



# What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person.

Elder abuse can take several forms. Often more than one form of abuse is being inflicted onto the older adult. Statistics on both a national and provincial scale indicate that financial and emotional abuse are the two categories most often identified. The categories include:

- Physical
- Psychological / Emotional
- Sexual
- Institutional
- Financial / material Abuse
- Neglect
- Violation of Rights

# Physical Abuse

Refers to the use of physical means to cause bodily harm (pain and/or injury) and includes, but is not limited to pushing, rough handling, tripping, spitting, striking with a hand or instrument, burning, stabbing, or use of physical coercion. It also includes deliberate exposure to severe weather and unnecessary physical restraint.

## Signs of Physical Abuse

- Cuts, lacerations, puncture wounds, open wounds, bruises, welts, discolouration, black eyes, burns, bone fractures, broken bones, and skull fractures
- Untreated injuries in various stages of healing or not properly treated
- Poor skin condition or poor skin hygiene
- Dehydration and/or malnourished without illness-related cause
- Loss of weight
- Soiled clothing or bed
- Broken eyeglasses/frames, physical signs of being subjected to punishment, or signs of being restrained
- Inappropriate use of medication, overdosing or under-dosing
- An older person telling you they have been hit, slapped, kicked, or mistreated

# Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse is a pattern of behavior in which the perpetrator insults, humiliates, and generally instills fear in an individual to control them. The individual's reality may become distorted as they internalize the abuse as their own failings.

- Instilling self-doubt and worthlessness
- Refusing to allow a person to spend time alone
- Delivering constant criticism
- Monitoring and controlling a person's behavior

## Signs of Psychological or Emotional Abuse

- Hesitation to talk openly
- Implausible stories
- Confusion or disorientation
- Anger without apparent cause
- Sudden change in behaviour
- Emotionally upset or agitated
- Unusual behaviour (sucking, biting, or rocking)
- Unexplained fear
- Denial of a situation
- Extremely withdrawn and non-communicative or non-responsive
- An older person telling you they are being verbally or emotionally abused

# Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse generally encompasses any situation in which force or threat is used to obtain participation in non-consensual sexual activity or coercing a person to engage in sexual activity against their will.

## **Some examples are:**

- Forcing or manipulating another into having sex or performing sexual acts
- Inappropriate touching when providing assistance with personal care and hygiene
- Sexual abuse can also include comments or jokes, or leering

## **Signs of Sexual Abuse**

- Bruises around the breasts or genital area
- Unexplained venereal disease or genital infections
- Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding
- Difficulty in walking or standing
- Marked changes in behaviour
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- An older person telling you they have been sexually assaulted or raped

# Institutional Abuse

Institutional or organizational abuse involves systemic failures and harmful practices that negatively impact vulnerable people under the care or supervision of an institution. This form of abuse can manifest in various ways. For example, it may involve authority figures within the institution committing harmful acts or the institution itself enforcing detrimental policies based on political, religious, or cultural beliefs.

The scope of institutional abuse is broad, encompassing neglect, substandard care practices, and more severe forms of mistreatment such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, including child abuse. These actions are typically perpetrated by those holding positions of power or authority within the institution. However, it can also be community or family individuals exploiting the vulnerability of those they are meant to protect.

## **Most common types include:**

- Physical violence, inappropriate use of restraints, or inappropriate confinement.
- Verbal abuse involving demeaning language, threats, or psychological manipulation that damages the victim's mental well-being.
- When an institution neglects to meet basic needs, such as providing adequate food, clothing, or necessary medical care.
- The misuse or misappropriation of an individual's funds or assets by the institution.
- A grave concern in institutional settings; this includes any non-consensual sexual act or behavior.
- Targeting individuals based on personal characteristics such as race, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

# Financial Abuse

Financial Abuse or Economic Abuse is the most common form of abuse of older adults. It can involve illegally or improperly using a person's money, assets, or property without the person's permission or knowledge. It is often a form of theft or fraud. Examples of financial abuse include pressuring for money, goods or property; using property or money without the person's knowledge and consent; and misusing a power of attorney.

## Signs of Financial Abuse

- Signatures on cheques etc., that do not resemble the older person's signature, or signed when the older person cannot write.
- Sudden changes in bank accounts, including unexplained withdrawals of large sums of money by a person accompanying the older person.
- The inclusion of additional names on an older person's bank account.
- Abrupt changes to, or the sudden establishment of, wills.
- The sudden appearance of previously uninvolved relatives claiming their rights to an older person's affairs or possessions.
- The unexplained sudden transfer of assets to a family member or someone outside the family
- Numerous unpaid bills, or overdue rent, when someone else is supposed to be paying the bills.
- Unusual concern by someone that an excessive amount of money is being expended on the care of the older person.
- Lack of amenities, such as TV, personal grooming items, appropriate clothing, that the older person should be able to afford.
- The unexplained disappearance of funds or valuable possessions such as art, silverware, or jewellery.
- Deliberate isolation of an older person from friends and family, resulting in the caregiver alone having total control.

# Neglect

Neglect can be physical, emotional, or financial. It refers to situations where a person has a responsibility to provide care or assistance to an older adult, but does not. For example, a neglectful caregiver might stop paying the bills or providing food, shelter, medication, medical attention, or other forms of assistance that the older adult needs and cannot get on his or her own. Abandoning the person is another form of neglect.

## Signs of Neglect

- Dirt, faecal or urine smell, or other health and safety hazards in older person's living environment
- Rashes, sores, or lice on him/her
- The older person is inadequately clothed
- The older person is malnourished or dehydrated
- The older person has an untreated medical condition
- The older person has poor personal hygiene
- Evidence of the withholding of medication or over-medication of the older person
- Evidence of a lack of assistance with eating and drinking
- Unsanitary and unclean conditions

# Violation of Rights

It is a violation of rights and freedoms if somebody interferes with an older adult's ability to make choices that other adults often take for granted, especially when those choices are protected under the law. Examples include interfering with spiritual practices or traditions; withholding mail or information; denying privacy; preventing visitors; dictating how someone else can spend their own money; or keeping someone in an institution without a legitimate reason.

## Signs of Violation of Rights

- Interfering with spiritual practices or traditions
- Restricting visitors
- Restricting the persons liberty and freedom
- Restricting a person's right to privacy
- Restricting a person's access to information or available community supports

Violation of rights can also include making decisions about the older adult's health, personal care, or finances without the person's consent (or where the person is not capable, his or her chosen substitute decision maker). In some cases, rules or policies may violate an older adult's rights



# How Can You Help

- Be watchful
- Recognize the warning signs
- Ask questions
- Listen carefully
- Be Supportive – Let them tell you what they need
- Investigate and share community resources

## **Ask the person**

- How they're doing
- If they're having any trouble at home or in other ways
- If there is someone you can put them in touch with who may be able to help
- How else they would like to be helped
- What you can do

Remember that keeping lines of communication open and breaking isolation can be vital.

## **Safe Responses**

If someone tells you they are being abused, here are some helpful things you can say:

- "I believe in you"
- "It's not your fault"
- "I'm worried about your safety"
- "I will support you and your decisions"
- "How Can I Help?"

## If an older adult tells you that they're being abused:

- **Be patient** – listen carefully and don't jump to conclusions
- **Believe them** – 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 them** – do not express pity or tell them what to do. Respect their decisions even when you don't agree. 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 are not comfortable doing
- **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
- **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
- **Do not confront the perpetrator yourself** – this could put you and/or the person who is being abused in trouble
- **Educate yourself on resources available** – learn about safety planning and call your local community information centre, community care access centre, community support agency; talk to your own doctor or lawyer; or search on the Internet for resources and information
- **Encourage them to seek help** – offer to help them find the right place to turn to and local resources, if this is something you are prepared and able to do



# What to do if you're being abused

## If you're 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.

## To seek help, you should:

- ▶ Tell someone you trust what is happening to you
- ▶ Ask others for help if you need it
- ▶ Turn to the police for help if someone is hurting you or you do not feel safe
- ▶ Talk with people to learn more about resources and services 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



# Safety Planning Checklist

You may want to consider putting together an emergency kit with:

- ▶ Emergency phone numbers written out and stored in a safe place
- ▶ Emergency money (e.g. for a taxi, hotel or payphone)
- ▶ Extra clothing
- ▶ A list of medications, name and phone number of pharmacy, and at least three days' worth of medications
- ▶ Glasses, hearing aids and other assistive devices such as cane, walker or wheelchair
- ▶ A safe place to go in the event of an emergency (both in and outside your home)
- ▶ An escape route from your home
- ▶ Keys for your home, car, and safety deposit box
- ▶ Copies of relevant documents, including:
  - ▶ Identification (e.g. birth certificate)
  - ▶ Marriage certificate or record of common-law relationship
  - ▶ Cheque books and credit cards
  - ▶ Lease, rental agreement, or house deed
  - ▶ Bank book and recent statements
  - ▶ Health card
  - ▶ Social Insurance Number
  - ▶ Passport



# Helplines and Resources

If you're in an emergency, call 911 or your local police (705) 377-7135, ambulance or fire

- ▶ Ontario Provincial Police **1-888-310-1122**
- ▶ Victim Services Directory **1-888-579-2888**
- ▶ Senior Safety Line **1-866-299-1011**
- ▶ Assaulted Women's Help Line **1-866-863-0511**
- ▶ Talk4Healing **1-855-554-4325** (for Aboriginal women, in English and Ojibwe)
- ▶ Talk2Nice **1-844-529-7292**
- ▶ Noojmowin-Teg Health Centre **705-368-0083**
- ▶ Mental Health Helpline **1-800-565-8603**



# STOP ELDER ABUSE

