

SENIOR ABUSE

A very real social problem, abuse of older adults is a very complex issue and may involve physical abuse, emotional / psychological abuse, neglect, financial abuse, violation of rights, and sexual assault.

Any senior can be abused, despite her/his age, living arrangements or conditions, physical or mental health, sexual orientation, financial status, education, culture, or social status.

What is senior abuse?

Abuse is any act or failure to act that endangers the health and/or well being of the older person. Such action or inaction is especially harmful when it occurs within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust.

Abuse may be:

- Physical—inflicting, or threatening to inflict, physical pain, injury, or discomfort on an older adult.
- Sexual—any form of sexual activity with a person without the consent of that person.
- Emotional / Psychological—inflicting mental pain, anguish, or distress on an older person through verbal or nonverbal acts.
- Financial—the unethical or illegal misuse of the money, property, or other assets of an older adult, including placing inappropriate pressure on an older person in order to gain access to her or his assets.
- Violation of Human / Civil Rights—the unlawful or unreasonable denial of fundamental rights and freedoms normally

enjoyed by adults.

- Neglect—the failure to provide the necessities of life such as proper food, fluids, suitable clothing, a safe and sanitary place of shelter, proper medical attention, personal care, and necessary supervision. There are several forms of neglect, including active neglect, passive neglect, self-neglect, and abandonment.

Much abuse occurs within relationships where there is an expectation of trust. Some of these relationships include:

- in a family,
- between a husband and a wife,
- between friends,
- between an older adult and someone they rely on such as an accountant, care worker, or other paid person,
- when someone is providing services in an older adult's home.

Not all abuse is a result of individual action and not all abuse occurs within a personal relationship. Sometimes older adults are targeted because the abusers think they will be easier targets.

What are the different types senior abuse?

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is defined as the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment.

Physical abuse may include such acts of violence as striking, hitting, beating, pushing, shoving, shaking, slapping, kicking, pinching, and burning.

Inappropriate use of drugs and physical restraints, force-feeding, and physical punishment of any kind.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is defined as non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with a person.

Sexual contact with any person incapable of giving consent is also considered sexual abuse.

It may include unwanted touching, all types of sexual assault or battery (such as rape, sodomy, coerced nudity), sexually explicit photographing, the forcing or coercing of degrading, humiliating, or painful sexual acts.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse

Emotional or psychological abuse is defined as the infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or nonverbal acts.

Emotional/psychological abuse may include verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, and harassment.

Treating an older person like an infant or child; isolating an older person from her/his family, friends, or regular activities; actively withholding access to grandchildren; giving an older person the "silent treatment;" and enforced social isolation are also examples of emotional/psychological abuse.

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse (sometimes referred to as financial or material exploitation) is defined as the illegal or improper use of an older person's funds, property, or assets.

Examples include cashing an older adult's cheque(s) without authorization or permission; forging an older person's signature; misusing

or stealing an older person's money or possessions.

Neglect

Neglect is the refusal or failure to provide an older person with such life necessities as food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medicine, comfort, personal safety, and other essentials included in an implied or agreed-upon responsibility to an older person.

Neglect may also include failure of a person who has fiduciary/ management responsibilities to provide care for an older person (e.g., pay for necessary home care services) or the failure on the part of an in-home service provider to provide necessary care.

Abandonment

Abandonment is the desertion of an older person by an individual who has assumed responsibility for providing care for that person, or by someone with physical custody of an older adult.

This is a form of neglect and can include deserting an older adult at a hospital, a nursing facility (or other similar institution), deserting an older adult at a shopping centre or other public location.

How can senior abuse be prevented?

As with all forms of violence, abuse of older adults can be prevented.

We must:

- Challenge ageist attitudes and beliefs that devalue older adults.
- Treat older adults with the respect and dignity

they deserve.

- Work with older adults to empower them to make healthy relationship choices.
- Offer alternatives to remaining in abusive situations.
- Enhance informal support networks.
- Ensure seniors retain as much power and control over their own lives as possible.
- Provide information on services and programs available to assist.
- Encourage caregivers to access support available to them.
- Educate ourselves and others about senior abuse.
- We must also foster positive relationships between generations and provide support to those caring for and supporting seniors.

For seniors, some simple but essential steps you can take to reduce the risks include:

- Maintain as much control and power of your life as possible.
- Stay active in the community and connected with friends and family. This will decrease social isolation, a known risk factor for senior abuse.
- Plan for your future. With a power of attorney and a health care directive / living will, health care decisions can be addressed to avoid confusion and family problems, should you become incapacitated.
- Make arrangements with someone you trust who understands your wishes.

- Seek independent advice from someone you trust and who has correct information before signing any documents.
- Know your rights. For example, if you engage the services of a paid care provider or family caregiver, you have the right to voice your preferences and concerns. If you live in a nursing home or board and care home, you still have rights.
- Take care of your health.
- Seek professional help for drug, alcohol, and depression concerns. Encourage family members to get help for these problems.
- Attend support groups for spouses and learn about domestic violence services.