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TURNING POINTS

Forget ‘Senior Citizen’—Aging Baby Boomers Search for Better Term

Offended by labels like ‘elderly’ and ‘old,’ older adults try on new generational descriptions; Perennial ‘sounds like a plant’



By
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There’s a new way to describe old. It’s “perennial.” Not everyone likes it.

Pam O’Brien, 69, thinks it’s contrived. Ms. O’Brien, who teaches full time in the Public and Professional Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh, says there are better, more appropriate terms. She personally doesn’t mind “elder,” as she is an elder at her church, along with other people ranging in age from the 30s to the 80s. But she’s not a fan of “elderly” and neither are her friends, who were upset when they were described



by a younger couple as
“the elderly couple.”

“Vintage,” another euphemism, makes her think of an old clothes shop. As for “golden ager”? That’s her parents’ generation, and baby boomers are aging differently. Ms. O’Brien, who has lost friends to cancer and heart attacks, says she thinks

the best term to describe people 60 and older is “lucky.”

Everyone is growing older, but most people don’t want to be called old or perceived as old, which makes finding an acceptable term difficult. “I haven’t found a word that someone is not turned off by,” says Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity.

For a long time, Dr. Carstensen, 64, tried to get people to call themselves old and be proud of reaching advanced age. Getting others to embrace the term was a tough sell, she says. Other, more positive terms, such as sage, don’t always apply either. “There are a whole bunch of older people who are nothing close to wise,” she says.

She prefers perennial, a term used by Gina Pell in a 2016 piece in an email newsletter, the What, to describe people of all ages. Since then, retirement bloggers have adopted the term. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared herself a perennial in a video posted by newsletter theSkimm. It implies reinvention, says Dr. Carstensen, but doesn’t assign positive attributes, such as mature, or negative ones, such as frail, to a diverse group.

ILLUSTRATION: NATALYA BALNOVA



Pam O'Brien, 69, here with husband Jack O'Brien, 70, thinks the term 'perennial' sounds contrived. PHOTO: O'BRIEN FAMILY

Labels constantly evolve, says Jeremy Wallach, an anthropologist who specializes in linguistics and teaches in the Department of Popular Culture at Ohio's Bowling Green State University. A once-acceptable word or phrase accumulates negative connotations and is replaced by another. "Aged" evolved into "senior citizen," which evolved into "older adult." Some, like "geezer," were never acceptable.

Baby boomers, the counterculture generation, are particularly self-conscious. "They want to adopt a new generational identity for themselves in post-retiree years," says Dr. Wallach, 48. He refers to the group as "baby boomers entering a new phase of life."

"That's my lingo as a social scientist. I don't have a popular culture name for them," he says.

Generational labels, which cover people from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, are especially imprecise. There are healthy 80-year-olds and frail ones. The 60-plus population includes the so-called Greatest and Silent Generations, referring to those born in the early 1900s to 1945, who think and feel very differently about age and propriety.

‘We have struggled over the years with words like aged, senior, and elderly in promotional materials. ’

—Daniel Reingold, CEO of RiverSpring Health

Stanley Szott is one of them. Mr. Szott, 93, prefers being called Mr. Szott. Growing up in a Pittsburgh coal community, he called anyone five years older than he was Mr. or Mrs. “We had respect for them when we were kids,” says Mr. Szott.

He thinks terms like “senior citizen” or “older adults” are unnecessary. “We don’t need to be reminded that we are senior citizens,” he says. Not only that, those umbrella terms don’t recognize a person as an individual, he says. “You lose your identity. Everyone’s the same.”

Daniel Reingold doesn’t like the label “fall risk,” the term on his wrist band when the 64-year old ended up in the emergency room after a bike accident.

As CEO of RiverSpring Health, a Riverdale, N.Y.-based nursing, rehabilitation and managed-care company, Mr. Reingold thinks a lot about proper terms for people who are aging. When he started with the company 28 years ago, its nursing home was called Hebrew Home for the Aged. It’s now Hebrew Home at Riverdale.

“We have struggled over the years with words like aged, senior, and elderly in promotional materials,” he says.

He prefers “older adults,” which he thinks is neutral and accurate. “The difference between a 90-year-old and a 40-year-old is that one adult is older,” he says. He’s just not sure when the term starts to kick in: “I’m 64 and I’m not sure I want to be called an older adult.”

As for perennial? “It sounds like a plant,” he says.

That’s okay with Brent Taylor, 37, who has debated what to call a line of plant-based nutritional products targeting the 50-plus market. “The adult-nutrition section of the grocery store is really a sad place,” says the Los Angeles entrepreneur, who co-founded plant-based burger maker Beyond Meat and has since left the company.

He and Sara Bonham, his partner in the new business, Willow Cup Inc., came up with a list of 120 possible names for their products, the first of which, a beverage, they plan to launch online in the fall.

Among them: 100 Years, which they thought conveyed an aspirational message about longevity. They eventually dropped that name because people in their focus group were less interested in reaching a certain age than in feeling good. They landed on Perennial, which they say plays off their plant-based focus but also symbolizes rejuvenation.

Ms. O’Brien, the University of Pittsburgh professor, thinks many people dislike labels as they get older because maintaining independence is very important at this stage of life, as are new beginnings. She and her husband Jack, 70, who develops continuing education content for architects, want to open a non-profit free library for children when they retire, sell their house and move to Florida.

Mr. O’Brien says labels such as “senior citizen,” seem odd, as people usually don’t call themselves “citizens” unless they are in a civics class. Still, he says, he doesn’t care what someone calls him: “I don’t feel like I fit any particular category, so I guess I’m not sensitive to it.”

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