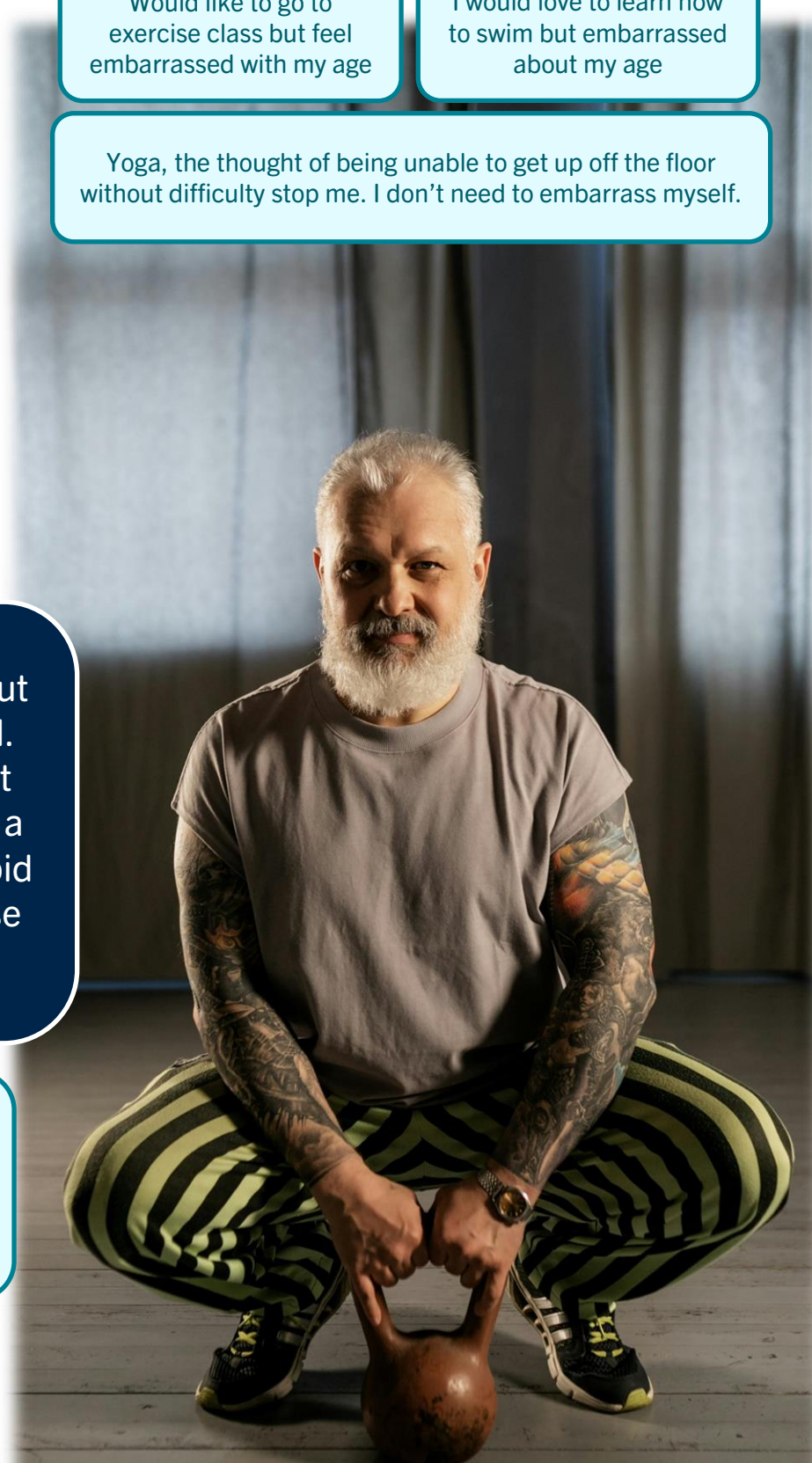
Would like to go to exercise class but feel embarrassed with my age

I would love to learn how to swim but embarrassed about my age

Yoga, the thought of being unable to get up off the floor without difficulty stop me. I don't need to embarrass myself.

I'm self conscious about going to a gym or pool. Aware that I might not be dressed suitably at a gym or would look stupid not knowing how to use the equipment.

I feel self conscious as I may be limited with my physical abilities and unsure of the response from others



Reasons for not participating 3

Body image affects older people too.

Numerous respondents wrote about poor body image inhibiting them.

This almost entirely pertained to water-based activities such as swimming, and most people writing these comments were women.

I don't go swimming anymore because I'm self-conscious about my sagging, crepey skin!

Swimming because of age, wrinkles, weight

Swimming because of my weight at my age.

I never allow anyone to see me in swimming togs. I am too embarrassed of my old body.

I chose not to go snorkelling in a group with my daughter last year but put the snorkel on when I was on my own in the lagoon.

I would like to swim i worry people will laugh at me in a costume

Disinclination to swim or join a gym because of body appearance.

Yes, i'd like to swim at the beach at least once a year but I'm afraid of not being a strong swimmer anymore. Also, I'd like someone to design a swimsuit for women who like to cover up more because of veins and scars.

Beach - always go alone and infrequently. Self conscious about physical shape change

Swimming /paddling at the beach, I feel self conscious about my body image. so I havent been in swimming gear now for 40years. and wont do water aerobics either.

Not my age, but my appearance. I don't look like I did when I was twenty, so I go to the beach less often and cover up more.

I would like to start swimming again but with the OA [osteoarthritis] and a left side mastectomy and scarring and exceptionally dry skin I feel self-conscious.

Reasons for not participating 4

There is acute awareness of age in many physical activity spaces.

Facilities and groups that are dominated by younger people and have a younger vibe or culture were an issue for some respondents.

Activities designated for older people can also pose problems though.

For some, the solution was to do the activity completely alone.

I think it's more difficult than before to find physical activities at the right level, e.g. cycling, yoga, tennis, even bushwalking. I withdrew from my local gym a few years back because I felt self-conscious about my age.

My advancing years make me concerned that I am not delaying things on the golf course. I much prefer to walk the course and should that ever become impossible I will not take to buggies

Pilates. There are not enough exercise options for older people. It is probably silly, but I really feel self-conscious exercising with younger, fitter people

Going to some gyms which are full of fit young people

Learning different dance as I feel awkward dancing with younger women

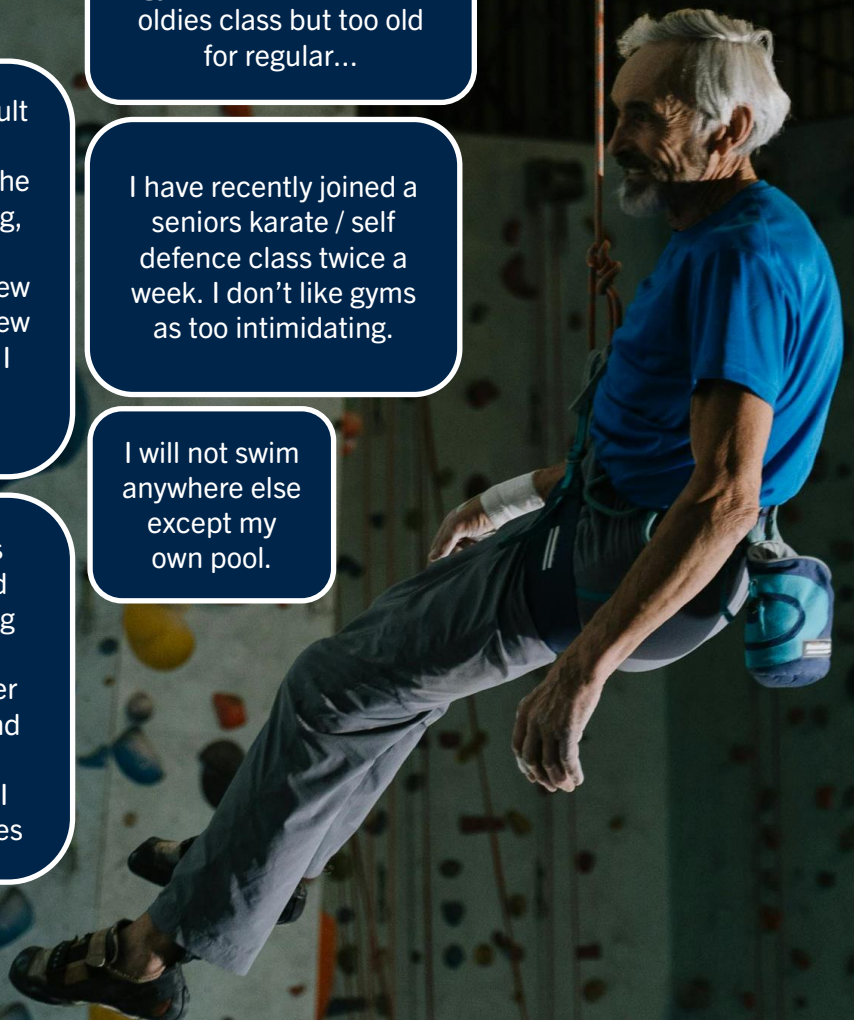
Have to resort to only joining 'Older peoples' groups.

Climbing at an indoor rock wall centre - would love a 'closed' session for older people! Took my grandchildren and it looked so much fun.

I have stopped attending gym as I feel too fit for oldies class but too old for regular...

I have recently joined a seniors karate / self defence class twice a week. I don't like gyms as too intimidating.

I will not swim anywhere else except my own pool.





**Other
activities**

Many faces of age self-consciousness

Age self-consciousness is about more than just physical confidence.

Around 250 respondents wrote about other kinds of activities that they did not pursue because of age self-consciousness and related reasons.

Some of these activities entailed physical aspects, such as travel and activities with motorised vehicles.

The rest were an issue for other reasons, including cultural associations with youth, fear of being unable to learn things at a later age, unease about being alone in later life, and more.

In addition to the major themes detailed in the following pages, a few miscellaneous activities were mentioned by one or two people such as going into politics, living with others outside of an aged care context, being outgoing in fashion, wearing a bikini, and skinny dipping.

Activities detailed

Travel and leisure were mentioned by many people:

- Travel in general, seeing more of Australia
- Travelling to slightly more precarious places such as overseas, the snow, remote places, Antarctica
- Camping, backpacking, and adventure holidays
- Botanic gardens, park events, amusement rides
- Pubs, restaurants, especially alone
- Travelling alone.

Others wrote about motorised vehicles, including:

- Driving in general or at night, getting a licence
- Driving a Formula 1 car, V8 supercar, truck
- Flying a plane, getting flying lessons or a glider licence
- Motorcycling, entering a motocross competition
- Getting around on an electric scooter or electric bike
- Jet skiing, driving a boat, flying a drone.

Attending music and arts venues or engaging in performance and the arts were mentioned too:

- Concerts, music venues
- Night clubs, dance parties
- Cinema, theatre, art galleries
- Learning a new instrument, performing music
- Singing, singing lessons, singing in public
- Performing in concerts, acting, fashion parades
- Craft, painting, sewing
- Debating, public speaking.

Social activities were an issue for some commenters:

- Formal social groups, clubs as member or volunteer
- Socialising with friends, attending parties
- Making new friends
- Dating, online dating, having sex

People also commented on work, study, and using tech:

- Studying or attending classes in general
- Studying medicine, nursing, languages, coding
- Learning more about computers, mobile phones
- Using IT equipment, software, AI, Zoom
- Learning to cook
- Doing specific kinds of work.

Travel and leisure

Age but also as a married woman living on my own, whilst having a living partner in residential care. Very hard to go out into the world on your own, even for an evening meal etc.

Travel - I feel I would slow groups down too much due to my slower walking and the fact I do not like walking long distances or climbing stairs

I did feel a bit age conscious to go on a solo holiday, however I have bitten the bullet and booked a tour to South Africa

I did realise recently that I've left it too late to be able to do some things I'd kinda like to do - like going to Antarctica eg probably not fit enough to be able to move from a ship into one of those floaty rubber things - can't remember what they are called.

Wondering if I may be too old (at 72) to go on a trip with Intrepid. Looking for travel group along Intrepid lines which perhaps advertises it takes healthy people in their 70's.

Motorised vehicles

I would like to drive a V8 supercar but I don't think I would be allowed - being classed as a silly old woman

This could never happen but I would like to zoom around on one of those e scooters that kids ride around on. Shame I am 91 can only dream but it would be good fun.

I would like to learn to fly but think I am now too old.

Driving in areas haven't done for years, scary and stressful.





Playing and enjoying music

Decided not to attend the Chemical Brothers concert feeling I would be out of place.

I am starting to not enjoy going [to] rock/metal music shows where I have been filmed because of my age.

Going to dance parties (raves), to some nightclubs, pubs and other similar venues as I might be the oldest person there and I'd feel self conscious.

Seeing live music (played by young people)

I've given up on horse riding dreams, learning to swim like Emma McKeon, playing a piano like Elton or driving a Mack truck like The Drone Man

Socialising

Parties where young people are present pose exclusion issues, they just don't want us older people there and make us feel unwelcome.

sometimes there have been parties or events which I have chosen not to attend because of my age. half the time, its because I found it difficult to engage with young people.

I have looked up at a couple of social groups with a view to join but thought I was too old. This assumption was my own, not someone else's

hesitant about joining new groups

online dating

sex with a younger woman

Mountain climbing
and serious sex.



Work, study and using tech

I self-limit when applying for a job. I only apply for back-office, non customer facing roles because of my age.

I have not done certain things as I felt they should have been open to younger people with careers ahead of them

yes, I would love to learn new things, but feel that not enough time is allocated to my learning, I need extra time and instructions to make a new activity rules and structure sink in.

I will not return to my previous occupation (teaching) because I am conscious I am not relevant to the younger generation.

Maybe some business ventures that require a Youtube or Instagram presence



I am reluctant to join in a few learning activities because I believe I will be disregarded. We live in a society that does not respect older people, particularly women!

Study medicine because everyone else who attended the open day was much younger. I thought I was far less likely to be taken seriously or selected.

Coding - I had a look online and it seemed all of the training was related to school kids.

I do avoid activities that involve putting me outside my comfort zone. I don't want to be seen as doing something that is viewed as being age-inappropriate.

Ageism or ability?



Complexities of age-related barriers

The relationship between ageism, ageing, and self-consciousness in activities is complex.

While we report the number of people who answered 'yes' or 'no' to this survey question asking about age self-consciousness and doing activities, determining whether a given comment constituted 'yes' or 'no' was not always a straightforward task.

Our intention with this survey question was to find out if internalised ageism had affected older people's participation in activities they would like to try.

However, the question wording did not use the word ageism. Instead, the question asked people if being self-conscious about their age inhibited their participation.

In response, commenters discussed the impact of age from a variety of perspectives. Their comments showed that self-consciousness about age can take different forms.

Some of these are clearly related to internalised ageism – for example remarks quoted in the preceding pages referencing respondents' *"embarrassment"* about their age or their ageing body.

Experiencing mockery or bullying from younger people when undertaking activities may also be manifestations of ageism, but in this case external not internalised ageism.

Other comments point to self-consciousness about lesser abilities to undertake an activity. For some respondents, this was clearly connected to age. For example, the person who wrote, *"yes, I would love to learn new things, but feel that not enough time is allocated to my learning, I need extra time and instructions to make a new activity rules and structure sink in,"* implied their ability to learn was less than the average because of their age.

There are many comments that associate a sense of self-consciousness about age with the negative impacts of reduced physical abilities. For example, recall the commenter who would have liked to travel to Antarctica, but felt unable to, writing, *"probably not fit enough to be able to move from a ship into one of those floaty rubber things - can't remember what they are called."* Impaired sensory abilities is a part of this, for example one person said, *"my hearing makes language classes difficult"*.

Some responses combined ageism and lesser abilities due to age, for example the comment, *"I feel self conscious as I may be limited with my physical abilities and unsure of the response from others."*

But not everyone with limitations attributed these to age. Some example quotes from respondents who answered ‘no’ to the survey question include:

not because of age but knee problem

not an age factor, just safety restraints given less capable body

No, the limitations are more due to my arthritis.

It would be easy to attribute all these barriers – a knee problem, safety concerns due to lower body capability, and arthritis – to age. To do so would be consistent with the respondents who linked their declining learning speed, hearing, and physical fitness to age self-consciousness. But some respondents simply did not see it that way, separating their limited abilities from their age.

These two approaches are equally valid. The fact that they both appeared in responses to this question points to two truths about ageing:

1. On average, people’s capacity declines with age. That’s why we eventually die.
2. Every individual’s ageing journey is different. Some people never lose cognitive, sensory, or physical abilities, even at a great age. Others lose one or all at very young ages, and of course some people are born without an ability that others take for granted.

Part of the problem with ageism is it can assign stereotypes to ages – such as the assumption that people over 60 are going to be slow in the gym.

Another problem with ageism is it fails to accommodate the expected average decline in our abilities with age – for example by giving older people more time to go slowly at the gym.

This pair of truths also presented us with difficulties when analysing the data for this report.

It wasn’t always easy to tell if a person’s activities were limited by age or by something else. Was the person’s knee problem caused by years of wear and tear or a car accident when they were 20?

Even if a problem did seem to be age related, it wasn’t always possible to tell if the age-related issue caused the person to feel self-conscious about their age. Did the person not play basketball to avoid breaking their knee? Or because they were self-conscious about being slower on their feet because of a dodgy knee, and therefore letting the team down?

Most of the time, commenters didn’t make it clear. Sometimes they just wrote down the name of the activity without giving any further information, for example they just wrote “online dating” or “abseiling”.

This meant that when it came to sorting comments into ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers to their survey question, we had a bit of interpreting to do. We erred on the side of inclusion – anything that could plausibly be interpreted as a ‘yes’ was put in the yes pile. The numbers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers that we mention in this report reflect that process.

But doing so is not without consequences. The ambiguity among the comments has meant we cannot go the extra step to attribute everyone’s non-participation in an activity to internalised ageism (or external ageism).

Self-consciousness about age takes many forms. It is complex.

And whether a barrier is age-related or not seems to be in the eye of the beholder.

You may call it internalised ageism but to me it’s just a gammy knee.

Methods

The information in this report comes from the 12th National Seniors Social Survey, which was conducted in February 2024. Anyone aged 50 or older who resides in Australia is welcome to participate in the NSSS. The survey received ethics approval from Bellberry Ltd prior to implementation (approval 2023-11-1424).

The survey included a module about ageism. Responses to one open-ended question – “Are there any activities you would like to try that you have chosen not to do because you are self-conscious about your age?” – were analysed for this report using the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke. We identified themes via inductive

analysis guided by a critical realist approach that aimed for accuracy and objectivity in interpreting respondents’ views. The number of comments comprising any given theme was estimated to give a sense of its prominence. The data were not cross-coded so numbers should be treated as estimates only.

Quotes from survey respondents were selected to illustrate some of the variety and prevalence of ideas expressed. Where possible they were reproduced verbatim, occasionally omitting or altering parts for clarity or anonymity (indicated with square brackets []). Minor typos were corrected for readability (no brackets). We

retained all other phrasing idiosyncrasies.

When inviting people to participate, we strive for greater inclusivity and maximising participation, rather than numerical representativeness. This is especially relevant to open-ended questions such as the one analysed for this report, because people’s unique experiences are the focus, not statistical patterns, and some demographics are more likely to write a comment than others (on any topic, not just ageism).

For comprehensive information about the ageism module, see our companion report, *Elements of Ageism 1*.

Sample

The percentages below characterise the demographic traits of the 839 respondents who indicated they had not participated in an activity because of age-related self-consciousness. No question was compulsory, so some rows do not add up to 100%.

Age group	50-64 years 11%	65-74 years 51%	75-84 years 31%	85+ years 5%
Self-rated health	Excellent 9%	Good 50%	Fair 30%	Poor/very poor 11%
State or territory	ACT 4%	NSW 25%	NT 1%	QLD 32%
	SA 9%	TAS 2%	VIC 16%	WA 10%
Gender	Female 63%	Male 36%	Non-binary 3 people	
Education	School up to Year 10 12%	Year 12 or cert/dip 35%	Degree or higher 49%	
Savings including super	<\$100k 29%	\$100k-\$500k 24%	>\$500k 29%	
Not metro	Regional 27%	Rural 7%	Remote 1%	
Diversity groups	First Nations, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander 1%	CALD background 4%	Living with disability 11%	LGBTI 2%
				Veteran 4%

*Survey data unweighted.

National Seniors Australia is located in
Brisbane/Meanjin and Canberra/Kambri.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the
land and waters in which we operate, the Turrbul
and the Ngunnawal and Ngambri Peoples.

We honour and value their continuing cultures,
contributions, and connections to Country, and
pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

© National Seniors Australia 2024

National Seniors Australia (National Seniors) owns copyright in this work. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, the work may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes, subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source. Reproduction for commercial use or sale requires written permission from National Seniors. While all care has been taken in preparing this publication, National Seniors expressly disclaims any liability for any damage from the use of the material contained in this publication and will not be responsible for any loss, howsoever arising, from use or reliance on this material. ABN 89 050 523 003.

Any correspondence may be addressed to research@nationalseniors.com.au.

1300 76 50 50 nationalseniors.com.au

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA