

Honorifics versus First Names

By Jill Evans Kryston, Etiquette Consultant

Q: I'm a woman of a certain age who finds it terribly disrespectful when members of the healthcare profession, often decades younger, assume they can call me by my first name. Worse is when they use patronizing words like hon and sweetie. Am I a dinosaur or have professionals lost their professionalism?

A: Your point is well taken. The culture in America has become relaxed to the point that we assume everyone else shares our casual style. In fact the U.S. is on the lowest wrung of casual in the world. Imagine how difficult it is for immigrants to assimilate to our culture!

It's important to consider just how offensive our casually friendly behavior can be to others. You're a perfect example of someone who feels dishonored when individuals get on a first name basis without consent. Many agree with you and etiquette experts concur.

We teach our children to respect their elders and persons of authority, but the bottom line is *all people* deserve respect across the board regardless of age, status, and socioeconomic level. Using honorifics such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr., Rev., Father, Rabbi, Judge, Senator and Officer is the standard way of showing proper respect to one another in the adult world.

I don't believe people are trying to be rude; however, the lines have become blurred between being friendly versus being familiar as the culture has shifted towards informality. We must remember that not everybody wants to be our friend. In fact, there are people who may never give you permission to call them by their first name.

To be fair to the healthcare profession, privacy regulations prevent the use of surnames when calling a patient to their appointment. However, behind a closed door they can resort to the more formal address and say, "How are you feeling today, Mrs. Stevens?" When in doubt, the general rule of thumb is to address others by his or her title unless you've been given permission by them to do otherwise.

In response to healthcare workers who use endearing words, I believe they may be attempting to make the environment seem more caring and friendly. My advice to the well-meaning healthcare worker is to avoid using expressions of endearment as you run the risk of offending a patient and it always comes off as sounding unprofessional.

Email your etiquette questions to Jill at: information@DefiningManners.com or mail to: P.O. Box 1703, Shavertown, PA 18708.

Defining Manners: A School of Contemporary Protocol offers certified etiquette instruction for children, teens, adults and business professionals. For more information visit: www.DefiningManners.com or call 570-696-3209.