

The Significance of Reframing Aging and Elder Abuse



FAQs from the Field

Reframing our communications around aging and elder abuse is an essential first step in creating long-term social change. The Reframing Aging and Reframing Elder Abuse projects help the field reframe communications to decrease ageist notions and increase understanding of aging, demographic shifts, and elder abuse.

As advocates embrace reframing, questions may arise. The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) who facilitates the Reframing Elder Abuse project and The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) who directs the Reframing Aging Initiative created this Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) guide to help you along the way. Please jump to Question 11 for information about resources, tools, and how to contact us.

1 What term should we use to identify older people in our community to ensure we are signaling their value appropriately?

The FrameWorks Institute research showed that the term “older people” was most effective at helping people focus on the right group of people (people in their 20s identify people in their 40s as “older adults”). Participants also rated “older people” as more competent with that term applied in comparison to terms like “seniors” or the “elderly.” In general, using person-centered language is preferable in any context. It is important to remember, however, that **reframing is not renaming**. If you know in your community that there is a term used to identify older people that signals their value, you should continue to use it.

2 Can reframing result in a lengthy piece which ultimately puts consumer engagement at risk?

The length of a piece after reframing depends on the communication material. One of the most important elements of reframing is the power of explanation. Sometimes reframing can be longer than the original message, or it can be shorter. That said, this strategy does not require an all-or-nothing approach. The more you apply its components to your communications, the more potent its effects will be. One can tailor how much to apply the strategy based on your audience. Please take note of your audience orientation, their reading ability as well as the time you have with them to ensure best practices.

3

What are ways to address elder abuse (i.e. social isolation and increased safety and health risks) during the COVID-19 pandemic without eliciting a sense of crisis?

It is important to remember that crisis framing is different than explaining the severity of the problems we are facing in this pandemic. Crisis framing only points to how big the problem is and how dire the situation will become if we do not act.

To avoid crisis framing, explain the scope of the issue while always putting forward ideas about how we might prevent or address elder abuse.

4

“Silver tsunami” and similar language are often used to convey urgency in order to push stakeholders and policy-makers to take action. Do you have recommendations on how we can balance the need for urgency while avoiding fatalism?

The most important framing strategy for this scenario is to point to existing or potential solutions. We need to explain the scale of a problem (i.e., lack of preparedness for demographic shifts) but that we also include good ideas about how we are going to collectively address that problem. That way, instead of a fatalistic response of running away from the problem (as you would from a tsunami), we provide a way for policy makers to see that a solution is possible. Please refer to the Quick Start Guide at www.reframingaging.org for more information.

5

Ageist attitudes start early with young children. Is the Reframing Aging Initiative addressing ageism starting with young children in order to improve attitudes about aging?

Fortunately, lots of advocates across the country are engaging in all kinds of initiatives to end ageism. One example of this is that the Reframing Aging Initiative has worked with several publications to change their style guides so that language used in their publications is less ageist and follows the reframing aging principles. As early as middle school, young people are required to use these style guides for their reports. This will have a major impact as children start to understand how language affects attitudes and how their own language can even make a long-term difference in counteracting discrimination and elder abuse.

6

Are there resources, data, or additional information regarding reframing specifically for older people who identify as LGBTQ+ or communities of color?

It is important to note that reframing strategies were tested among members of the general public to measure whether these communications would increase support for policies that would better address the needs of older people. Reframing aging and elder abuse communications around our nation’s common value of justice was shown to increase understanding and policy support for a variety of populations, including people who experience multiple forms of discrimination such as communities of color and people who identify as LGBTQ+.

The NCEA has communicated with [SAGE Advocacy and Services for LGBT Elders](#) regarding reframing elder abuse. Their organization was able to incorporate reframing concepts in the following materials to spread awareness about elder abuse among older LGBTQ+ adults.

- [LGBT Older People: Our Right to a Peaceful Life](#)
- [LGBT Older People Built the LGBT Community](#)
- [Paying it back: Promoting Justice for LGBT Communities of all Ages](#)

The NCEA has also [translated](#) a number of their reframed elder abuse awareness materials into Spanish, Korean and Chinese in an effort to get reframed messages to people who speak English as a second language and/or communities of color.

7 How can we use the “What Surrounds Us Shapes Us” solution when working with our clients and colleagues?

This strategy is designed to help us think about aging not simply as a matter of individual-decision making (did you diet, exercise and save enough money and generally take care of yourself?). Instead, it helps focus us on how our social contexts, experiences, and environment shape how we age. We know that this can effectively help members of the general public (regardless of age) think about how we might shift policies and practices to better support older people. To learn more, access the *Gaining Momentum* toolkit at www.reframingaging.org.

8 How can we incorporate reframed communication concepts into World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) efforts?

Reframing strategies can be used throughout the year, not just during World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD). However, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) is a great opportunity amplify reframed messages. The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) has already reframed many of our World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) materials in our [WEAAD toolkit](#). Utilizing this toolkit is the perfect way to ensure your organization is getting the reframed message out there.

9 What can we do to counter the ageist language in state laws that label victims as vulnerable while also effectively getting legislation passed?

We recommend promoting the understanding that there is extraordinary heterogeneity across the older adult population. As we age, we become more different, not more alike. We understand that chronological age does not equate to functional ability or physiological age. Therefore, aging does not automatically equal decline or loss of independence. It is a spectrum. For an example of the application of this knowledge to a policy issue, please see [Age Must Not Be Used as Criteria to Deny Treatment](#).

We can talk about how our policy language reinforces these false ideas of inherent vulnerability and victim-blaming that are not helping our cause. Changing our policy language to focus on justice as we age as opposed to paternalism that defines older adults as “other” can be the first step in changing this culture.

We recommend using “we” language when talking about older adults with policy makers so they can start to understand that older adults are not “other.” We are all aging, so policies that combat negative stereotypes don’t help just older adults, they help us all. We do not want to be seen simply as “objects of care” just because we are older. Empowering the older adults of this decade empowers the older adults of the next decade.

Lastly, we recommend approaching this conversation from an angle that does not place blame on an individual or a specific organization for this language and culture. Coming from a place of blame may just make a policymaker feel bad and cause them to go on the defensive. The NCEA often avoids placing blame by showing that we used to use this language too. We might say something like, “Our organization used to do this too, but we are learning there is another way to approach our issue.”

10

When advocating for policies to legislators or the press, can we cite individual examples of elder abuse?

You can cite examples of elder abuse. The NCEA agrees that using examples may be a key tactic when speaking with legislators as well as the press. However, when you cite a(n) example(s), make sure you discuss the conditional factors that led the situation(s) of abuse to occur or worsen. You can also discuss how these factors leave us all at risk of abuse as we age, and so policy reform is needed to ensure justice for all. Additionally, you can discuss the cost of abuse on society as a whole, not just on older adults. Lastly, when possible, model language that maintains older people’s agency. Legislators are also interested in hearing about how a proposed policy solution is innovative and effective. By emphasizing how policies will solve problems facing older people rather than their vulnerability, we can start to help legislators talk to their constituents in different ways.

These tactics will broaden the lens so that your audience does not remain focused on acts of abuse or on the individuals who experience it. If you were to leave the example alone, it may reinforce unproductive associations about the “kinds” of people who either inflict or suffer from elder abuse (victim/perpetrator individualized focus). To prevent unproductive thinking and build support for systems-level change, emphasize the structural causes of the specific type of abuse you work to prevent as well as the societal impact.

11

What resources and assistance do the Reframing Aging Initiative and Reframing Elder Abuse Project provide?

The Reframing Aging Initiative has a [webpage](#) with resources including the *Gaining Momentum* toolkit, the FrameWorks Academy video series, and the Quick Start Guide (www.reframingaging.org). In addition, you can access all of the reframing aging research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute on our webpage as well as links to related research, articles, and information about initiative funders and founders. Please feel free to contact reframingaging@geron.org for more information.

The Reframing Elder Abuse Project has a [webpage](#) with information regarding the project, toolkits, online trainings, as well as our eNewsletter (bit.ly/ReframeEA). If you are interested in resources on reporting elder abuse, please reference our organization’s website ncea.acl.gov. Please feel free to contact ncea@med.usc.edu for more information.



This FAQs from the field guide was developed from questions asked during a webinar conducted by the National Center of Elder Abuse and The Gerontological Society of America, “[Why Reframe? Understanding the significance of Reframing Aging and Reframing Elder Abuse.](#)” Our answers are based on aging communications research conducted by the [FrameWorks Institute](#).

