Communicating with Seniors: Elderspeak and Beyond

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What is “Elderspeak”?  

“Infantilizing” communication  

“Sweetie, Dearie, Honey Pie, Mommy, Sweet Pea…”

Conveys a message of incompetence of the receiver and dominance of the speaker over the elder
Elderspeak

Elderspeak may be characterized by:

- simplistic vocabulary and grammar
- shortened sentences
- slowed speech
- elevated pitch and volume
- inappropriate terms of endearment

(Caporael, 1981; Kemper, 1994)
Elderspeak Examples

- Overly Nurturing—inappropriately intimate
- Overly Directive (dismisses autonomy of listener)
- Tagging Questions (prompts the answer for the elder….you don’t want *that*, do you?)
- Simplistic vocabulary
- “Baby Talk” patronizing, demeaning
Why Do We Use Elderspeak?

- Tradition
- Modeling by others
- Unawareness
- Intent to control
- Insensitivity
What’s Wrong With Elderspeak?

Older adults with dementia most frequently reacted to **elderspeak** communication by negative vocalizations (screaming or yelling, negative verbalizations, crying)

May induce “catastrophic reactions”

Herman RE, Williams KN, 2009
Conveyance of Inequality

**Elderspeak** was first identified by research in nursing homes.

**Elderspeak** assumes frailties of the residents and reinforces negative age stereotypes.  

Hummert, 2009
Effects of Elderspeak

- The implicit message of incompetence then begins a negative feedback loop for older persons, who react with decreased self-esteem, depression, withdrawal, and the assumption of dependent behaviors.

Ryan et al., 1986
Components of Empathic Communication

- eye contact,
- trunk lean,
- body orientation,
- distance,
- tone of voice,
- predetermined verbal message
Delivering a Teaching Message

- Origami Project
Origami Instructions

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
Delivering a Clear Respectful Message

Considerations

Hearing
Visualization
Use of Examples
“Teach-Back”
Rewording
Avoid lingo, slang or jargon
Delivering a Clear Respectful Message

Considerations Continued

Language
Gender
Past Experiences
Dangers of Elderspeak

- Ageism
- Allegations of Psychological Abuse
- Anger
- Depersonalization
Ageism = stereotyping and discriminating against individuals or groups because of their age. It is a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values used to justify age-based prejudice, discrimination, and subordination.
Allegation of Psychological Abuse

Words, tone of voice & gestures may be interpreted as abusive.
Anger
Using Elderspeak Perpetuates Depersonalization
Conclusion

Appropriate Communication Skills easily learned—but takes “informed mindful desire”

- Opportunities for modeling respectful communication
- Enhance effective relationships
Conclusion Cont’d

- Cooperative care
- More efficient care
- Ethical Behavior
Avoid Elderspeak

• Begin conversations by asking the elder what they wish to be called.
• Communicate preferences to the care team
• Err on the side of formality
• Respect age and senior status
• Population aging
• None of us is getting any younger….
Discussion