**How the Power of Language Can Change a Culture**

[alt. title: How Language Influences Our View of Seniors]

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Actions may speak louder than words, but that doesn’t always make them more powerful. Don’t believe me? Take a moment to let each of these words “sink in” and feel your natural reaction to them: Audit … Taxes … Prejudice … Agony … Strangle … Facility … Evaluation … Republican … Democrat … God … Triumph … Amazing … Love. Your reactions to these words are likely based in part on your biological makeup, your personality and past experiences.

**How Our Brains Respond to Words**

As humans, we are hardwired to react to negative situations, even words. Why? Survival reactions and fear of change is firmly rooted in our midbrain (or “paleomammalian brain”). As I mention in my book, [*Live Long, Die Short: A Guide to Authentic Health and Successful Aging*](http://www.livelongdieshort.com), our midbrain is “control central” for temperature regulation, emotions and the “fight-or-flight” mechanism. When our ancestors came up over the hill and confronted a lion, this area of the brain, specifically the amygdala, jumped into action and released neurotransmitters that revved up our bodies to either *fight* the lion (a questionable decision) or run like hell – take to *flight* from the beast. The amygdala is fear central. When it fires, everything we need to fight or run is activated. All body functions that aren’t needed to deal with the situation are slowed down, ignored or inactivated. It is efficient. It is effective. It is perfect.

Unfortunately, as Andrew Newberg, M.D. and Mark Robert Waldman point out in their book, *Words Can Change Your Brain*, negative words stimulate the amygdala releasing stress-producing hormones and neurotransmitters. They write: “A single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.” Conversely, they demonstrate how positive words such as “love,” “peace” can alter our genetic makeup, promote cognitive functioning and build resiliency.

**How Language Influences Our View of Older Adults**

According to professor Susan Smalley, Ph.D. in her article “[The Power of Words](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-smalley/the-power-of-words_b_81918.html),” one study revealed that simply hearing statements about elderly people caused research subjects to walk more slowly. What does this tell us about our view of the aging population and how we speak about them?

For those of us who work in the senior living industry, how do the words we use impact the culture around us? How do those words reflect our own attitudes, beliefs and values?

*Words matter. Wield them wisely.*

As a culture, it is time to rethink our words choices and become more purposeful in how we speak and what we say. Even seemingly innocent words can be replaced with better choices. For example, how about the “F” word … *Facility*? Until recently, senior living homes were not called “communities,” but “facilities.” Prospective residents were “evaluated” to determine if they “qualify” for independent living, or if “assisted living” with special “programs” to “help” them were needed. No wonder many older adults are staving off of moving into a retirement community, declaring that they are “just not ready.” Would you want to move to a *facility* (aka “prison”) where your independence is potentially threatened? Personally, I’d rather live in a community that offers a progressive culture where continued growth and development is supported … How about you?

**Some Better Words**

In choosing more empowering and purposeful words, we need to ask ourselves a few questions.

* Do the words we use promote successful aging?
* Do the words we use empower and encourage others?
* Do the words we choose offer a positive message?

Consider replacing (in part or in whole) some of the current words in our vocabulary, with some positive choices:

**Old Word New Word**

Facility Community

Assisted Living Higher Levels of Living

Evaluation Lifestyle Inventory

Seniors \* Older Adults

Programs Initiatives or Resources

Advice Coaching

Help Support

Elderly Older Adult

I encourage leaders and organizations in the aging field spent a week or two taking inventory of the most commonly used phrases they say or hear, and run them through some of the filters we discussed. If these words do not promote a positive culture, then there is an opportunity to replace those words with more enriching choices. Doing so would go a long way in changing how we perceive and behave with respect to the aging community. It would also send the message to older adults that they can take charge of their own aging process, and that they can age in a better way. *Live Long!*

\*At least until our cultural interpretation of the word “senior” loses its negative meaning (e.g. slowing down, decline, burden, poor health).