

Viva the Vital

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The Diagnosis: *Boomeritis*

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The national debate on healthcare may be finding its way into more cocktail party conversations, but in our recent experience interacting with older Boomers, the national issue runs a distant second to a more personal topic – me and my doctor(s).

At social gatherings over the past few months we have been struck by the number of conversations between older Boomers, those over 50, about doctor visits, chronic conditions, recent procedures, physical therapy sessions and prescription drugs. At first we thought these Boomers were talking about providing care for elderly parents. But no, the patient was in the room; in fact, he or she was in every conversation.

Boomers are coming face-to-face with the reality that at age 50 and beyond, the warranty on the equipment is running out. Vision, hearing, knees, hips and other component parts need upgrades if not complete replacement. One-time blemishes and laugh lines now need professional attention and space-age lasers. Sagging sections from head to toe benefit from a nip here, a tuck there. On top of that, chronic conditions like high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and – dare we say – erectile dysfunction -- need on-going management. Better living through chemistry, indeed.

It's no surprise that doctor visits are at record levels, Botox procedures are in the millions and self-care Web sites like WebMD generate traffic that rivals search engines. Boomers are in prime time when it comes to their health. The sheer number of Boomers means the nation will set new records for the number of patients with high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, and arthritis. Tell your kids to invest in Tylenol. We're going to need it.

As observers of all things Boomer, we've been trying to figure out why talking about our health and relationships with doctors is providing new fodder for social conversations. We express wonderment at younger generations and their willingness to reveal all on Facebook and MySpace. We may not post our medical stories online, but we do tell anyone and everyone we know about them. Why do we feel compelled to share our personal attempts to restore vitality?

Then it hit us. Our personal health stories provide new ammunition in our life long quest to establish our uniqueness. It's all about ME, and now, well, ME and MY DOCTOR.

You've heard the conversations: "My heart doctor..." "My podiatrist..." "My orthopedist..." "My dermatologist..." "My chiropractor..." "My dentist..." "My plastic surgeon..." My word.

This fascination, focus and willingness to share intimate details of our medical maladies seem to us to be the latest manifestation of the Boomer generational trait to be “self” centered – a lifelong chronic condition we call *Boomeritis*.

Today’s older Boomers were raised in the 1950’s with three siblings (on average) in a home environment that typically made the children the focus, thanks to Dr. Benjamin Spock’s 1946 opus *Baby and Child Care*. Children were seen and heard, and many Boomers-to-be learned how to vie for attention from Mom, Dad and their siblings. Quite naturally, a “what’s in this for me?” mentality took root and has prospered ever since.

This struggle to identify our uniqueness still drives our social behavior. Remember, even if you are a one-in-a-million Boomer, there are 76 others exactly like you. Finding a way to stand apart is woven into our very fabric.

Once we left the nest, many of us found a career that enabled us to make a mark and prove our worth. Through work we found an identity. What we did for a living became the source of social conversations. In the 1970s and ‘80s, when two Boomers met the ice breakers revolved around jobs and careers. Not “who are you?” but “what do you do?” Then came marriage and those baby carriages, and Boomers created new content for social interactions, and new ways to share their uniqueness, through talking about their kids. Each one unique, of course.

Now, at 50 and older, we’re less interested in talking about our work or the exploits of our children to set ourselves apart, so we reveal and revel in stories about our medical adventures.

So *Boomeritis* isn’t fatal. Neither is it a case of Boomers trying to claim to be better – or sicker – than you. Just different.