

LIVING

The Negative Effects of Elderspeak

Talking down to older adults is not only disrespectful, but it can be detrimental

By [Julie Pfitzinger](#)

January 9, 2019



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Faye Kirtley doesn't appreciate it when store clerks talk down to her and act as if "I don't know what I'm doing," she said.

“It’s embarrassing, and I don’t know why they think it’s okay to treat an older person like that,” added the 88-year old resident of Bardstown, Ky. “Maybe they have people in their family that they talk down to, too.”

Barbara Tack, 76, of Exeter, N.H. cringes at diminutives such as “miss” and “little lady” and has been known to correct a supermarket cashier on the impact of those monikers.

“I told him, ‘I am not young, and I think it’s an insult to call attention to my age at all,’” said Tack. “He did seem chagrined, so I tempered it with something like, ‘It makes me feel bad that all you can see is my age.’ But I hear that kind of condescending comment way too often.”

Tack also shared a story about a friend, a 70-year-old man, who was offended by what he perceived to be very childlike instructions given to him by a nurse in a doctor’s office: “Sorry, you have to remove your sweater for me to take your blood pressure. I know it’s cold outside and you can put it back on right away.”

Elderspeak Reveals Perception

What Kirtley and Tack are describing are signs of what is referred to as “elderspeak.” It occurs when an older adult is spoken to by health care workers, service personnel, neighbors or even family members as if he or she is a child with limited understanding.

[In a recent article in The Chicago Tribune](#), Anna I. Corwin, an anthropologist and professor at St. Mary’s College of California in Moraga, noted that elderspeak “sounds like baby talk or simplified speech” and is, in fact, a symptom of how older adults are often perceived.

“Americans tend to view and treat older adults as no longer productive in society. And that’s how we define personhood, as an adult who is a productive member of society,” Corwin said.

Elderspeak involves talking slowly and at a louder volume, with pronounced enunciation; it also employs the frequent use of words such as “sweetie,” “dear” or

the pronoun “we” when referring to the older person (as in, “Do we want to go to dinner now?”).

The Negative Impact of Elderspeak

Not only is this type of speech condescending and disrespectful to older adults, it can be damaging to their mental health and well-being.

According to Becca Levy, a researcher on a study on the effects of elderspeak, by Yale University, the practice “sends a message that the patient is incompetent, and begins a negative downward spiral for older adults who react with decreased self-esteem, depression and withdrawal.”

Further, those living with mild to moderate dementia can be even more negatively impacted by this type of language. These people can become aggressive or uncooperative when elderspeak is used, according to the Yale report.

The Importance of Respect

In an article about the dangers of ageism by LifeCare Advocates, a care management practice based in Newton, Mass., one of the tactics mentioned for reducing the use of elderspeak involves training health care workers not only to refrain from using diminutives, but to ask the older adult how he or she wants to be addressed. For some of them, the automatic use of their first names demonstrates a lack of respect.

Kirtley, who tends not to correct those who speak down to her for fear of “causing an incident,” still decries the practice of elderspeak. She’d be happier to always be treated with the respect she said everyone deserves.

“It’s an issue of dignity,” Kirtley said.

By [Julie Pfitzinger](#)

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