Anticipate Public Thinking

Aging Swamp Glossary

Understanding how Americans think and talk about aging helps communicators like you choose your communications cues strategically. If you can predict how the public will interpret your messages, you can create more effective messages that engage people in productive conversations about:

- the aging process and how it works
- the environmental and systems-level factors that stand in the way of positive aging outcomes, and
- how policies, programs, and systems-level changes support older Americans' wellbeing and benefit all of us.

What is aging and how does it work?

Ideal vs. Real: The public simultaneously holds two contradictory views of aging: the ideal and the real. The public's idealized vision of aging encompasses accumulated wisdom, self-sufficiency, an active lifestyle, and "earned" leisure. But that vision contrasts sharply with what people presume to be the reality of aging: a process of deterioration, loss of control, and dependency. Both models are highly individualistic because both ideal and real outcomes are always thought to be the result of individual decision-making. They also limit the public's understanding of older people's social contributions and its recognition of the kinds of social policies and supports that can improve aging outcomes.

Us vs. Them: The American public's negative view of aging can be seen in its pattern of identifying older people as a separate social group that is separate and apart from "the rest of us." Compartmentalizing and marginalizing older Americans makes it easier for people to apply zero-sum logic when reasoning about policy initiatives designed to support older people. When thinking this way, they reason that providing social supports for older people necessarily means taking resources away from other groups. Messages about "staying young" or "fighting aging" reinforce this model of separate and opposed social groups.

Individualism: Another dominant pattern of thinking is that individuals' outcomes are primarily or solely the result of their good or bad personal choices. When this individualistic thinking is applied to aging, the public reasons that whether someone ages well is a consequence of personal financial, lifestyle, and health choices. This default assumption obscures the social determinants and contextual factors that influence people's health and wellbeing as they age and makes it difficult to recognize the power of social supports to improve outcomes for everyone.

Nostalgia* and *The Threat of Modernity: The idea that life used to be better (and is getting worse) is a common model the public uses to reason about many social issues. Coupled with this sense of nostalgia is the belief that modern life threatens people's ability to age well. The public blames modern life for the breakdown of family connections, an unpredictable economy that makes it hard to invest or save for retirement, and the impending end of Social Security as a social safety net. Activating these cultural models feeds people's sense of fatalism, making it difficult for them to see the systems-level changes that can improve aging outcomes for everyone.

Solutions: The public shares a strongly fatalistic attitude about aging and the prospect of thriving in older age. Common characterizations of age-related demographic change as a "silver tsunami" or an impending social crisis fuel this fatalism, leaving people pessimistic about our ability to address these issues. When pressed, members of the public default to individualistic thinking and reason that, if life outcomes are attributable primarily to individuals' life choices, then the keys to wellbeing in older age must be better personal health and financial choices. As a result, they have trouble envisioning collective or policy-level solutions to the challenges people face as they age.

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The Swamp

Visual summary of relevant findings from cultural models research.

Ideal vs. Perceived "Real"

- Accumulated wisdom
- Self-sufficiency
- Staying active
- Earned leisure

- Deterioration
- Loss of control
- Dependency
- Determinism

Collective Responsibility

Individualism

- Lifestyle choices
- Financial planning

Problems Can Be Solved

Social Determinants

What's in the Swamp of...

Aging

Solutions

- Better individual choices & planning
- More education & information
- Fatalism: Nothing can be done

Threat of Modernity

- Family dispersal
- Economic challenges
- Social Security is doomed

"Us" vs "Them"

- Older as "other"
- Zero sum
- Digital incompetence

Ageism

What Surrounds Us Shapes Us