

Language Policy: Evolution of Fall Prevention Language

Purpose

To align our internal and external communications with a person-centric approach that reduces stigma¹ and empowers older adults.

Policy Directive

Effective immediately, staff and community partners are encouraged to transition away from using phrases like "falls are not a normal part of aging" or "falls are not inevitable". While intended to be encouraging, these phrases can inadvertently lead to feelings of shame, abnormality, and dismissiveness for those who *have* experienced a fall, and those who may be concerned about experiencing one.²

Fall occurrences *do* in fact increase with age. Statistically, we know that older adults are more prone to falls. Physiologically, we know that all human bodies are subject to muscle weakness, atrophy, sarcopenia, frailty, and vestibular decline as we get older. These facts are at the core of seniors' fall prevention.

Key Communication Principles

To ensure our messaging is both truthful and empowering, please adhere to the following guidelines:

- » **Normalize the Experience, Not the Event:** Acknowledge that while falls become more common due to physiological changes (such as sarcopenia or reduced balance), the individual experiencing them is not "abnormal" - it's not an "abnormal event".
- » **Focus on Prevention, Not Inevitability:** Replace "not inevitable" with a focus on actionable strategies. Frame falls as a manageable risk rather than a predetermined fate or a personal failure.
- » **Adopt Person-Centric Language:** Shift the conversation from the mechanics of a "fall" to the well-being of the "person". Our goal is to support healthy aging, which includes fall prevention as one component of a larger life journey.³



Reframing our Vocabulary

Avoid Using	Recommended Alternative	Rationale
“Falls are not a normal part of aging”.	“While the risk of falling increases with age, there are proven ways to maintain your independence”.	Removes the “abnormal” stigma while acknowledging physiological realities.
“Falls are not inevitable”.	“Most falls can be prevented with the right support and environment”.	Shifts the focus from a philosophical debate to a hopeful, proactive solution.
“Fall-prone” or “At-risk seniors”.	“Individuals who have had a previous fall(s)” or “individuals who may benefit from knowledge and actions on challenging their balance and building strength”.	Humanizes the individual and focuses on the benefit of the intervention.
“Fear of falling”.	“Concerned about falling”.	Softens the tone and creates a safe space for conversation on the topic. ^{2,4}

Summary

By strategically excluding the concepts of “normality” and “inevitability” from our lexicon,⁴ we foster an environment of dignity. We aim to replace embarrassment with empowerment, ensuring that every older adult feels heard, respected, and supported in their prevention journey.

References

1. Hanson, H. M. (2014). Fall-Related Stigma in Older Adulthood.
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3. Hortmann, M., et al. (2024). Reframing Communication about Fall Prevention Programs to Increase Older Adults' Intentions to Participate.
4. Yardley, L., & Smith, H. (2002). A prospective study of the relationship between feared consequences of falling and avoidance of activity.

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