

Mind Your Language

At Age & Opportunity we believe that ageist terms and images should be as unacceptable as sexist or racist ones. This guide aims to encourage all of us to use language that is precise, accurate and non-judgemental in private and public conversations with and about older persons.

Do...

Use the term **Older persons**. It is the most appropriate term to use. The ‘er’ qualifier makes it more acceptable and inclusive than just ‘old’. It indicates that age is relative - everyone is older or younger than someone else. It recognises a continuum of ageing, all older persons are not the same age. While older people is also acceptable the word persons highlights that everyone is an individual. Above all, it is the term that older persons prefer. This is reflected in titles such as the United Nations Principles for Older Persons and the International Day of Older Persons.

Don't...

One of the worst – but most pervasive - ways to describe older persons is ‘the elderly’. The word elderly is problematic because of its association with dependency and frailty and when paired with ‘the’ it implies membership of a homogenous group where all the individuals are the same. Also using “the” as a prefix implies we are not part of this group, we are othering the subjects.

Geriatric is a medical term and should only be used in medical contexts, we would never refer to children as paediatrics. Likewise, just as we don't refer to persons under 50 as junior citizens there is no need to refer to persons of any age as senior citizens. Pensioner or OAP implies financial dependency and renders invisible the very many older persons who are in paid or unpaid work.

Person first...

We do change as we get older. Functional abilities change over time. Older persons do become ill, do live with disabilities and many health issues do become more prevalent with age. When dealing with any disability or health issue - at any age - person-first language should always be used. Someone lives with dementia rather than exists as a dementia sufferer. Individuals are users of wheelchairs rather than wheelchair bound and have had strokes rather than are stroke victims.

In the picture...

It's not just our language that we need to watch. Portrayals of older persons can also be stereotypical leading to ageist attitudes and behaviours. Many of the images used to represent older persons, particularly those in care settings during the Covid-19 crisis have been negative stock images of body parts - wrinkly hands, woolly slippers, walking frames. Dehumanising anybody like this means we are less likely to respect their rights and treat them as equals. On the other hand, portrayals (often in advertising) of older persons as happy and affluent, active and leisure oriented can be positive but often exaggerated and unrealistic. These representations do not reflect the diversity of older persons and the experiences of ageing and can be alienating and disheartening for viewers. It is always preferable to include images of local older people that we can all identify with.

Visit Age & Opportunity's website and social media for good examples of positive language and images.

Website: <https://ageandopportunity.ie/>

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