



Cooperative Extension



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**Ideas for Intergenerational Living**

*a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation  
and exchange between the generations*

Article 2 (12/00):

## From “Senior Moments” to “Wisdom Moments”

"Senior moment" is yet another insulting phrase that's found its way into the landscape of American slang. The term denotes an ageist stereotype that associates aging with deficiency and memory loss. Unfortunately, more and more people are using it.

At a recent meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, two researchers documented that the phrase "senior moment" first appeared in 1997 and became increasingly more common. They noted the phrase "most often refers to forgetfulness, though the degree of forgetfulness can vary from an 'itty bitty lapse' to dementia."

According to popular usage, you don't have to be a senior to have a senior moment. Al Roker, weather reporter for NBC's Today Show who appears to be forty something, recently exclaimed he had a senior moment when he momentarily forgot what he intended to say. The laughs from the audience and his colleagues suggest either a lack of awareness, or perhaps even a blatant insensitivity to the phrase's ageist implications.

To find out more about popular usage of the term, I conducted an Internet search and came across the book, "Senior Moments: Growing Old is not for Sissies" (written by Don Core, published by SOFITS Publishing in Harrison, Ark.). The tag used to sell the book reads, "You know you're getting older when ...you have trouble remembering names and important dates."

Another website asked visitors to complete the sentence: "I must be having a 'senior moment' again because [blank]." Their example was, "I must be having a 'senior moment' again because there's that darn Error message on my screen again."

"Senior moment" is derogatory and ageist, no less offensive than terms that convey sexism, racism and discrimination based on religion or ethnic affiliation. The phrase is particularly insidious because it's cloaked in science (i.e., the exploration of biological processes of aging) and thus takes on a ring of legitimacy. Yet researchers who actually study cognitive processes emphasize that people vary in their brain function as they age.

I want to argue that we're probably better off as a society if we abandon our usage of "senior moment." I'd like to instead suggest another phrase that launches a more positive, hopeful association for aging. This phrase generates images of competence and draws a connection with an older adult's sense of completeness, meaning and virtue tied in with their life experiences and reflections. The new term I expose to the court of public opinion is "wisdom moment."

Wisdom moments would be used to celebrate instances that reaffirm the life skills and improved self-awareness we gain as we grow older. We would invoke the phrase when someone with considerable life experiences effectively and compassionately shares his/her knowledge and understanding. The phrase would be a reminder of the joys and sense of triumph associated with surviving and aging.

An example would be the breakthrough moment when a senior adult mentor reaches a troubled young person who has been deemed by others -- including teachers, parents and guidance counselors -- as unreachable. What makes this a wisdom moment is that the mentor has an epiphany -- a magical moment of realization -- in which he/she figures out how to draw upon his/her knowledge and fortitude, nurtured through a lifetime of experience and reflection, to solve the task at hand.

Just as not all senior adults are forgetful, it's only fair to acknowledge they are not all in possession of wisdom. But the phrase "wisdom moment" allows us to affirm life and human potential rather than limitation.

Aging is not simply forgetting. It's forgetting *and* remembering. Where "senior moments" emphasize lapses in memory, "wisdom moments" highlight what we remember. And, it is in these moments, when we seize the opportunity to share our knowledge and make a difference in other people's lives, that we reaffirm our own sense of hope and humanity.

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