

what we call ourselves

In the first of a new monthly series for seniors, Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages asks for your feedback on how older people would like to be described.



by Ruth Gerzon

In English finding an appropriate, respectful, politically correct term for people over 60 or 65 is difficult.

No matter what label you choose, someone is not going to like it. Now I am over 65 myself I am grappling for a term to describe my own demographic without risking offense.

Elderly is out, invoking images of frailty, physical decline and long-term care. Other terms are laden with stereotypes, conjuring up discounts, decline and dysfunction.

Try curmudgeons, geezers, or the current term favoured by some of our young: "old fart". Golden years implies a fantasy ending as in the sunset or the colours of autumn.

There are a variety of terms used such as older person or older adult. Personally I dislike being called a senior citizen – do we need reminding that we are citizens too? But I don't mind senior. It shows respect for our life experience. We always looked up to the seniors at school, or to senior management at work. It's a euphemism I can live with because it sounds at least a little dignified.

It's the stigma and discrimination older people face that leads us to use such terms. Euphemisms are indirect expressions we use when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing. Is being old that embarrassing? Maybe it is, at least in Pakeha society.

Some writing about seniors is patronising and demeaning, using terms such as feisty, spry, sweet, little, feeble, eccentric, senile, grandmotherly. I find phrases such as "he is 80 years young," particularly grating, as is "sweetie" when addressing an older woman.

Some writers seem astounded that older people can still walk and talk. Listen to the gee-whiz tone in this: "John is 78, yet is still active as a gardener, teacher, runner, volunteer ..."

My research on this topic comes up with information that shows that such cultural stereotypes can damage our health. Do you think of elderly people as weak, helpless and generally worthless? If so, you've greatly increased the odds that you will become weak and helpless one day. After all if we believe people our age are supposed to be feeble, chances are we won't do much exercise.

We are just as diverse as younger people. We may look stylish or dated, be jet-setters and bus riders. Some of us are conservative, and some are wild. We teach weaving and waiata, garden and play tennis, and some of us are couch potatoes. Many of us work past retirement age. Some join SeniorNet, while others won't touch a computer or mobile phone.

We need to avoid lumping all older people into any category – fashionable, active or frail. We're just people like everyone else and come in a wonderfully diverse assortment of looks, styles, and abilities.

In the Eastern Bay, Pakeha are fortunate to have alternative ways of seeing older people

close at hand. In Maori culture respect of age is deep-seated, though some younger people seem to have been influenced by Pakeha cultural attitudes to ageing. There are several terms and all respectful. Pakeke implies adult, kuia older woman koroua, old man, kaumatua, old man or woman.

When Does Old Age Start?

The whole concept of who is old has become very slippery. To a young child, almost any adult is old, but to the rest of us, only people who are a whole lot older than ourselves are old.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, a United States Chief Justice, known for his concise and pithy opinions, said "Old age is always 15 years older than I am."

I can't find results of any research here but, on average, Americans believe old age begins at 68. A Pew Research Center survey shows that people under 30 believe that old age strikes before the average person turns 60, whereas middle-aged respondents say that old age begins at 70 and adults aged 65 or older put the threshold closer to 74.

Now for those who have read this far, I have a request of you. What name shall we give this column? Any ideas welcomed. Please email them to easternbayvillages@gmail.com or phone me on 027 4308149.

I will leave you with a quote from Nina George, author of The Little Paris Bookshop

"Often it's not we who shape words, but the words we use that shape us."



Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga aims to foster well-being and reduce vulnerability and isolation for seniors/kaumatua by promoting mutual support. Are you looking for support and/or able to offer support to others? Contact us on 020 4161 5887 or email easternbayvillages@gmail.com

This week Eastern Bay Villages has a call out for retired tradespeople to do minor repairs on door locks and change smoke alarm batteries to keep seniors and kaumatua safe. If you might be able to help contact us by emailing easternbayvillages@gmail.com or phone 027 4308149.

Little Bug says:

I am grateful for monarch butterflies. Nature's "messengers". We're lucky that they thrive in the Eastern Bay.



Illustration Sarah Akroyd