The Language We Use
or
*I'm Not Your ‘Honey’*

from GWAAR (Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc.)

This document is meant to help professionals, volunteers, and others understand that the language we use in offering services to older adults or individuals with disabilities must recognize people as individuals first and at all times treat them with respect and dignity. To paraphrase, we should speak, write, and live ‘person-first’.¹

Robert Butler, in the 1960’s, created the term ‘Ageism’ which he defined as being, "A process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Older people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills. Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings."²

**Key Points To Remember When Working With Older Adults**³

Our country is quickly becoming generationally diverse, making it critical for those of us who interact with, serve, and support older people to be aware of and sensitive to their unique needs, challenges, values, and preferences. To serve and safeguard older adults, we need to have a general understanding of the aging process, and the changes and challenges they might experience.

1. Don’t assume older people are all frail or have dementia because of their age or how they look. Most older people are living active, independent lives.

2. Disrespectful behavior toward older people could harm their body, mind, and spirit. Older adults deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, like anyone else.

3. To serve and help safeguard older people, it is important to be aware of and sensitive to their individual needs, challenges, values, and preferences.

The old adage, ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’ is not at all true. Words matter.⁴ It’s important we avoid
addressing someone in a way that may categorize him or her inappropriately
or is demeaning to them or their peers.
People with diverse needs are defined as “those with varying abilities and
disabilities, cultures, languages, and social and health care needs.” Whether
we are a professional or volunteer, we should acknowledge the uniqueness
of older adults and

recognize their years of contributions to society and honor their choices for
how they choose to live. According to gerontological research, “we need to
carefully and repeatedly examine our attitudes toward aging and to
challenge the common stereotypes and myths.”

The suggestions included here are meant to be helpful in assuring language
used in communicating with older adults or individuals with disabilities is
respectful and recognizes each individual as a unique person. People are
asked to avoid using words that may be interpreted as condescending or
even offensive.
The first column of this chart shows examples of language that is
inappropriate and could be interpreted as disrespectful or condescending.
The second column recommends other means for communicating
professionally with older adults or individuals with a disability.

Note: unless you have a signed confidentiality release you should never
discuss an individual’s personal circumstances. For example, saying to
someone while working, ”That woman over there just found out she has
cancer.” would violate confidentiality and may result in a cause for
discipline.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rather than saying:</th>
<th>Consider:</th>
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| ‘sweetie’, ‘honey’, ‘dearie’ ‘you girls’ ‘you boys’ | Unless the consumer tells you otherwise, refer to a person by their last name. Example: Do you understand the instructions Mrs. Hall?”, or “The driver will be there at 4:30 p.m. Mrs. Vang.” Avoid asking, “May I call you by your first name?” The individual may feel put on the spot and reluctantly agree. Try using instead: “Mr.”, “Ms.”, “Mrs.” or ‘Sir’ in communicating with program participants. Examples: “Mr. Hall, would you like to subscribe to our senior newsletter?” “Oh, Mrs. Vang, I enjoy volunteering and giving rides to people.” Instead of approaching a group of older adults and asking, “How are you girls (or boys) doing today?” just say ‘How are you today?’
<p>| “Our people like Bingo.” | Avoid using language of a possessive nature |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Improved Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Our folks love it when we have cabbage at the site.”</td>
<td><em>Try instead:</em> “Some of the people at the dining site have told me they like Bingo.”</td>
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<td>“My people don’t like that new van.”</td>
<td>“The survey showed a majority of participants like cabbage.”</td>
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<td>“We’re going to expand that program for our folks in the next year.”</td>
<td>“The transportation coordinator told me a few of the riders don’t like the new van.”</td>
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<td>“Well, we have lots of disabled who visit our site.”</td>
<td>“After our consumer survey we decided to expand that program next year.”</td>
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<td>“She’s handicapped so needs the van”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He’s wheelchair bound so needs the van”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We need a ramp at the site for the handicapped to use.” or “We need more handicapped parking.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“That blind lady over there...”</td>
<td><em>Try instead:</em> “Well, we do have people with physical disabilities who visit the site.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He’s blind so you need to get him his plate.”</td>
<td>“She has a physical disability and will need a wheelchair accessible vehicle to get to her appointment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He’s blind so can’t get to the van without help.”</td>
<td>“He has a physical disability and uses a wheelchair so, yes, I’d like to reserve the van.”</td>
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<td>“We have lots of DD folks at the site who may need transportation.”</td>
<td>“We have several individuals who have developmental disabilities at the site who may need transportation.”</td>
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<td>“Well, she’s deaf so needs batteries for her hearing aids.”</td>
<td>“She is hard of hearing and needs batteries for her hearing aids.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We have lots of diabetics on HDM.”</td>
<td>“Several of our program participants have Type 2 Diabetes.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The diabetics at that site...”</td>
<td>“We have several individuals with Type 2 Diabetes who might be interested in the support group in 2014.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He’s a hoarder you know.” Let’s stop the word ‘hoarder’ in its tracks and banish it from being used as a noun.</td>
<td>*How a person chooses to live should not enter into a conversation unless, perhaps, you are professionally assessing him or her for services or have a concern for their health or safety.”</td>
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“She’s a cat lady.”
An individual is not what he or she accumulates. It is unprofessional and offensive to label a person according to how we may personally judge him or her.

| “He suffers from dementia.”
It is desirable to avoid language that projects struggle, pain, or suffering when it is not necessarily part of the circumstances being described. 6 |
| “He has been diagnosed with dementia.”
(Note, this should never be assumed or expressed unless the individual has specifically been diagnosed by a medical professional as having Alzheimer’s or other dementia and you have a signed release allowing you to share that information for a specific purpose.) |

Page after page could be filled with such examples but it is hoped that this brief document, and the references suggested, help us in making appropriate choices in the language we use. “If you can manage to adopt writing and speaking this way, you’re on your way to seeing the person before the disability.” 7

References

2 http://www.mailman.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/Ageism_in_America.pdf
3 http://nursing.uc.edu/centers/Look_Closer_See_Me.html
5 http://www.hrmood.com/meaning-CSA.pdf
6 http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenecents/cultural_competence.html

"Words simultaneously reflect and reinforce our attitudes and perceptions; words shape our world."

-- Kathie Snow, "The Case Against 'Special Needs"