

Aging Lifestyles: Time to retire the 'R' word

by Joe_Volz

It's time to retire that infamous "R" word - retirement. At least that's the way it looks to this commentator, who has "retired" and unretired four times. Let's find a new 21st century word or phrase that accurately reflects the lifestyles of the over-60 crowd.

A few generations ago, retirement had a fairly well-understood definition. You hit "retirement" at age of 65 and you, well, retired. The Social Security Administration had decided, thanks to its actuaries, that 65 was a good age to start receiving benefits. One reason, as Otto von Bismarck, Germany's "Iron Chancellor," first discovered in the 19th century, was that if the government started paying out benefits at 65, the recipient would die in a few years and the government would save a lot of money, while at the same time, pretending to be concerned about the old folks.

Well, life expectancy has climbed precipitously in the last century - almost doubled - so "retirement" has taken on a new meaning. People just keep working well after 65 or they launch new jobs, and, sometimes, careers.

So much for that word, "retirement," which also used to mean that if you were a middle-class male, you would either sit around and drink beer or make a stab at playing golf. Of course, wives never retired. Their major complaint was that the old man was getting underfoot in the house.

Retirement, by the way, was an irrelevant word for the poor folks who needed to work forever. Now the word is irrelevant for nearly everyone. Many baby boomers, now turning 60, are healthier and want to work forever. Many shift to different kinds of careers.

So "retirement" is kind of an inoperative word. Let's come up with something better. Like maybe "refocus" or "realign." No, they don't have any oomph to them. They are just as sterile as words like "senior citizen," or "elderly" or "Golden Ager."

We need some word that connotes life and vigor and enthusiasm.

The late Maggie Kuhn was on the right track when she called her group of activist women, the "Gray Panthers." It was sure better than what a lot of men were being called - "old geezers." This name thing is a big deal these days in an era of "marketing and branding."

Even grandparents are trying to rebrand themselves.

The Arizona Republic newspaper reports that the image of grandma and grandpa has changed markedly. Actor Will Geer who played Grandpa on the Waltons looked old. Like a grandpa. But blonde bombshell Goldie Hawn has just become a grandma and she calls herself "Glamma."

As grandmother Rebecca Bond, 53, of Tempe, Ariz., told the Republic, "I'm not a little old lady with white hair sitting in a rocking chair and knitting." So, her granddaughter calls her Nina.

Anyhow, you get the picture. Some old folks don't want to be called retirees or grandma and grandpa or any of those other words which denote aging.

Even the American Association of Retired Persons has soured on the word "retired" now just calling itself AARP. You have to figure out what those letters stand for.

But, of course, the rub is trying to find words that reflect the vibrant and healthy older generations of today.

Some people use the word "Third Ager" but that's a little too cute for me. A New York think tank runs an "Age Boom Academy." So are we Age Boomers. But there is that word "age," a dirty word in a youth-oriented society. My wife is in a group called the "Wise Women." Now that's closer to the mark.

Well, let's work on some new vocabulary before some 30-something marketing wizard for a drug company comes up with some cutesy word. Send me your suggestions. Maybe, we can even get the American Society on Aging to change its name.

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