



Elder Abuse and Neglect FAQs

As America's population ages, so do the incidences of elder abuse. Unfortunately, the prevalence and nature of this growing problem has generally remained hidden from public view. It is imperative that both professionals and lay persons become more aware of the scope and many issues surrounding this sensitive topic.

What are the types of elder abuse and neglect and how are they detected?

Passive and active abuse. Caregiver fails to meet the physical, social and emotional needs of the elder. The difference between passive and active abuse is that active abuse is intentional while passive abuse is unintentional.

- Evidence that personal care is lacking or neglected
- Signs of malnourishment (e.g. sunken eyes, loss of weight)
- Chronic health problems both physical and/or psychiatric
- Dehydration (extreme thirst)
- Pressure sores (bed sores)

Physical abuse. Intentional infliction of physical harm. This includes everything from slapping to physical restraints.

- Overt signs of physical trauma (e.g. scratches, bruises, cuts, burns, punctures, choke marks)
- Signs of restraint trauma (e.g. rope burns, gag marks, welts)
- Injury - particularly if repeated (e.g. sprains, fractures, detached retina, dislocation, paralysis)
- Additional physical indicators - hypothermia, abnormal chemistry values, pain upon being touched
- Repeated "unexplained" injuries
- Inconsistent explanations of the injuries
- A physical examination reveals that the older person has injuries which the caregiver has failed to disclose
- Repeated time lags between the time of any "injury or fall" and medical treatment

Material and financial abuse. Misuse, misappropriation and exploitation of the elder's material and monetary possessions.

- Unusual banking activity (e.g. large withdrawals during a brief period of time, switching accounts from one bank to another, ATM activity by a homebound elder)
- Bank statements (credit card statements, etc.) no longer come to the older adult
- Documents are being drawn up for the elder to sign but the elder can not explain or understand the purpose of the papers
- The elder's living situation is not commensurate with the size of the elder's estate (e.g. lack of new clothing or amenities, unpaid bills)
- The caregiver only expresses concern regarding the financial status of the older person and does not ask questions or express concern regarding the physical and/or mental health status of the elder
- Personal belongings such as jewelry, art, furs are missing
- Signatures on checks and other documents do not match the signature of the older person
- Recent acquaintances, housekeepers, "care" providers, etc. declare undying affection for the older person and isolate the elder from long-term friends or family
- Recent acquaintances, housekeeper, caregiver, etc. make promises of lifelong care in exchange for deeding all property and/or assigning all assets over to the acquaintance, caregiver, etc.

Psychological abuse. Intentional infliction of mental and psychological harm using verbal taunts to threats of physical harm and isolation.

- Psychological Signs:
 - Ambivalence, deference, passivity, shame
 - Anxiety (mild to severe)
 - Depression, hopelessness, helplessness, thoughts of suicide
 - Confusion, disorientation
- Behavioral Signs:
 - Trembling, clinging, cowering, lack of eye contact
 - Evasiveness
 - Agitation
 - Hypervigilance

Sexual Abuse. Any sexual activity against the elder's will.

- Trauma to the genital area (e.g. bruises)
- Venereal disease
- Infections/unusual discharge or smell
- Indicators common to psychological abuse may be similar to sexual abuse

Violations of basic rights. Depriving the elder of basic rights provided under state and federal laws. This could range from privacy to freedom of religion.

- Caregiver withholds or reads the elder's mail
- Caregiver intentionally obstructs the older person's religious observances (e.g. dietary restrictions, holiday participation, visits by minister/priest/rabbi etc.)
- Caregiver has removed all doors from the older adult's rooms.
- Basic rights violations are similar indicators as those for psychological abuse.

What are some common causes of elder abuse and neglect?

Caregiver stress: Caregiving is a stressful undertaking. Caregivers who don't have adequate training and resources experience extreme bouts of stress and frustration. This can lead to elder abuse and neglect.

Dependency and impairment: It has been argued that as an older adult's dependency increases so does the resentment and stress of the caregiver. Studies indicate that individuals in poor health are more likely to be abused than individuals who are in relatively good health. In addition, caregivers who are dependent on the elder financially are more likely to be abusive due to feelings of powerlessness that may be experienced by the caregiver.

Everyday stressors: External stress such as finances, issues on the job, and additional family stressors have been identified as risk factors for abuse. This correlation has been clearly demonstrated in studies examining spousal or child abuse.

Isolation: Abuse, whether spousal abuse, child abuse, or elder abuse occurs most often in families characterized by social isolation. Of course, this may be both an indicator of potential abuse as well as a potential contributing cause of abuse.

Intergenerational violent behaviors: Individuals who were abused as children oftentimes become part of a cycle of violence. Caregivers who have these tendencies may resort to violent behaviors against the elder they care for when they feel provoked. In other instances, if the older person receiving the care previously abused their child, that child now in the role of caregiver "returns" the abuse they suffered.

Personal dynamics and substance abuse: Some caregivers may be at risk for abusing elders as a function of their own difficulties. For example, a caregiver who suffers from such problems as alcoholism, drug addiction, and/or an emotional disorder (e.g. a personality disorder) is more likely to become an abuser than an individual who does not suffer from such problems.

What are some basic tips for preventing elder abuse and neglect?

- Maintain close ties with aging relatives and friends
- Identify helpful resources and put them to use
- Examine closely your family's ability to provide long-term, in-home care
- Explore alternative sources of care
- Anticipate potential incapacitation and make plans based on the elder's wishes

- Don't offer personal home care unless you thoroughly understand the demands and can meet the responsibility and costs involved
- Don't ignore your limitations and overextend yourself

- Don't expect family problems to disappear once the elder moves into the home
- Don't hamper the older person's independence or intrude unnecessarily upon his/her privacy

Who to Call

Elder Abuse Hotline 1.800.392.0210 (Missouri)

Local Law Enforcement: 911 or your local police number.

Care Connection, your local Area Agency on Aging: Every Area Agency on Aging operates an information and referral service. They provide individuals with information concerning a broad range of services and programs available to individuals 60 years and older, along with their caregivers. Contact us at 660.747.3107 or at 800.748.7826.

National Center on Elder Abuse: 1-202-682-2470 or 1-202-682-0100.