

Communicating with Seniors Elderspeak and Beyond



Pamela Sims, MSN, RN

Frances Civilette Downs, PhD, RN

What is “Elderspeak”?



“Infantilizing” communication

“Sweetie, Dearie, Honey Pie, Mommy, Sweet Pea...”

Conveys a message of incompetence of the receiver and dominance of the speaker over the elder

Elderspeak

Elderspeak may be characterized by:

- simplistic vocabulary and grammar
- shortened sentences
- slowed speech
- elevated pitch and volume
- inappropriate terms of endearment



(Caporael, 1981; Kemper, 1994)

Elderspeak Examples

- Overly Nurturing-inappropriately intimate
- Overly Directive (dismisses autonomy of listener)
- Tagging Questions (prompts the answer for the elder....you don't want *that* , do you?)
- Simplistic vocabulary
- “Baby Talk” patronizing, demeaning

Why Do We Use Elderspeak?

- Tradition
- Modeling by others
- Unawareness
- Intent to control
- Insensitivity



What's Wrong With Elderspeak?

Older adults with dementia most frequently reacted to **elderspeak** communication by negative vocalizations (screaming or yelling, negative verbalizations, crying)

May induce “catastrophic reactions”

Herman RE, Williams KN, 2009



Conveyance of Inequality

- **Elderspeak** was first identified by research in nursing homes



- **Elderspeak** assumes frailties of the residents and reinforces negative age stereotypes

Effects of Elderspeak

- The implicit message of incompetence then begins a negative feedback loop for older persons, who react with decreased self-esteem, depression, withdrawal, and the assumption of dependent behaviors.

Ryan et al., 1986



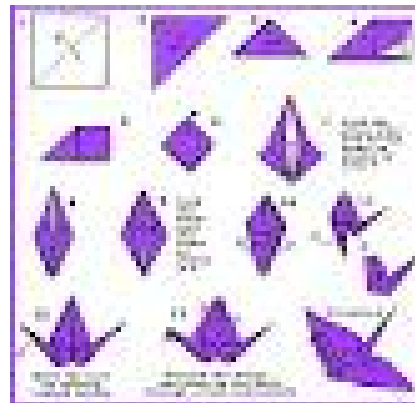
Components of Empathic Communication

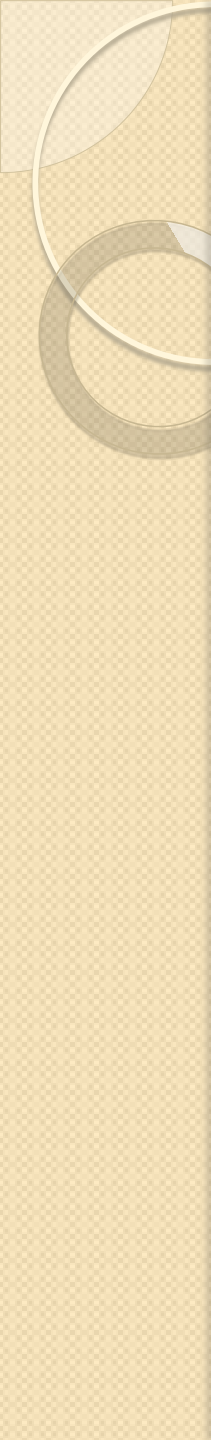
- eye contact,
- trunk lean,
- body orientation,
- distance,
- tone of voice,
- predetermined verbal message



Delivering a Teaching Message

- Origami Project

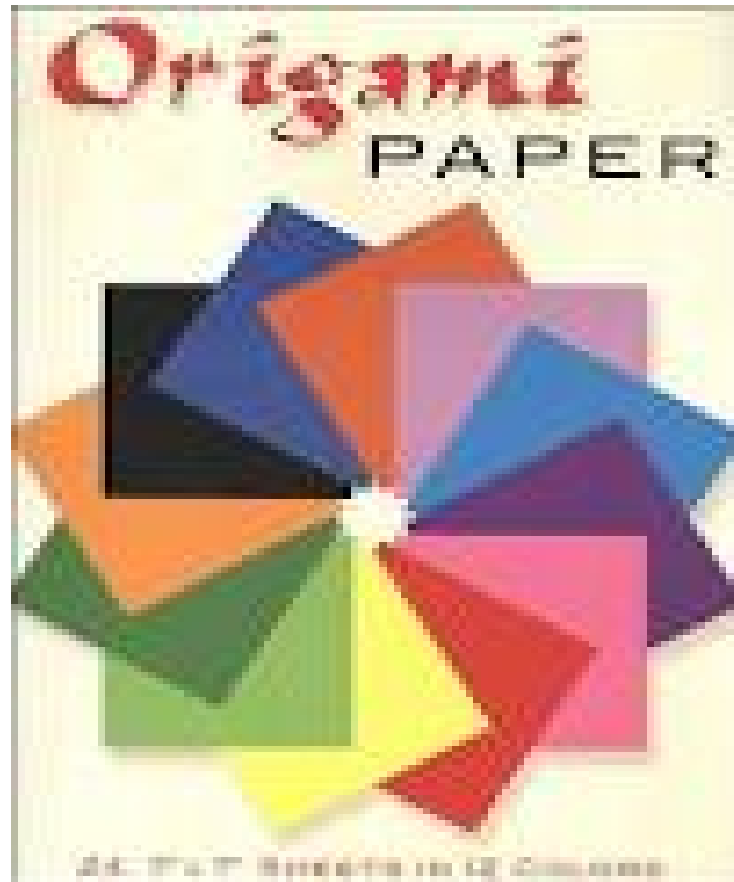


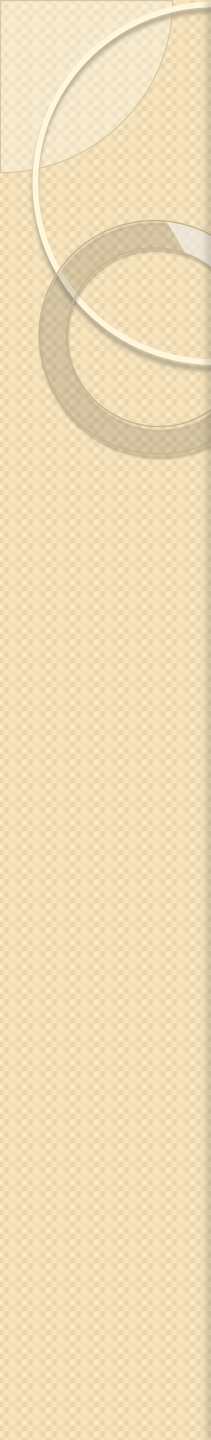


Origami Instructions

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Debrief Origami





Delivering a Clear Respectful Message

Considerations

Hearing

Visualization

Use of Examples

“Teach-Back”

Rewording

Avoid lingo, slang or jargon

Delivering a Clear Respectful Message

Considerations Continued

Language

Gender

Past Experiences



Dangers of Elderspeak

- Ageism
- Allegations of Psychological Abuse
- Anger
- Depersonalization

Ageism= stereotyping and discriminating against individuals or groups because of their age. It is a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values used to justify age based prejudice, discrimination, and subordination

A
G
E
I
S
M



Allegation of Psychological Abuse

Words, tone of voice & gestures may be interpreted as abusive.



Anger



Using Elderspeak Perpetuates Depersonalization



Conclusion

- Appropriate Communication Skills easily learned-but takes “*informed mindful desire*”
- Opportunities for modeling respectful communication
- Enhance effective relationships

Conclusion Cont'd

- Cooperative care
- More efficient care
- Ethical Behavior



Avoid Elderspeak

- Begin conversations by asking the elder what they wish to be called.
- Communicate preferences to the care team
- Err on the side of formality
- Respect age and senior status
- Population aging
- None of us is getting any younger....

Discussion

