

# Elderspeak: The Reaffirmation of Negative Stereotypes of Elders



Elderspeak, also commonly known as infantilizing communication, is the usage of modified speech for older adults which can include using simple language/ vocabulary, a slow rate of speaking, using a singsong voice (high pitched and exaggerated), inappropriate terms of endearment, and replacing single pronoun questions with the plural version (Herman & Williams, 2009). Elderspeak is frequently adopted by younger individuals and individuals that work closely with the older population (Herman & Williams, 2009). When using Elderspeak to communicate with older individuals, it is perceived as condescending, degrading, and assumes that elders are mentally incapable to participate in a normal conversation (Herman & Williams, 2009).

## “HONEY”

## “DEARIE”

## “SWEETHEART”

### My Experience

Both of my grandparents suffered with either Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease, thus my only interaction with my elders has been seeing and interacting with them while they were nearing the end of their lives. Therefore, my perspective of elderly people was shaped by what I saw in long-term care homes as a child. Almost every interaction I saw between staff and the elders was Elderspeak, and since I saw staff using this language, I thought this was the appropriate way to speak with the older population. Until recently, I have had a distorted view of the older generation, as I have seen elders as frail, unhealthy, confused and in need of help. Deconstructing my perspective has taken a long time, and it is still an active process that I must participate in to refrain from engaging in Elderspeak and perpetrating negative stereotypes. I hope to achieve a viewpoint of admiration and compassion, while acknowledging that elderly individuals have much to offer our society and deserve to be treated this way.

### Elderspeak and Theory

As seen in the article by Rozario and Derienzis (2009), elders often face an identity crisis in which an older person feels like their younger selves internally, but this self image does not correlate with what they see/feel externally. This phenomenon is referred to as the mask of ageing (Rozario & Derienzis, 2009). In addition, how our identity develops is through social interaction; therefore, an elder's identity is largely influenced by how society interacts, communicates, and perceives them (Rozario & Derienzis, 2009). By using infantilizing communication towards elders, we reinforce ageism and negative stereotypes which in turn affects how an elder views their identity. For example, if an older person engages in a conversation where elder speak is being used towards them, this may shift their perception of themselves to feel as if they are unable to understand or communicate with society as they did when they were younger.

### Social Work Implications

Throughout our unit discussing racism and the current climate, we explored the importance of language. As a social worker in particular, we must be mindful with our terminology and communication style in order to adhere to an anti-oppressive practice. In regards to working with the older population as a social worker, it is imperative that we refrain from engaging in Elderspeak as it perpetrates ageism and negative stereotypes. As discussed in Azulai's article, ageism exists mainly in those working closely with older people; therefore, as future social workers, we must examine our own perspective and knowledge of the older population to ensure we do not participate in ageism (Azulai, 2014). This internal examination includes being mindful with how we communicate with elders. As seen in Williams', Herman's, Gajweski's, and Wilson's study, elders often perceive Elderspeak as belittling and oppressive (Williams, Herman, Gajweski, & Wilson, 2009). In order to foster respectful relationship with our older clients, it is vital to refrain from reinforcing ageist stereotypes that will lead to an elder's negative self perception.

### Interview With a Long-term Care Nurse

I decided to conduct my interview with my friend that is currently working as a nurse in a long-term care home. I asked her if she has seen or engaged in Elderspeak in her position, and she informed me that almost every single employee and supervisor uses Elderspeak when addressing their clients. In addition, she explained how the elders are almost always visibly irritated when communicated with in this manner. She discussed how they are not educated in how to communicate with their clients and/or shown how not to address their clients in a patronizing way. Mentioned below is an example given from my interview of how Elderspeak is used daily in a long term care home:

**“Hi Honey, are WE ready to take your medication?”**

**- Miranda Shaw**