



How to Communicate about Aging

Many individuals and organizations are focused on serving older adults and their families, engaging in an array of written and oral communication. Whether preparing grants, writing reports, developing educational programs, producing marketing materials, or conferring with older adults and their families, the language used influences mental images about a particular issue or topic. Using certain language can tap into existing attitudes and beliefs which often portray older adults negatively. Shifting language that encourages creative thinking and problem-solving portrays older adults in a more holistic way.



Before digging into recommendations, it is important to emphasize the limitation of grouping all adults aged 60 or 65 and older into a single category or group.¹ There is significant diversity in this group. Spend time narrowing down the target audience for communication (caregivers, adults with chronic diseases, etc.) and how they like to communicate and learn (email, mail, phone call, text message, in-person, virtual, etc.). Please note that grants and other federal/state programs tend to lump people together by age group, which can limit changes made at the individual or organizational level. Use the recommendations in this document to communicate about these age categories.

Communication Recommendations:

Labeling is something we do to identify groups of people with similar characteristics. No one likes to be labeled, but we all do it (millennials, aging adults, etc.) and they are necessary (e.g., federal and grant reporting). Unfortunately, some labels for adults aged 60 or 65 and older are negative. Examples of labels are “the elderly” or “senior citizen.” These labels often elicit images of adults who are incompetent and need help and assistance. Even euphemisms, like “seasoned” or “young lady” can suggest to listeners that advancing age is undesirable. Instead, experts recommend gradable adjectives or words that express varying degrees of age like “older” (older students, older participants, etc.).^{2,3,4} Please note that “elder” might be appropriate in some cultural or ethnic groups (e.g., Native Americans). It can be helpful to ask if “elder” is the preferred term.



Othering is characterized by communication that uses “they” or “them” and other phrases to separate the speaker from the subject of communication. Aging does not begin at sixty-five. Everyone is aging. The link between our choices at younger ages and our outcomes at older ages is undeniable. Remember, the solutions proposed for older adults today will be passed down/carried forward to the next generation. Experts recommend using inclusive language, such as “us” or “we”, and offering a vision of overcoming challenges by working together.⁴ Do not confuse inclusive language for elderspeak.

Elderspeak is communication with older adults rooted in assumptions that they are cognitively or mentally impaired. It includes simplified language, typically associated with how adults speak to children.⁵ Greater success comes from treating older individuals as adults with unique identities.

Examples of elderspeak:

- Are we ready to take our medicine?
- How are we doing today?
- Are we ready to walk?
- Are we okay with this?



Crisis language (e.g., silver tsunami or demographic cliff) is used to engage readers and convey urgency, and it seeks to inspire action and change. However, when talking about older adults and issues associated with advancing age, it has the opposite effect.² It ignites feelings of powerlessness and inability to change things for the better. Instead, emphasize creativity and innovation when communicating about aging and older adults to inspire hope for the future.²

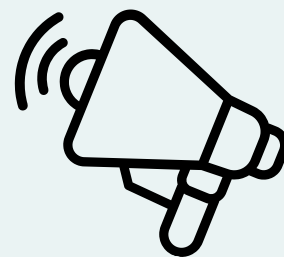
Positive aging imagery is commonly used to counter negative stereotypes about aging. It is sometimes ineffective, especially when paired with communication about the realities of advancing age and end-of-life. Use images that realistically portray older adults, their diversity, and are relatable to the target audience.⁴



Call to Action:

1. Review existing programs and scripts to ensure they align with recommendations.
2. Incorporate effective communication strategies into written and oral communication.
3. Apply communication strategies when writing professional papers, documents, and grant proposals.
4. Evaluate marketing campaigns to ensure that images and language offer a balanced view of aging and older adults.
5. Identify your target audience for marketing, education, and outreach efforts (e.g., caregivers, empty nesters, individuals with chronic illnesses, etc.).

This factsheet provides actionable tips to enhance the quality of communication about aging and older adults, and communication with the clients served by businesses or agencies. Resources are available with expanded details and information.



Learn more!

National Center to Reframe Aging: <https://www.reframingaging.org>

References

1. Bjorklund, B.R. & Earles, J.L. (2020). The journey of adulthood (9th ed.). Pearson.
2. Gerontological Society of America. (n.d.) Resources. The National Center to Reframe Aging. <https://www.reframingaging.org/resources>
3. Morrison, S. (2023). Don't call me "old": Avoiding ageism when writing about aging. National Institute on Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/research/blog/2023/12/dont-call-me-old-avoiding-ageism-when-writing-about-aging>
4. Sweetland, J., Volmert, A., & O'Neil, M. (2017). Finding the frame: An empirical approach to reframing aging and ageism. Frameworks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/finding-the-frame-an-empirical-approach-to-reframing-aging-and-ageism/>
5. Shaw, C. A., & Gordon, J. K. (2021). Understanding elderspeak: An evolutionary concept analysis. Innovation in Aging, 5(3), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab023>



NORTH CENTRAL REGION
Aging Network

The North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) is a collaborative of Extension professionals dedicated to improving the health and well-being of adults in later life through science-based strategies. Visit us at: <https://ncran.org>