

Older people and domestic abuse

Abuse of older adults happens all too often and is frequently not identified by victims themselves or those around them. It can be difficult to acknowledge that older people can be victims and perpetrators of abuse.

Some older people are abused by other family members - often their children or grandchildren.

In these cases, many of the same dynamics exist as with intimate partner violence. These factors can be even worse if older victims are becoming less able to take care of themselves. Additionally, it may be incredibly hard for a victim to see that their own child is choosing to hurt them. They may never choose to have their child arrested or force them to move out.

Identification

It can be difficult to decide if an older person is being abused by a partner or family member. Below are some indicators which if present may signify the need to ask further questions about a household or relationship:

Behavioural Indicators of Abuse of Older Adults:

The Victim:

- Is easily frightened or fearful
- Is agitated or trembling
- Is hesitant to speak openly though they are capable
- Gives implausible stories and explanations for physical injuries
- Makes contradictory statements or exhibits denial

The Abuser:

- Tries to conceal the victim's repeated injuries by going to different medical facilities
- Interferes with the investigation by trying to speak for the victim or changes the subject
- Refuses to allow the victim to be interviewed separately
- Is unreasonably critical or dissatisfied with social and health care providers
- Offers inconsistent or implausible explanations for the victim's injuries
- Appears to be overly protective or overly dominant
- Has an inappropriate sex-role relationship with the victim

Financial Exploitation

A study of substantiated cases of financial abuse conducted by MetLife (2009) reported that 60% of the perpetrators were the adult offspring of the victim. The impact on older adults can range from depression to bankruptcy, and even physical harm resulting from essential needs like food, shelter, medication, or medical assistance going unmet.

Why are older adult's attractive targets?

- Family members are often the abuser and the older adult is afraid they will be put in a nursing home or not cared for if they come forward about the exploitation
- Many seniors do not realize the value of their assets
- Some older people are unsophisticated about financial matters
- Severely impaired individuals are less likely to take action against their abusers as a result of embarrassment or illness
- Older adults are more likely to be dependent on others for help. These “helpers” may have significant influence over the older person and have access to homes and assets
- Advances in technology have made managing finances more complicated

Who are the perpetrators?

Family members, including spouses, children, or grandchildren. They may:

- Stand to inherit and feel justified in taking what is “rightfully” theirs
- Have substance abuse, gambling, financial problems, mental health issues
- Have a negative feeling towards siblings or other family members whom they want to prevent from inheriting the older person’s assets
- Have a negative feeling with the older family member and feel a sense of “entitlement”

What are the indicators?

Changes in an older person’s financial condition that could be sudden or gradual

- Suspicious changes in wills and power of attorney
- Addition of names to bank signature cards
- Complaints of stolen or misplaced credit cards, check books, or valuables
- An older adult reporting they have unpaid bills although they have the money to pay for them
- Older adults who appear nervous when accompanied by another individual, or gives strange explanations of why they need money
- An older person reporting scams(e.g.; people who offer to work for cash in advance but they don’t do the job)
- Dependency. If the caregiver is financially dependent on the older adult, financial exploitation may occur

Caregiver Stress

In some situations, abuse and neglect may be unintentional or as a result of ‘carer stress’. However, the assumption should be that any form of abuse can cause serious harm. Caregiver stress is a risk factor for abuse and neglect of older adults. The demands of daily care and support for even a more independent older person can cause significant caregiver stress. Abusive behaviour is sometimes blamed on resulting frustration and anger. However, caregiver stress does not excuse abusive behaviour. Abuse is always a choice. Many times the abuser of older adults need their victims for transportation, housing, financial assistance, and more. This can make such situations unique as both the victim and abuser may need the other to help fulfil their needs.

Power and Control Wheel for Elder Abuse

This is the Power and Control Wheel for Elders. You can use the wheel to identify tactics an abuser is using to maintain power and control over their victim. If you are noticing a pattern of abusive behaviours that are impacting the way your client thinks, feels, or acts, they are probably a victim of abuse. Abusers will often minimise the impact of their behaviours, deny that they have done such things, and blame their abuse on the victim, stress, alcohol, drugs, and other factors. One excuse they may give for their actions is caregiver stress.



What can I do?

It is important to understand the needs the victim has in order to present real options for safety. For instance, if you help the victim remove the abuser from the home but do not plan for assistance: getting groceries, getting to medical appointments, or other things the abuser provided the victim, they may be more likely to ask the abuser back or suffer from self-neglect.

What if someone I know is being abused but they won't make their abuser leave?

As with victims of domestic abuse of all ages and abilities, separating from the abuser is not always the safest or best option. There are many factors to consider when deciding what to do. Older victims of domestic abuse face additional barriers:

- They may not identify themselves as "abused." Images on TV and movies often show abused women as younger women with children. This may imply that domestic abuse doesn't occur in mid or later life.
- Older women may just accept the abuse since gender roles, expectations, and acceptable behaviour were different many years ago.
- They may feel shame and be afraid of what will happen to them if they report abuse.
- They may fear that they'll have to leave their homes or be placed in supportive housing.
- Some victims fear having their decision-making rights taken from them by service providers.
- Financial worries can be huge. Some older abused people have no formal education or money of their own. Many with health problems are afraid of losing insurance if they are on their abusers' policies or don't know how to navigate the medical system alone. They may be afraid of not being able to get a job or be unable to work at all and feel trapped.
- Family members and adult children may be a factor. Some adult children will support their parent and help in any way they can if they are being abused. Others create barriers by encouraging their parent to stay thinking that if they leave, they will become responsible for their abusive parent. Some side with the abuser, believing the victim tore the family apart.
- Life stresses can feel overwhelming. Some victims may have never lived on their own away from partners or the family they were born into. They may know no other life.
- There may be strong cultural or religious beliefs that keep them from getting help. Changes such as the death of family or friends, birth of grandchild, retirement, and moving may all also play a part in a victim's decisions.

How to Safety Plan

Sometimes the best thing you can do to help a victim of abuse who is not ready or able to leave the situation is to help them consider their options and plan for their safety. Domestic abuse [safety planning](#) is an on going process of considering and selecting options that may help a victim remain safer– it means helping a victim creatively brainstorm their options and the possible advantages and consequences of each.

A decision to stay may be a safety strategy and making a plan in case things get worse may help. For example, if a victim was living with an abusive family member or caretaker you may discuss with them ideas such as:

- calling the police

- seeking a civil order such as non-molestation, if the relationship between the abuser is a blood relative, current or former spouse, or current or former intimate partner)
- speaking with a specialist domestic abuse provider such as Women's Aid
- making a referral to Adult Safeguarding
- hiding an emergency phone to call for help