

Anti-Elderspeak Language Guide



CATCH-ON

A HRSA GERIATRIC WORKFORCE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

We are ALL aging – how do you want to be spoken to?

Through verbal and non-verbal language, we can celebrate adult personhood by acknowledging and honoring older adults’ unique identities, yet our speech can get in the way. Elderspeak uses over-simplified language and is often driven by ageist stereotypes or the belief that accommodation is needed. While aimed at expressing care or enhancing comprehension, it is demeaning, and can make caregivers seem less respectful or nurturing, dominant, and unfriendly.

Reframing Aging

Try saying this:	Instead of saying this:	Because:
Older Adult/Person/People	Senior/Senior Citizen Elderly	Implies frailty, dependence, and perpetuate stereotypes
Person with dementia or cognitive impairment	Demented Senile	Disrespectful and contributes to stigma
“You are beautiful!” “You have a vibrant energy!”	“You are beautiful for your age!” “You are young at heart!”	Implies that youth is superior, and aging is shameful or undesirable
“How can I help you be safe?” “I admire your independence. Do you need any support?”	“Should you still be doing that?” “You live alone at your age? You’re so independent!”	Can discourage activity and implies that getting older guarantees dependence or inability to perform tasks
“You may fall without the walker.” “Ensure may help your nutrition.”	“You must use the walker.” “Drink this Ensure.”	Implies control and dependence. Explain why you are providing a service.

Elderspeak

Try saying this:	Instead of saying this:	Because:
Preferred name or title “Good morning, Mrs. P”	Sweetie, Dear, Honey “Good morning, honey.”	Pet names can be demeaning and minimize the perception of control
You, I “Are you ready for breakfast?”	We, Us, Our “Are we ready for our breakfast?”	Pleural pronouns imply joint control and refusal to treat as an individual
“Are you ready to take a bath?” “Which hat do you want?”	“You’re ready for a bath, aren’t you?” “You want the green hat, right?”	Tag questions imply control and lack of choice
“I hear that you’re in pain.” “I’m here for you.”	“Now, now. It’s not that bad.” “Bless your heart.”	Implies scolding, even if the intent is to soothe or empathize
Wound, Blanket, Stomach Depends, Caregiver, Day Center	Ouchy, Blankie, Tummy Diapers, Babysitter, Day Care	Child-like words disregard maturity, wisdom, and experience
“I see you ate all of your dinner.” “Let me know if you need help.”	“Good job finishing your dinner!” “Wow - you brushed your teeth alone!”	Praising for tasks we wouldn’t praise a younger adult for is condescending

Communication Techniques

Demonstrating respect and building relationships requires more than just words. Effective communication can be achieved by drawing attention to our behaviors, actions, and the way we speak.

Try doing this:	Instead of doing this:
Speak in a firm, medium-loud, low-mid range pitched voice	Using a high-pitched, singsong, over-nurturing voice
Maintain pitch or tone of voice	Increasing tone of voice at the end of a sentence
Use regular speech pattern and vocabulary; add pauses	Using simple speech patterns or vocabulary
Use hearing devices or identify a “better” ear if needed	Speaking loud or slow, using exaggerated expressions
Actively listen and allow the person to speak	Only using close-ended questions
Face and speak directly to the older adult	Addressing the caregiver instead of the older adult
Maintain eye contact, relax posture, sit at eye level	Eye rolling, raised eyebrows, arm crossing, standing over
Move and act in a calm, unhurried manner	Rushing to complete the task or encounter
Ask to turn off or mute any potentially distracting devices	Leaving the TV or radio on

These approaches can be patronizing, condescending, or imply impairment. Always identify individual needs first!

Every person and situation are unique.
Avoid assumptions! Ask about and honor communication needs and preferences.



Center for Excellence in Aging

For more information, visit <https://catch-on.org/> and <https://aging.rush.edu/>