

What You Need to Know About Elder Abuse

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse, or the abuse of older adults, is often defined as any act or omission that harms a senior or jeopardizes his or her health or welfare. The World Health Organization defines abuse of older adults as “a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring in any relationship where there is an expectation of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person.”

Elder abuse can take place in the home, in a residential setting, or in the community.

It is estimated that between four and ten per cent of Ontario's seniors experience some type of abuse.

**Elder abuse is never acceptable.
Elder abuse is often a crime.**

What are the Types of Abuse?

There are many types of elder abuse. Persons may experience more than one type of abuse at the same time.

Physical Abuse

Any act of violence or rough treatment causing injury or physical discomfort. This may include the inappropriate and/or unwarranted use of physical or chemical restraints (i.e. medications). Examples include: pushing, hitting, rough handling, scalding.

Psychological Abuse

This is sometimes called emotional abuse. Psychological abuse includes any act or treatment that may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth of the older adult, including

confinement, isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, intimidation, and infantilization (treating an older adult as if he or she is a young child). Examples include: threatening the older adult, insulting the older adult, excluding the older adult from decision-making when the person is capable.

Sexual Abuse

Any sexual behaviour directed toward an older adult without that person's full knowledge and consent. Examples include: sexual assault, sexual harassment, fondling, sexual comments or jokes.

Financial Abuse

This is sometimes called material abuse. Financial abuse is the misuse of an older adult's funds and assets without that person's knowledge and/or full consent; or, in the case of an older adult who is not mentally capable, not in that person's best interests. It can also involve the misuse of a Continuing Power of Attorney for Property. Examples include: use of an older adult's money for purposes other than what was intended by the older adult, cashing pension or other cheques without authorization.

Neglect

Intentional withholding of basic necessities or care (active neglect) or not providing basic necessities or care because of a lack of experience, information or ability (passive neglect). Examples include: denying the older person food/water, denying visits from family or friends.

Other

There are various other types of abuse that are being recognized, such as medication abuse and spiritual abuse. All types of abuse or neglect hurt the older person.

Elder Abuse is Often a Crime

Many types of abuse or neglect are crimes under the *Criminal Code of Canada*. These include assault, sexual assault, criminal intimidation and harassment, theft, fraud, and failing to provide a dependent person with the necessities of life.

Who are the Victims?

Elder abuse can happen to any older adult. In fact, contrary to commonly held beliefs, most victims of elder abuse are mentally competent and do not require constant care.

Elder abuse usually occurs in situations where the victim of the abuse is dependent on the abuser in some way.

Who are the Abusers?

Elder abuse can be caused by family members, friends, paid care providers, landlords, staff or any individual in a position of trust and authority. Most elder abuse is caused by a family member of the victim.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Elder Abuse?

Victims of elder abuse may show signs of:

- Depression, fear, anxiety, passivity
- Social withdrawal
- Unexplained physical injury
- Lack of food, clothing and other necessities
- Changes in hygiene and nutrition (e.g. signs of malnutrition)
- Failure to meet financial obligations
- Unusual banking withdrawals

What are the Effects of Elder Abuse?

Health Effects

Abuse and neglect are a major source of stress and can have long-term effects on the health and well-being of older adults.

Living with abuse or neglect can significantly increase the person's chances of becoming ill or may make other health problems worse, and increases the risk of early death.

As a result of abuse or neglect, older adults often experience worry, depression or anxiety. An older adult may also feel shame, guilt or embarrassment that someone in the family or someone close has harmed them.

Some abused older adults may start to eat less, use more medications or drink more alcohol to help cope with the emotional and physical hurt. They may have difficulty sleeping or sleep too much. Some abused or neglected adults may lose interest in life or become withdrawn. Some may have suicidal thoughts.

Financial Effects

Financial abuse may result in the loss of a home, personal assets or money, and can leave seniors without money for food, medications or transportation. When abusers steal or control older adults' money or other property, older adults may have fewer resources to take care of their own health, housing and activities.

Social Effects

The effects of abuse and neglect can also carry from generation to generation. For example, grandchildren who witness such abuse may come to view negative behaviours toward older adults as acceptable and perpetuate disrespect. Abuse and neglect of older adults is not a private matter. It affects individuals, families, communities and society at large.

What Should I Do if I Am Being Abused?

If you are being abused, you should know:

- You do not deserve to be abused.
- You are not to blame for the abuse.
- You have a right to live without fear.
- You have the right to a safe, healthy environment and healthy relationships.
- Abuse often gets worse over time.
- You have the right to control your own life and make your own decisions.
- You are not alone. Others have experienced abuse and many have found ways to deal with these situations.

You may or may not want to leave the situation, or take action, but it is important to know your options, and that help is available.

Steps you can take to seek help:

- Tell someone you trust what is happening to you.
- If someone is hurting or threatening you, or if it is not safe for you where you are, call the police.
- Talk with people to learn more about resources available in your community. Find out your options to take care of your personal needs and financial security.
- Make a safety plan in case you have to leave quickly.

What Should I Do if I Know Someone Being Abused?

Sometimes people know or suspect that a friend, family member, neighbour or acquaintance is being mistreated or abused and they are not sure what to do. They worry about getting involved, not saying the right thing or wrongly identifying the situation.

If you know or suspect someone is being abused, make the effort to reach out to the person and talk to them. Ask things like:

- How are you doing?
- Are you having any trouble at home? Can I help you?
- Is there someone I can put you in touch with who may be able to help you?
- How would you like to be assisted?

THE SINGLE LARGEST FACTOR THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND/OR MAINTENANCE OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS ISOLATION. TALKING TO A PERSON IS ONE OF THE FIRST STEPS TO BREAKING DOWN THIS ISOLATION. IF A PERSON DOES TELL YOU THAT THEY ARE BEING ABUSED, YOU SHOULD:

- **Believe the person.** Do not question what they are telling you. You may be the very first person who has ever been entrusted with this information. It may be hard to understand what is going on, especially if the perpetrator is a nice person to you or someone you know.
- **Do not judge the person.** Listen to what they are saying to you. Do not express pity or tell them what to do. Tell them you care about them and offer them a level of support that you feel comfortable providing and know that you can provide on an ongoing basis. Do not promise them things you know you cannot do or do not feel comfortable doing.
- **Educate yourself on resources available to older persons who are being abused.** You can do this by calling your local community information centre, community care access centre, community support agency, talking to your own doctor, your lawyer or searching on the internet for Ontario resources and/or information.
- **Do not deny what is going on.** If you choose to deny what is going on or not to listen to a person, this will serve to isolate the person who is being abused even further.
- **Understand that making efforts to change an abusive relationship is extremely difficult.** A person who is being abused can be very afraid and not certain what to do. It can take a very long time for people to decide to make a change in their lives, to reach out for help or to even talk about their situation.
- **Encourage the person to seek help and assistance.** Offer to help them find the right place to turn to if this is something you are prepared and able to do.
- **Do not confront the perpetrator yourself.** This could put you and/or the person who is being abused in trouble.

Remember, if you or someone you know has been abused or is experiencing abuse, you are not alone - help is available.

Provincial Contact List

In an emergency, contact 911 or your local police, ambulance or fire service.

Ontario Provincial Police
1-888-310-1122 (toll-free)
TTY 1-888-310-1133
www.opp.ca

Crime Stoppers
1-800-222-TIPS (8477)
www.ontariocrimestoppers.ca

Elder Abuse Ontario
416-916-6728
www.elderabuseontario.com

Ministry of the Attorney General's
Victim Support Line
1-888-579-2888 (toll-free)
or in Toronto 416-314-2447
www.ontario.ca/victimservices

Seniors Safety Line
1-866-299-1011 (toll-free)
www.elderabuseontario.com

Long-Term Care ACTION Line
1-866-434-0144 (toll-free)
TTY: 1-800-387-5559
www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/contact/ccac/ltc_actionline.aspx

Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority
1-855-ASK-RHRA (1-855-275-7472)
www.rhra.ca

Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee
1-800-366-0335 (toll-free)
www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/pgt

Advocacy Centre for the Elderly
416-598-2656
www.advocacycentreelderly.org

Ontario Association of Community Care
Access Centres
416-750-1720
www.oaccac.com

Assaulted Women's Help Line
1-866-863-0511 (toll-free)
TTY 1-866-863-7868 (toll-free)
www.awhl.org

Fem'aide
1-877-336-2433
(toll-free, available in French only)
www.femaide.ca

Seniors' INFOline
1-888-910-1999 (toll-free)
or in Toronto 416-314-7511
TTY 1-800-387-5559
www.ontario.ca/seniors

Find Out More

For more information on elder abuse and access to publications, please visit:

Ontario Seniors' Secretariat – www.ontario.ca/seniors

Elder Abuse Ontario – www.elderabuseontario.com

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence – www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf

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