



Elder Abuse Awareness

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse can take a number of forms and may be defined in various ways. It is most often defined as an action by a person in a position of trust, which causes harm to an elder. Harmful actions by strangers are usually not considered elder abuse.

The exact incidence of elder abuse is unknown. One estimate for the United States placed the number of seniors abused or mistreated at 1.5 million per year. The figure may be much higher since elder abuse is often not reported. In any event, with a rapidly growing elderly population, the numbers can be expected to rise.

Who are the victims of elder abuse?

Elder abuse can happen to anyone, although elders who have mental or physical disabilities are at the greatest risk. More women than men live to be elders, but both sexes are equally at risk for abuse. Their spouses, others by children, others by caregivers in institutions abuse some older people. As with other types of abuse, those who abuse elders usually keep the victim socially isolated.

What types of elder abuse occur?

There are many types of elder abuse:

Physical

- Hitting or pushing
- Sexual molestation
- Forced confinement in a room, bed or chair
- Non-prescribed restraints
- Overmedication

Emotional/Psychological

- Humiliating, insulting, name-calling or threatening
- Treating an elder like a child

Neglect

- Withholding food or medical attention
- Leaving a senior in an unsafe or isolated place

Financial

- Withholding money
- Forcing a senior to sell personal property
- Stealing an older person's money or possession
- Misusing Power of Attorney

Why does Elder Abuse Happen?

Researchers who have studied elder abuse across cultures identify several factors associated with elder abuse:

- The burden of responsibility on caregivers, which is growing heavier as older people live longer, can lead to elder abuse. This is especially true in cases where caregivers have to take care of physical needs, such as bathing and toileting.
- Economic problems, such as high unemployment, can increase the stress experienced by caregivers and also increase the potential for financial abuse. In addition, economic recession often meant that fewer resources are available to assist relatives in caring for the elderly.
- Cultural changes that lower the status of the elderly and lead to less respect from younger people can increase the likelihood of abuse.
- Personal problems on the part of relative or caregivers, such as substance abuse or mental or emotional impairments, can cause neglect of elders and sometimes abuse
- An increasing number of socially isolated elderly means that more older people are lonely and vulnerable to abuse.
- Elderly women are more likely to be abused, simply because they outnumber men. Women may also be more economically dependent on others.
- A lack of adequate housing can contribute to abuse; especially if family members feel forced to co-habit with elders.
- The extent to which a society tolerated aggression and crime is thought to be related to the incidence of elder abuse.
- Within families, a history of violence can mean that violence is used to respond to stress.
- Within institutions, elderly residents may be powerless and vulnerable, and staff may be underpaid, under qualified and overworked. These factors create a climate, which can contribute to elder abuse.

Unfortunately, victims of elder abuse are often reluctant to report offenders, and are not willing to pursue a criminal investigation. They may fear being abandoned by the abuser, or may have feelings of embarrassment and shame. It is important to be sensitive to feelings. Always respect the integrity of the victim. Warmth and empathy toward the victim can create an environment where he or she feels safe in discussing the abuse, and can begin to explore alternatives. Ultimately, elders are adults with the right to self-determination. If an elder is mentally competent, and chooses to remain in an abusive or neglectful environment, that decision must be respected. Follow-up through intermittent visits can reduce the risk of abuse; by making it clear to the abuser that the situation is being monitored.

What can be done about a suspected case of elder abuse?

Most elder abuse is against the law. If you are being abused or you know of someone who is, you can call the police. Social service agencies and health professionals can also provide advice or help. Public health department or community legal clinics are a good place to call.

You are required to report any elder abuse to your supervisor on staff immediately.