



Care Watch

AGEISM EXISTS: NAME IT! RESIST IT!

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Senior Citizens Naming and (Re)Claiming Ourselves

Like other groups of people who experience discrimination, as senior citizens, we often grapple with how we name ourselves and how others label us. Does it matter? At Care Watch, we believe it does matter. How we name ourselves reflects social attitudes and may often reinforce ageist stereotypes. We proudly refer to ourselves as senior citizens and there is a reason for this. While numerous derogatory terms exist for senior citizens (e.g., old codger), below is a list and description of commonly used labels. The descriptions reflect a combination of dictionary definitions, insights from gerontologists as well as our own experience. What image of aging are you conveying in the labels you choose to describe senior citizens?

Terms that Suggest a Valued Social Role

ELDER(S): Describes a person who is superior in age and wisdom who is deserving of respect. Most often used in indigenous cultures and some religious communities where it is not so much about chronological age, but refers to a respected social role that is bestowed by the community.

SENIOR CITIZEN(S): This is the term embraced by Care Watch as it conveys the notion of a person of advanced age who has the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. It suggests that seniors are active members of the community and play an important social role. It does not necessarily indicate retirement status as one could be a senior citizen, yet not be retired from paid employment. Some have criticized the term as it suggests to them frailty and neediness.

Terms that Do Not Suggest a Valued Social Role

THE ELDERLY/AGED: These terms convey an image of senior citizens as frail and requiring care.

OLDER ADULT/OLDER PEOPLE: Some senior advocates and academics reject these frequently used terms as they feel they are euphemistic and akin to saying someone is "blacker" or "gayer". They refer primarily to chronological age (60-65 years of age and older).



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OLD/OLD PEOPLE: Some prefer these terms as they are unapologetic about advanced age and avoid any euphemisms. Like the term “young people,” they are neutral.

- **PENSIONER:** Refers to adults who are 60-65+ who are eligible for government pensions. We feel it does not convey an image of frailty, but does connote a social status outside of the paid labour market.

RETIREE: This term has become more common in North America and criticized by some as a euphemistic term that denies the reality of advanced age. While it suggests the achievement of a particular status, it would seem to refer more to what adults no longer do (paid employment) versus what they do.

- **YOUNGER OLD (60-70), OLDER-OLD (75-85), OLDEST OLD (85+):** These are terms used by researchers and policymakers to delineate the various stages of aging. While they acknowledge the diversity within the broad age-range of senior citizens, they are seldom used by senior citizens.

GOLDEN-AGER: A euphemistic term that denies some realities of advanced age, but emphasizes a life stage of freedom and pleasure without the usual worries and concerns of younger people.

- **SENIOR(S):** Refers to an adult of advanced age and is often used in policy documents. For some, this term implies retirement from paid work.

SOURCES

Cruikshank, M. (2013). Learning to be old: gender, culture and aging. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Care Watch conversations with senior citizens

Oxford English Dictionary (<http://www.oed.com>) and Oxford Canadian Dictionary (<http://public.oed.com/aspects-of-english/english-in-use/canadian-english/>)

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