

Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly

An Overview

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A Growing Problem

Elder abuse is a real problem in today's society. Many older people are at risk of being abused or neglected. Many times, it is family members or other caregivers who abuse the elderly. The problem happens in all parts of the country. It happens to people of all races. It does not matter if you are rich or poor. According to the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), many elderly persons are abused at home. This problem affects hundreds of thousands of elderly people across the country. However, elder abuse is often hidden. Many families keep the abuse a secret. Some experts think that only one out of fourteen elder abuse cases is reported.

Elder abuse can take a number of forms. It may be defined in different ways. It is usually defined as any action **by a person in a position of trust** that causes harm to an elderly person. Harmful actions by **strangers** are usually not considered elder abuse.

No one knows exactly how much elder abuse takes place. Some experts think that 1.5 million seniors may be abused or mistreated in the U.S. each year. Since the number of elderly persons is growing rapidly, the numbers will probably rise even further.

Elder abuse can happen to anyone. Elders who have mental or physical disabilities are at the greatest risk. Since women live longer than men, they are often victims of abuse. But both sexes are equally at risk for abuse. Some older adults are abused by their spouses or by their children. People who take care of elders in care facilities or in the home may also be abusers.

Types of Abuse: Elder abuse can be divided into two groups:

- ✚ **Domestic:** This is when the older person is being mistreated by someone they know (a husband or wife, brother or sister, child, friend, or caregiver) while living in a home setting. The abuse may happen in the person's own home or in a family member's home.
- ✚ **Institutional:** This is when the abuse takes place in a facility where people are paid to care for the elderly, such as nursing homes, assisted living, or board and care homes.

To **abuse** means to **use** someone in the wrong way. We usually think of physical abuse, but elder abuse may be any of these:

Physical Abuse: Burns, Choking, Punches, hits, slaps, breaking bones

Sexual Abuse: this means any unwanted sexual contact with an older person. This includes any type of sexual act, improper touching, and rape. In addition to being abusive, many of these actions are also crimes. Sexual abuse includes: being rough with private body parts during bathing, forcing the elder to watch pornographic movies, making crude remarks about private body parts.

Emotional Abuse: yelling, insulting, swearing, name-calling, making fun of the elder's values, ignoring religious beliefs, using "the silent treatment", ignoring the elder

Neglect: This means not giving needed personal care, such as food, shelter, or medical care. Examples include: Forgetting to pick up the person's pills at the drug store after the person has run out of medicine. Not coming home in time to drive the person to a doctor's visit. Not giving food or water. Leaving eyeglasses out of reach

Self-Neglect: This is when the elderly person threatens his own safety or health. For example, he may refuse needed food, water, clothing, or medication. Or she may insist on living alone when she cannot cook or clean for herself.

Financial Abuse: This means the misuse of money or things the person owns. For instance: not

giving the person money when she asks for it. Cashing an elderly person's check without permission. Forcing an elderly person to sell her home. Stealing cash, clothes, jewelry, or anything the person owns.

As you can see it is possible for more than one type of abuse to take place. In **institutional settings**, **physical abuse** is the most often reported form of elder abuse. Other types of elder abuse that have been reported in facilities include sexual abuse and financial abuse.

In domestic settings, the most common form of elder abuse reported is **Neglect/Abandonment** (46%) followed by physical abuse (20%), emotional abuse (17%), financial abuse (14%) and sexual abuse (3%).

Example: Mrs. Lewis is eighty years old. She has some health problems and has trouble getting around. Her daughter Susan (54 years old) came to live with her. Things were going well until Susan lost her job. She has been unable to find another job. She depends on her mother for everything. Recently, she started drinking too much. She spends hours in front of the TV. This makes Mrs. Lewis angry. The two women have been having a lot of arguments. Recently, the arguments have been getting physical. Susan has pushed and hit her mother. The other day Mrs. Lewis found out that Susan has been taking large sums of money out of their joint account. Mrs. Lewis is very upset. She is afraid to confront Susan. She is afraid it will make her even angrier.

Partners in Abuse

The Victim

The typical victim of elder abuse is a widowed, white female. She is usually more than seventy years old and lives on a limited income. The victim usually lives with the abuser, who is often a spouse or adult child. Elderly victims often do not report being abused. They may fear that the abuse will get worse if they report it. They are often ashamed of the situation. They may worry about having to leave their own home.

Those who are most at risk for abuse are often: in poor health, living alone, have little social support, widowed

The Abuser

There is no typical profile for an abuser. They can be any sex, age or race. Sometimes the stress of caring for an elderly person can lead to abuse and neglect or there may be a long history of domestic violence. In fact, spouses were responsible for more than half of reported cases of elder abuse. Also, adults who were mistreated as children may end up abusing their aging parents.

Following is a list of factors that may result in elder abuse:

- Mental and emotional problems
- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Emotionally dependent on the victim
- Financially dependent on the victim
- The belief that violence can solve problems

Warning Signs

You should watch for clues that abuse is taking place. The following signs do not always mean abuse, but they should be looked at carefully:

- Poor grooming
- Unusual or unexplained injuries (cuts, bruises, burns)
- Pressure sores or bedsores
- Restricted movement (tied to furniture or locked in room)
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fear
- Withdrawal
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Visits to many doctors or hospitals
- Strange explanations for injuries
- Helplessness
- Won't talk in front of the caregiver

Signs of an abuser include the following:

- Verbally attacking, threatening, or insulting the older person
- Concerned only with the older person's money and not his health or well-being
- Problems with alcohol or drug abuse
- Not allowing the older person to speak for himself
- Blaming the older person
- Ignoring or showing anger towards the older person
- Keeping the older person away from others

According to the American Medical Association, one older person in four will suffer some kind of abuse or neglect. Sometimes, the abuse comes from something simple. For example, failing to turn a bedridden person regularly can result in bedsores. Sometimes a healthcare employee does not do their work properly, such as cutting off a bandage with a sharp instrument. But abuse can also be more direct. Physical and verbal abuse is usually done on purpose. Sometimes, patient abuse can cause permanent harm or even-death.

Abuse can take other forms too. Not giving choices can be abusive. For instance, trying to force or control any of the following things can be a form of abuse:

- What clothes to wear
- What to eat
- When to bathe
- When to see visitors

Physical abuse and stealing are against the law. But elderly victims may not be able to testify in court. They may be scared of what will happen if they tell about the abuse. They may be ashamed of what has happened.

Prevention

Experts agree that the best way to prevent and stop abuse is through services provided in the home by outsiders. For example, Meals-on-Wheels and home health care nurses can see what is going on inside the home. They can help the older person from getting too weak and dependent on the abuser. Also, having someone from the "outside" can keep the abuser from acting.

The hidden problem of abuse needs to be seen in the light of day. Only then can solutions be offered. Some things that can help are listed below:

- Protective services
- Counseling services
- Senior health programs
- with household chores
- Help Bill paying services

Help for the Caregiver

Elder abusers come from all backgrounds. Sometimes they are people who used to have good coping skills. They usually meant to do good when they decided to care for an elderly relative. They felt that they could handle the situation. But when they take on the role of full-time caregiver they realize it is more difficult than they thought. Guilt and anger can turn into a violent action toward an elderly person. Take a look at the following example:

Example: Lynne is a good example of caregiver burnout. Lynne quit her teaching job to take care of her mother who has Alzheimer's disease. The stress and demands of her mother's care was harder than she thought it would be. She started getting very bad headaches. She developed high blood pressure. She often found herself getting very angry with her mother. This led to yelling and crying fits.

When Lynne went to her family doctor about her headaches, he told her about a caregiver support group. He also told her about other community services that she could take advantage of. Things got better but it was still more than she could handle by herself. Lynne's mother now lives in an assisted living center. She gets the 24 hour help she needs. Now the time they spend together is meaningful mother-and-daughter time. Lynne now handles her mother's personal needs. She visits her once a day. She often brings special items that she knows her mother enjoys.