

# SENSIBLE SAGES

A Newsletter to Our Members 1-2-2018

**A New Year Greeting....**

**Hi Sensible Sages,**

**A thought for the New Year:**

[Opinions](#)

## **In search of a word that won't offend 'old' people**

**We hear a lot about aging societies these days. At the same time, we hear relatively little about being old from older people themselves. In part, this is because most people in their 60s, 70s and older still don't think of themselves as "old." We often refer to old people in the third person.**

**As long as we are healthy and engaged in life — as most people in their 60s, 70s and older are — we don't view ourselves as old. But by using "they" rather than "we" in our minds and our conversations, we keep an entire stage of life at arm's length. By failing to identify with "old," the story about old people remains a dreary one about loss and decline.**

**Language matters: We need a term that aging people can embrace.**

**For years, I've thought that we should just start calling ourselves old and be proud of the fact that we've reached advanced ages. Maggie Kuhn, who co-founded the anti-ageism group Gray Panthers, also took this position.**

**I first heard Kuhn speak in the late 1970s at the meetings of the Gerontological Society of America. A distinguished geriatrician introduced her in a hotel ballroom to a standing-room-only crowd. He concluded his gracious introduction by saying something to the effect of, "And now it is my great pleasure to give you this impressive young lady." Kuhn ambled to the podium, stood silent for a moment, pulled the microphone down to her mouth (she was as short as she was fierce) and slowly and forcefully said, "Two things: I am not young, and I'm no lady. I am an old woman. And the fact that you cannot call me what I am without insulting me illustrates the depth of the problem we face."**

**I instantly idolized her. But embracing the term "old" is probably a fool's errand. Over the past 40 years or so, I've tried to persuade people to use the word "old" proudly, but I have so far failed to**

**get a single person to do so. In fact, even I avoid “old” for fear that the term might offend.**

**Alternative terms range from distant but respectful to outright patronizing. None of them are appealing to old people. The most widely used are “senior citizens,” “retirees,” “the elderly” and “elders.” Then there are the derogatory terms, such as “geezers” and “coots,” mostly whispered behind closed doors. And there are terms such as “sages,” which frankly go too far in the opposite direction, as plenty of old people are a far cry from wise. Some people prefer the comfortably familiar term “boomers.” But then what do we call Gen Xers and millennials when they grow old?**

**There are those who argue that we need to distinguish the young-old from the old-old. Although I suspect this is touted mostly by baby boomers who want to deny that they are old, it’s true that 65-year-olds are not the same as 95-year-olds. It’s also true that chronological age is a poor marker of functioning. Even though the young-old differ from the old-old, there is tremendous heterogeneity within age groups. The functional status of “old people” has also shifted substantially over historical time. A century ago, 40 was old. Today’s older generations are healthier, more cognitively fit and better educated than any previous generation.**

So, what do we call old people?

[The Stanford Center on Longevity](#), which I direct, strives to develop a culture that supports long life, and we recognized early that language matters. Most people say that they don't want to grow old, but they also want to live a long time. Yet, we've never settled on a good term for old people.

Last spring, I met Maureen Conners, a fascinating woman who works in fashion technology, an emerging longevity industry (that is, a business providing the needs of older people, including education, travel and entertainment). She uses the word "perennials" to refer to older customers.

Upon first hearing this term, I was startled. The symbolism it connotes is perfect. For one, "perennials" makes clear that we're still here, blossoming again and again. It also suggests a new model of life in which people engage and take breaks, making new starts repeatedly. Perennials aren't guaranteed to blossom year after year, but given proper conditions, good soil and nutrients, they can go on for decades. It's aspirational.

In August, Allure magazine [announced](#) that it would no longer use the term "anti-aging" and appointed Dame Helen Mirren their spokeswoman. Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin are starring in a wonderful series called "[Grace and](#)

**Frankie**” in which they portray two smart, funny and unapologetic perennials.

Perhaps we are reaching a tipping point — a shift away from the fear of growing old and toward embracing living long. “Perennials” may just move the conversation along.