

Little Old Ladies & Grumpy Old Men:

How Language Shapes Our Views about Aging

How many times have you heard the expression *little old ladies*? What image do you get? Blue-haired seniors chatting at the beauty parlor? A petite woman peering over a steering wheel?

Have you ever called someone a *little old lady*? Have you ever been called one?

Little old ladies is just one of dozens of unflattering terms used to refer to older adults. Examples include *grumpy old men*, *geezers*, *bats*, *witches*, and other belittling expressions. Virtually everyone has encountered words of this sort at one time or another. They are found in newspaper stories and magazine articles, heard on television, and overheard in conversation. Studies have shown that they are used by people of all social classes and even by older adults themselves.

Facts of Modern Life

**People are living longer and healthier lives.
Older people are staying active and learning new technologies.
'Little old ladies' are an endangered species.**

Although these expressions are used in certain situations for light humor, they have the effect of lumping all older adults into one category, rather than focusing on individuals. This *language of aging* helps create or reinforce stereotypes of what it is like to be an older adult, even though the images are unrealistic and virtually obsolete. Hearing this language may influence our attitudes about and behavior toward older people. It may even affect our own aging process. This is unfortunate because research has clearly demonstrated that the older population is diverse; that most older people are active, independent, and happy; and that many of the problems thought to be due to aging are preventable, reversible, or can be delayed for years.

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How names CAN hurt you

As children we are taught that “sticks and stones may break our bones, but names can never hurt us.” While it is true that words cannot affect our bodies, they can bruise or lift our spirits. A careless word or insult can demoralize us; a compliment can make our day. Our language has a major influence on how we look at things.

Think about advertising. Just labeling a product *healthy* will attract health-conscious consumers. Calling a product *deluxe* or *premium* makes us expect quality. Well-chosen words can bring pictures to mind, make our mouth water, or stir our feelings.

Language has the same kind of power when applied to people. The student labeled *bright* or *smart* is treated as intelligent, while the child labeled *slow* is expected to perform poorly. These labels may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy because they reinforce an image or expectation that eventually affects each student’s self-concept and performance.

Labels applied to whole groups of people are at the root of prejudice because they emphasize difference and suggest that one group is better than another. Studies have shown that these labels affect how people are thought of and treated and may even affect how they come to think of themselves.

The impact of labeling can be quite significant for older people. Some specialists who study aging and old age suggest that when a person is labeled *old* or talked to in a patronizing way, it can start a cycle of deterioration that results in feelings of incompetence. Research done in nursing homes suggests that residents labeled *fragile* learn to be helpless and actually become helpless. Interestingly, though, most older people, even cancer patients, tend to see themselves as above average and “exceptions to the rule” when it comes to aging, probably because of the negative view of older people most of us seem to hold.

The lowered expectations for older people that are reinforced in our casual conversations may impact us in other ways. For example, both health professionals and older patients may ignore or dismiss treatable symptoms (e.g., memory loss, leaky bladder) because of the mistaken belief that such symptoms are the result of “just getting old.” Also, if we believe we are “over the hill,” we may balk at starting an exercise program because we think it will not make a difference. In fact, research shows quite convincingly that even frail elders can benefit from an exercise program.

Word traps to avoid

Our language communicates narrow, usually negative views of older people (or of aging in general) in several ways. Consider some word traps to avoid:

- **Giving a negative meaning to the word *old*.** Why does *old* have to be seen as bad? If you don’t like the word *old*, try *older*. But don’t say, “You’re not getting older, you’re getting better!” Say instead, “You’re getting older *and* better!”

- **Talking to or about older adults as if they were children.**

The practice of infantilization, or treating adults like children, is insulting at any age. Studies have shown that some staff members at nursing homes and in recreation programs use language similar to *baby talk* and a high-pitched voice when talking to older people. Although we sometimes speak of old age as a *second childhood*, most adults wish to be treated like adults. Avoid words that diminish people in size and therefore power (e.g., *little old lady*, *cute couple*) and words that suggest familiarity or closeness (using first names when not invited to do so, or calling an older person *sweetie*, *dearie*, *honey*).

- **Expressing surprise at older people’s accomplishments or suggesting that older people are obsolete.** When we ask a person if he or she is *still working* or *still driving*, we imply that we are surprised that they are doing something most people



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their age don't do. We reinforce a rather narrow image of what most older people are like or capable of. Other words to avoid are *out-of-date*, *rusty*, *past one's prime*, *has-been*, and *over the hill*.

• **Using words that suggest that older people are physically unattractive and have negative behavior and traits.** Many of the most vivid and vicious words and expressions fall into this category and paint a word picture of older people as withered, fragile, annoying, unpleasant, and mentally incompetent. Some examples are *old fool*, *old biddy*, *curmudgeon*, *fruitcake*, *dried up*, *Sunday driver*, and many others. Most of these are clearly putdowns, reflections of anger toward older people and fear of aging, or they are used as “insult humor.” Although unflattering characterizations of older people date back hundreds of years, these expressions appear to have become more popular recently, much to the dismay of today's older adults, who remember a time when people spoke to and about elders with respect.

What you CAN do

Perhaps the most effective way to counteract such pessimistic language is to replace it where possible with positive words, such as *mature*, *sage*, *venerable*, and others that respect the strengths, contributions, and potential of older adults. Choose words that emphasize older adults' endurance, longevity, experience, resilience, and wisdom.

My own work has shown that, when asked, people contribute longer lists of negative expressions about older adults than they do positive ones. This suggests that all of us may have to make an extra effort to change our everyday conversations. Some ideas can be found in recent books about positive aging: *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, *Reclaimed Powers*, *The Fountain of Age*, *Late Bloomers*, *The Ageless Self*. These titles and the words on the positive word list can help us broaden our thinking and replace language that limits our potential with a *language of possibility*.

The benefits of renaming the conditions of aging to reflect the more positive possibilities of life likely will be numerous. A recent study of the ways in which older adults respond to stressful mental tasks in a laboratory showed

that those presented with positive words about aging during testing were less likely to experience cardiovascular signs of stress than were people who were presented with negative words about aging. One team of gerontologists suggests that a focus on the positive aspects of aging will bring about a reversal in the cycle of deterioration and breakdown in confidence sometimes felt by older people and will bring about a “reconstruction” of self-esteem. More positive language and images can be motivational—encouraging people to plan ahead for their later years, to engage in healthy lifestyles, to seek prompt attention for symptoms instead of dismiss-

Negative words

- old fogey □
- old bird □
- old goat □
- crotchety
- codger
- fuddy duddy
- dinosaur
- no spring chicken
- bag

Positive words

- a woman (or man) of age
- vintage
- elder statesman/woman
- matriarch/patriarch
- distinguished
- seasoned
- veteran
- classic

ing them as a consequence of aging, and to summon up energy to try new things and meet new people.

In a recent newspaper article from Topeka, Kansas, one writer reminded readers why the expression *little old lady* is obsolete: “Those four ‘little old ladies’ sitting in the booth at your neighborhood restaurant have nearly 300 years of accumulated information, stories, and experience. Perhaps they haven’t just awakened from a nap. Check their bags for dance shoes, laptop computers, or golf balls.” Perhaps one day we’ll replace talk of *little old ladies* and *grumpy old men* with stories of *vital and vibrant adults* of all ages.

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