



VCU

Gerontology

College of Health Professions



SOUTHERN GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Bridging Aging Research & Practice

Words Matter – How to Avoid Ageism in your Presentation

Words matter. The language of ageism is deeply entrenched in our daily vocabulary. Words are commonly used to describe aging as “a problem,” or “a social burden.” We might talk about having to “deal” with old people or an “aging population” without realizing that we, too, are aging, and thus that population includes us all!

Culturally – including within our professions – we focus mostly on declines related to aging. This means that we often fail to recognize the many ways in which we deepen and grow as human beings as we grow older. The truth is aging is a multidirectional and multidimensional process. Aging involves growth, maintenance, adaptation, and decline across the four dimensions of our experience: our bodies, our psyches, our social identities, and our sense of spirituality or connectedness with forces outside ourselves.

Ableism is the stereotyping and discrimination against people on the basis of their physical and/or cognitive ability. Ableism is based on an underlying belief that typical abilities are superior. Ageism and ableism result from a dominant but mistaken cultural understanding of aging as a singular process of disease and deterioration, which are stigmatized in society.

As a result, we may (innocently, we believe) tell someone, “oh, you’re not old!” or use the word “young” to describe something preferable (“She has such a youthful spirit!”). These sentiments reveal our cultural preferences for youth over age, by equating good things with being, seeming, or looking younger and equating negative things with being, seeming, or looking older. We can also find ourselves apologizing for our own age when we say things like, “I have worked here for 20 years – I was just a teenager when I started!” because we don’t want someone to suspect how old we are, or “Oops, I just had a senior moment” when we have forgotten something.

The use of this language (and the thinking behind it) is not just problematic, it is dangerous to our health and well-being! Over forty years of empirical research has revealed strong correlations between negative attitudes to *our own aging* and negative health outcomes including reduced recovery from illness, increased chronic disabilities, and reduced longevity.

Your professional obligation to avoid ageist language in your presentation is therefore critical. We offer the following suggestions to help you:

Don’t:

- Say “silver tsunami” - growing older should not be compared to a devastating natural disaster.
- Frame aging as a disease or a process of decline – aging is completely natural and normal.
- Talk about the aging population as “they” or “them.”
- Make self-deprecating comments about your own age.

Do:

- Use the terms “old people” (no, it’s not an insult!) or “elders” or “older people.”
- Remember that each person is a unique individual, and that includes elders.
- Talk about the aging population as “we” or “us” – remember, we are all aging!
- Present aging as a rich mix of growth, maintenance, adaptation, and decline.