

## **The Coming New Crop of Older Adults: What You Need to Know Now**

### **Developmental Stages in the Lifespan – our uniqueness:**

First Age= ages 0-25 “*growing*” education, socialization, biological family, mind and body peak at 25

Second Age= ages 26-50 “*becoming*” career building, establish family unit, making lifestyle choices

Third Age= ages 51-75 “*searching*” meaning and purpose, empty nest, generativity

Fourth Age= ages 76-100 “*leaving*” preparing for end of life, interiority, wisdom, legacy

**All generations in all eras move through these stages of development.** One difference is the impact of the shared experiences of that particular group of people who move through the lifespan at the same time. That generational difference is our focus today.

**What defines a generation? A cohort** = People born during specific periods of time who share cultural and historical time frames which shape their values as they move into and through adulthood

**Why it matters:** We’re all different and need to understand each other better.

**Birth Cohort – A Generation's Shared Experiences:** Those born into a particular birth cohort generation have a large pool of shared memories and experiences to draw upon as they form relationships with one other, but the bond between members of a given generation run deeper than recalling the same television shows, cars, or hairstyles--how we grow up shapes our values, ideals, and our “lingo” as well.

In the older adult services industry, we face challenges as the people live longer with more impairment. We aren’t healthier – we have modern medical advances and pharmacology to thank for longevity.

### **What America faces in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

1900 = age 48 average longevity

2005 = age 78 average longevity. *If you’ve had lifelong access to healthcare, are medically literate, followed a moderately healthy lifestyle you are likely to live much longer.*

***Groucho Marx said: “Age is not a particularly interesting subject. Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.”***

And the older we become, the more we tend to surround ourselves with our own generation.

Right now people are waiting longer to downsize and move to congregate housing. Once older adult housing targeted those age 70-72 to move to the retirement community. Now it’s more likely for us to be in our mid-80’s before such a transition is undertaken.

**Longevities impact on how we live:** The tough thing for all of us to realize is that our personal space either enhances or diminishes our functioning. What was a good fit for us at age 40 doesn’t usually work so well at age 80. The trouble is: *we are slow to recognize our aging selves.* Most of us see ourselves as 10 to 15 years younger than we are – both chronologically and in our functioning. Many “age poorly” and have a higher functional age due to physical disease and impairments. We resist new adaptations.

*Our chronological age* shapes our thoughts and our values while our *functional age* directs what environment works best for us. It’s the rare person who can align both and make that leap to moving into a space that fits both chronological and functional age. That rare person is probably your friendly local gerontologist.

Consider **categories of experience** likely to be held in common by those within a given generation shaped by history. We're all different. How we grew up and what happened then shapes us. These **shared experiences** have a profound and lasting impact on people's styles and viewpoints in **each specific generation**:

**Historical Events:** wars, space explorations, natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, wild fires), deaths, assassinations, diseases and epidemics.

**Political Events:** elections, trials, impeachments, Supreme Court decisions, social movements (equality, peace, environmental), marches, protests.

**Technology:** auto industry, appliances, business tools, computers, inventions, medical breakthroughs.

**Media Experiences:** news media, books (print and electronic), television and internet programs, music, concerts, movies, entertainers, celebrities, athletes, other public figures.

**Fashion:** clothing (*pay attention to differences in classic, casual or "whatever" attire*), hair styles, home decorating colors, patterns and styles.

**Products:** housing, foods, transportation (cars), furniture, games, toys, gadgets

## Birth Cohorts in America

**"Seniors=The Greatest Generation" – born 1929 and earlier today's age 85 and older**

Influences: growing up in the Depression era, beginning of modern industrialized society, discovery of penicillin and modern medicine, serving in WWII, working as a group, "the corporate man", moving to suburbs, radio and Big Band music, movies, civic organizations, mainline religion growth

**Values:** independent, private, hard work, fiscal responsibility even frugal, GI bill educated, homeownership, loyal, committed to long career with same company, pension plans, self-reliant, long time married with several offspring, patriotic, civic minded and volunteerism, politically active, don't talk about problems outside the family, disdain for mental health therapy, cherish "senior discounts" for thriftiness

In the USA today we have less than 6 million persons age 85 and over, while we have over 40 million age 65 and over. Those seniors have reached the end of their lifespan.

***If you have a business/organization with the word "senior" in it, know that its expiration date is coming. Boomers will never consider themselves "seniors" because it refers to their parents' generation. They are Boomers first and last.***

**→The preferred name for older people of any cohort is "older adults." It's not sexy but it's real.←**

**"The Lucky Few"- born 1930 to 1945 (46 million births in the US) today's age 84 to 69**

Also called "**The Silent Generation**" because they don't make waves; called "**The Lucky Few**" because they are small in population numbers. Influences: growing up in Great Depression and WWII, schooled during Eisenhower era (Allied commander then President), some served in Korean War; explosive growth of the

worldwide corporation, civic organizations, widespread medical advancements, auto ownership, Frank Sinatra and Elvis, beatniks, married with several offspring, some divorced, some pursued careers and never married, politically active

**Values:** cooperation and unity, savers, piggybacked on GI bill education, Eisenhower era conservatives, respectful, independent, tried and true products, married with kids, value home ownership, “traditionalists” with “group thinking”, loyal to the company, agreed to move around the country as a “company man,” compliant, low tolerance for risk, strong volunteerism, religious, technology challenged, embrace medical advances

**Most older adult service organizations and retirement housing communities today are chasing The Lucky Few to be their customer. The problem is the small numbers: everyone seeking the same group. The Lucky Few don't find the word “Seniors” as abhorrent as Boomers do.**

**“The Baby Boomers” – born 1946 to 1964 (79 million births in the US) today's age 68-50**

Influences: competition among themselves due to sheer volume, television, wide spread higher education, Boy/Girl Scouts, summer camps, college life with drug use/hippies, Woodstock, John F Kennedy and LBJ's Great Society, Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, women's equality, FM radio, rock n' roll and hard rock music, the birth control pill, microwave ovens, disbanding of institutionalized mentally ill, suburban sprawl and homeownership, first generation of technology age

**Boomer Values:** Competitive, education and work centric, career driven “two income families”, independent “hands on” thinkers, difficulties with parents when teenagers, dream of “having it all,” spenders not savers, sexually active: often divorced and remarried, one or two offspring, highly value pet ownership, first generation of many highly educated, lifelong learning, embraced “newest and latest” to become digital immigrants, well traveled, wide span of political and spiritual beliefs from conservative to liberal, first generation to widely embraced psychological services, ask lots of questions and demand expertise, disillusioned with corporate America

**“Generation X” – born 1965 to 1980 (52 million births in the US) today's age 49 to 34**

Also known as the “**Echo Boom generation**” they are the children of the Boomers. Influences: Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush eras, Fall of Berlin Wall, dissolution of the USSR, Hostages in Iran, Gulf War, Challenger disaster, AIDS epidemic, environmental movement, always had computers and VCR's, cell phones, cultural diversity, many are only children, latchkey kids often raised by divorced parents and blended families, less driven by organized religion or political groups

**Values:** tech savvy: grew up with video games and home computer, impatient, “group dating” (urban tribes) as teenagers, slow to marry, self reliant and independent, high tolerance of others and variety of friends in race, religion and sexual orientation, if married they desire multiple children and often become one income family, not financially better off than parents or grandparents, tend to ignore leaders and rules, “*what's in it for me*” attitude, demand a voice in flexibility of when, where and how work is accomplished, entrepreneurial focus on career path not with one corporation or industry, distrusting of organizations/institutions, eco-green, turning away from joining faith communities to embrace the spiritual, skeptical of organizations/institutions

**“The Millennials” or “Digital Natives” – born 1981 to 2001 (76 million births in the US) today’s age 33 to 13**

Influences: Global economy, economic prosperity, always known a digital world of communication (internet, cell phones), Clinton/Bush/Obama era, USA attacked 9-11-01, Afghan and Iraq wars, pandemic scare, highly educated, exposed to many influences

**Values:** greatest amount of education of any generation, “instant action and access” intolerance for slow, vulnerable yet optimistic economic outlook, high value on family and friends (relationships) over work or school, close relationships with parents, always electronically connected: technology driven including social networking and text messaging to keep in touch may result in a lack of face to face social skills and manners, open minded regarding race/ethnicity and immigration, trusting, confident and assured, well-traveled, global perspective, eco-green

### **Words that Sound Wonderful**

**Each generation knows words that are “music to my ears”**

**Just one example:**

**“help”**

**Help** is a four letter word to those age 85+. These people give help, they don’t receive it. So saying “Mom you need some hired help to do some things around here” probably will not result in cooperation. Better to say “Mom, help me out. I worry about you. In fact I think about it when I try to go to sleep at night. Help me by allowing someone to come in into the house to make sure everything is okay. It would give me peace of mind. Will you help me with this?” This rephrasing is more likely to gain cooperation.

**Help** is music to the ears of Boomers. We love help: yard help, pool help, household help, technology help, whatever. Boomers say “bring on the help” while their parents do not. In fact, their parents often believe that Boomers are too extravagant with hiring helpers.

**So let’s explore connotations of words for various generations:**

**“The Greatest Generation” – born 1929 and earlier today’s age 85 and older**

Use these words: **Duty, heroes, independent, disciplined, self reliant, privacy, trust, honor, respect authority, strong, patriotic, volunteer, church, the past, civic, religious, value, thrifty, prudent, volunteer, proven, USA, national pride, class conscious**

Ex with the older woman leaving medical rehab facility: *“Mom, I know you want to stay independent. Let’s take a look, privately, of how you can stay strong by participating in the doctor’s plan for occupational therapy at the Medicare paid skilled nursing unit. It will probably get you back to volunteering at the church very soon.”*

**“The Lucky Few”- born 1930 to 1945 today’s age 84 to 69**

Use these words: **Trust and verify, experience, cooperation, honor, respected, “tried and true”, traditional, loyal, classic, value, religion, group, mentors, the past, civic duty, civic pride, volunteer, community, customary, experienced**

Ex: *"You've said you prefer an experienced and trusted retirement community. Let's take a look at this one, owned by a long standing corporation. The director is heavily involved in the community."*

**"The Boomers" – born 1946 to 1964** today's age 68 to 50

Use these words: **Achievement, goal oriented, individual support, help, change, custom fit, "newest and latest", expensive, valuable, outstanding, spirituality, quality education, well trained, expertise, inquire and verify, meaning and purpose, hobbies, interests, resourceful, the future, grandchildren friendly, welcoming, inviting, tailor made, uniquely made, blended family, pet friendly, well-traveled**

Ex: *"Your achievements are outstanding and just what we need now. I'm asking you to use that education and expertise on this new project as we look to the future of care for older adults."*

**"Generation X" – born 1965 to 1983** today's age 49 to 31

Use these words: **individualistic, self-reliant, special, uniqueness of me, family, friends, life/work balance, technology, travel, spiritual, cultural and racial diversity, inclusive, astute, resourceful, skeptical, the present, money just a tool, last minute planning/offers, activities and interests, well-traveled, tech savvy**

Ex: *"You're just the unique person who can balance the requirements of this project from technology to spirituality to cultural diversity. Can we get together for coffee to explore with my friend Mark?"*

**"The Millennials" or "Digital Natives" – born 1984 to 2001** today's age 30 to 13

Use these words: **Instant, ready, now, digital, friends, diverse family, special, world travel, value, attention seeking, teamwork, nurtured, pampered, confident, adapt, diversity, global viewpoint, spontaneous, try it, group, cooperate, tech savvy**

Ex: *"We're ready this instant to set up Mimi's new iPad and add Netflix to her TV; grab all your tech gear and come over to her apartment. Tweet for friends to join us and we'll have coffee after."*

*Whether it's at home, at work, with a potential client, the information on understanding and embracing generational differences is sure to impact you. Make it a positive. Thank you for having me today.*

Sources for material presented:

*US Census Bureau; Pew Research Center;  
Sloan Work and Family Social Network-Boston College;  
McKinsey and Company US Aging Consumer Initiative;  
AgingStats:Gov Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics*