

Abuse and Exploitation of Older Persons

The abuse of older adults is a disturbing yet very real occurrence. Abuse can take many and varied forms, and the abuser is often a close family member or caregiver. The PROFESSIONAL needs to become aware of the different types of abuse that can be experienced by older Persons, the indications of potential abuse, and the options that are available to help older citizens who are experiencing abuse.

- Give a brief definition of the different types of abuse:
 - **Physical:** Any action that causes physical pain, discomfort or injury such as slapping, kicking, shoving, pinching, hair pulling, burning, punching, or causing injury with an object or weapon.
 - **Psychological:** Any verbal or psychological attack which provokes fear, severe mental anguish, emotional distress, or anxiety and results in loss of dignity and self esteem. This include humiliation, isolation, intimidation and/or threats, chronic put downs, criticism, blaming, name calling or infantilization. Other forms of psychological abuse are inappropriate control of an older person's activities and/or removal of decision making power when an older person is still competent to make his or her own decisions.
 - **Financial:** Any action, with or without the knowledge and/or consent of an older adult, which results in the loss of money, property or other possessions. Examples are: misuse of the older person's money, property or other possessions through fraud, forgery or extortion; theft or misuse of pension cheques and/or funds through persuasion, deceit or other forms of emotional manipulation; forcing an older person to change a will or sell personal property; misuse of power of attorney, joint bank account, or any personal property of an older individual.

Financial abuse seems to be tied to a combination of opportunity, need or greed, and a false sense of entitlement. The opportunities may increase at transition points (e.g. widowhood for a woman with little of no experience with financial matters, or where an older man's health is changing and he is relying on new found women or men friends; where cognitive capacity is starting to decrease; or where the person is dependent on others to aid with banking). A small proportion of financial abuse is connected with an abuser having a substance abuse problem and the need to support that alcohol or drug habit.

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- **Sexual:** Any sexual contact or activity that does not involve an older individual's full understanding and consent is a form of abuse, such as exhibitionism or voyeurism; engaging in offensive verbal and non verbal behaviour of a sexual nature; physically intrusive acts such as sexualized kissing, oral/genital contact; digital penetration and vagina/anal intercourse.
- **Describe how the violation of human rights constitutes a form of neglect.** Withholding information, denial of privacy, denial of visitors, restriction of liberty or mail censorship is a violation of a person's fundamental human rights (according to legislation, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights)
- **Why do you think it is difficult to obtain comprehensive and accurate statistics regarding the prevalence of abuse of seniors?**
- Older adults are reluctant to file charges for a variety of reasons.
- **Identify potential indications of physical abuse:**
 - Being unattended for long periods or tied to a bed/chair
 - Over sedation
 - Unexplained physical injuries; bruising, cuts, burns, broken bones, rashes, pressure sores
 - Medical attention sought from a variety of doctors or clinics
 - History of accidents or injuries
 - Depression, fear
 - Repeated falls
 - Injury to scalp, evidence of hair pulling
 - Torn clothing or broken eyeglasses
 - Rope or belt marks.
- **Identify potential indications of psychological abuse:**
 - Sadness
 - Depression, fear, anxiety, passivity
 - Social withdrawal
 - Fear of specific persons or being alone with them
 - Waiting for caregiver to respond to questions
 - Noticeable behavioural changes including avoiding eye contact

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- Changes in appetite
 - Difficulty sleeping or needing excessive sleep
 - Not being allowed to visit or talk to the older person. The older person may be isolated from the community, social services, and even from other family members by the abuser.
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- **Identify potential indications of financial abuse:**
 - Confusion about own finances
 - Lack of financial choices/decisions
 - Failure to meet financial obligations
 - Unusual banking withdrawals or ATM activity on behalf of an older person
 - Discrepancy between income and standard of living
 - Sudden or unexplained difficulty in paying bills
 - Not allowed to spend money without agreement of caregiver
 - Missing personal belongings

 - **Describe some common practices in our society that may (intentionally or not) contribute to abuse of older persons.**
 - Ageism
 - Stereotyping
 - Sense of entitlement
 - Acceptance of violence in society
 - Increasing materialism
 - Lack of awareness and protective mechanisms in communities

 - **Who are the abusers?**
 - The typical abuser is a member of the older adult's family, a spouse or partner, adult child or grandchild, other family member or caregiver. Unrelated caregivers are responsible for less than a quarter of elder abuse cases.

 - **List and discuss barriers to disclosure of abuse of older persons.**
 - Most cases of abuse are perpetrated by a family member and the older person is ashamed to admit a family member would do such a thing or they don't want to "air their dirty laundry in public".
 - The abuser may be threatening to withhold access to resources, friends, or grandchildren if disclosure is made leading to further isolation.

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- Fear of the unknown. The abuser may not be terrific, but to the older adult this may seem better than the alternative of being alone or perhaps in an institutional setting.
- Immigrant older persons may have a particular concern that their sponsorship may be threatened if they report abuse
- A very real concern that the abuse could escalate before any help intervenes
- Also, criminal matters affecting older adults tend to get diverted into health care and social services systems

- **A provocative dilemma exists when it comes to intervening when there is suspicion of abuse of an older person, and the older person refuses assistance. How does one attempt to protect and assist an older person while respecting their basic rights to self determination?**

This is a complex issue and goes to the core of what the PROFESSIONAL training is all about – it is about building relationships and trust. As you build a relationship with your client, you can gently try to establish the supports necessary for them to be able to SAFELY get help. Remember, you want them to get to a safer and healthier place – not a position where they are more at risk or vulnerable to retaliation.

- **Under what circumstances would you report abuse to the authorities against the wishes of the older person?**

If there is justifiable reason to believe the person is not competent, the criminal code has been violated (and sufficient evidence has been compiled to allow the police to formally charge the offender), or the older person is a risk to others, abuse should be reported to the authorities.



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Review Questions:

1. Risk factors for elder abuse include all of the following EXCEPT:
 - A. Dementia in the abuser
 - B. Social isolation
 - C. Depression on the part of the abuser
 - D. Mutual dependence between the abuser and the victim



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Answer Guide to Review Questions:

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