

Senior Abuse – It’s Not Right!!!

We have a shared responsibility to promote respect for all members of our society. Everyone has a role to play. When people have trouble in their relationships, you may be the neighbour, friend or family member who can make a positive difference. We also need to recognize the ways our society discriminates against older adults. “Ageism” is the term that describes attitudes and beliefs that cause people to treat older adults as if they are less important or less valued because they are older. These attitudes are a factor in abusive situations because they allow people to believe that they have the right to ignore, harm or control an older adult.

What is Abuse of Older Adults?

The terms of “elder abuse” or “senior abuse” are often used to describe the experience of older adults who are abused, usually by someone they care about. It is abuse whenever someone limits or controls the rights and freedoms of an older adult. The older adult is unable to freely make choices because they are afraid of being humiliated, hurt, left alone, or of the relationship ending. Abuse causes harm to an older adult.

Source: Government of Canada. *It’s Not Right! How You Can Identify Abuse and Help Older Adults at Risk*. For more information www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca)

For older people, abuse can come in many forms: physical, sexual, emotional, financial, or neglect. It’s possible to experience more than one type of abuse at the same time, or at different times.

In Canada, some kinds of abuse-like fraud, assault, sexual assault, threatening harm and criminal harassment-are crimes under the *Criminal Code*. Some types of abuse are also offences under provincial and territorial laws.

Key Facts:

- *Around 4-6% of older adults have experienced some form of abuse at home.*
- *Senior abuse can lead to serious physical injuries and long-term psychological consequences.*
- *Senior abuse is predicted to increase as many countries are experiencing rapidly ageing populations.*
- *The global population of people aged 60 years or older will more than double, from 542 million in 1995 to 1.2 billion in 2015.*

Ageism:

- Stereotypes about old age and aging can be a factor in senior abuse. Some people assume that an older person’s mental and physical abilities are limited without regard to the individual’s real abilities. They may talk down to an older person or make decisions that affect them without their input.

Physical Abuse:

Physical abuse is the deliberate use of force against a person without that person's consent. It can cause physical pain, injury, or impairment. This includes:

- Pushing or shoving
- Hitting, slapping or kicking
- Pinching or punching
- Biting
- Burning
- Throwing an object at you
- Misusing physical restraints
- Confining you to one place or room

All of these acts are crimes in Canada. Physical abuse includes the deliberate overmedication or under medication of an older person.

Sexual Abuse:

Sexual abuse involves any unwanted sexual touching or activity. This can include:

- Kissing, fondling or sexual intercourse without consent
- Continuing sexual contact when asked to stop
- Being forced to commit unsafe or degrading sexual acts.

Sexual assault is a crime in Canada. Even when you are married, it is a crime to force any sexual conduct on another person.

Emotional Abuse:

Emotional (or psychological) abuse involves using words or actions to control, frighten, isolate or erode a person's self-respect. Emotional abuse can include:

- Putting you down or humiliating you
- Ignoring you or your health needs
- Yelling at you constantly
- Making threats to harm you or others
- Intruding on your privacy
- Making fun of your language, traditions, religious or spiritual beliefs, or preventing you from practicing your religion
- Keeping you from seeing your family, friends or community
- Making threats to move you out of your home
- Deciding what you can and can't do

Emotional abuse is serious – inside wounds can take a long time to heal. Some forms of emotional abuse are crimes. Stalking, verbal threats, harassing telephone calls, deliberate intimidation and counselling (advising) suicide are all criminal acts in Canada. Many other forms of emotional abuse are not crimes. Still, they can hurt a lot and may lead to criminal acts later on.

Financial Abuse:

Financial (or economic) abuse involves acting without consent in a way that financially benefits one person at the expense of another. This may include:

- Stealing from you
- Keeping you from making your own financial decisions
- Withholding money for things you need (food, housing or medical treatment)
- Pressuring you to share your home or your car, or baby-sit your grandchildren when you don't want to
- Making frequent requests for money
- Failing to repay loans
- Taking your money or cashing your cheques without your permission
- Pressuring you to sign over your house or property or to sign legal documents that you don't understand
- Overcharging you for services

Most forms of financial abuse are crimes, including theft, criminal breach of trust, forgery and fraud. It is also a crime to misuse a Power of Attorney. Financial abuse can also include marriages where a person deliberately pressures an older person of limited capacity into marriage solely for financial profit.

Neglect:

Neglect is the failure to provide adequately for a dependent adult. As an older adult, you may be at risk of abuse (including neglect) because of where you live (alone, with family, or in an institution) or because you depend on other people for basic help with daily living or financial support. You may receive help with intimate care – like feeding, dressing or bathing. You may depend on someone to give you your medication. These are situations where abuse can take place.

Oversight or deliberate acts of neglect can involve:

- Not giving you proper food or clean clothing
- Not providing you with a safe, warm, clean place to live
- Failing to provide adequate health care, medication and personal hygiene
- Failing to provide aids for daily living, like hearing aids, walkers, canes, wheelchairs, grab bars
- Failing to prevent physical harm
- Failing to ensure you have proper supervision (if needed).

Some forms of neglect are crimes in Canada, including failure to provide the necessities of life and criminal negligence causing bodily harm or death.

Institutional Abuse or Neglect:

Senior abuse may take place in the home, the community or in an institution.

Older adults living in institutional care facilities may experience abuse that is a single incident of poor professional practice or part of a larger pattern of ill treatment. This may include:

- Inadequate care and nutrition
- Low standards of nursing care
- Inappropriate or aggressive staff-client interactions
- Overcrowding
- Substandard or unsanitary living conditions
- Misuse of physical restraints or medications
- Ineffective policies to meet residents' needs
- Low levels of supervision.

Why take Action?

These are some of the reasons why you might not want to take action and get help, and why you should act to be safer.

You may not be seeking help because:

- You don't want the abuser to get in trouble or go to jail
- You believe the abuse is not intentional or because it is someone you trust and care for OR by someone who 'can't help' their behaviour
- You think no one will believe you because the abuse didn't leave a mark OR it only happened once
- You believe the abuse will get worse if you seek help OR you think it's not a big deal and hope it will get better over time
- You believe that you are not able to take action because you provide care for someone, you depend on someone for care, you don't have money OR you don't know where to turn
- You believe that what happens in your home is private and family comes first so you are embarrassed OR you believe you must accept your situation so your family stays together

Abuse is not your fault, is always wrong and there are ways to get help!

How Can You Be Safer Now?

There are actions you can take yourself or with the help of people you trust

If you are living with your abuser:

- Don't be ashamed – talk to people about what's going on
- Carry \$15 - \$20 for taxi and change for a pay phone
- Open your own bank account (\$5 to start) and request that no mail come to your home
- Get a cell phone, keep it charged and program numbers in speed dial
- Avoid the kitchen and rooms with one exit when abuse is possible
- Create a telephone code word with someone to signal danger and ask them to call 911 if they think you're in danger
- Ask someone to help you find services and go with you to appointments
- Have someone take photographs or notes as evidence of the abuse

- Join activities outside your home (art or fitness classes)

If you are leaving your home:

- Leave an emergency bag at a safe location or with someone you trust, with copies of your identification, prescriptions, phone numbers, health/credit/drug/bank cards and spare glasses/cane
- Bring a picture of the abuser to show police, neighbours and co-workers; record the abuser's licence plate number
- Make arrangements for dependent adult children, spouse/partner and pets because it may be difficult to get them out of the home once you've left

If your abuser lives outside the home:

- Change/strengthen the lock and install a peephole
- Inform your neighbours that your abuser shouldn't be around
- Change the places you go and consider changing your doctor, dentist, and/or lawyer if shared with your abuser
- Carry restraint, custody and bail orders with you

How Can You Get The Help You Need?

When you call for help it is very important that the person you speak to understand the type of abuse, and the important help you need now.

When contacting someone for help:

- Say that you are experiencing abuse and name it – physical, sexual, emotional, financial or neglect
- Make sure voice messages are very specific – name the kind of abuse, what you need help with and whether it is safe to call you back/leave a message
- Tell them if you have dependent adult children, spouse/partner or pets who will need care if you are not around
- Ask them to make the call for/with you if they suggest you contact another agency
- Don't stick with services that aren't helpful – don't let a bad experience stop you from continuing to look for help
- Know you have the right to consent, or not, to share your information with others without losing your service provider's support (but know this may limit their ability to connect you with other services)

Source: National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly. *Resources for Older Women- Saskatchewan Edition*. www.nicenet.ca

How do I Report Abuse?

All of us have a role to play in stopping elder abuse. We need to be alert to the signs and signals of abuse. Friends, family and professionals all need to do their part.

Going to the police:

Call the police if a family member or caregiver physically or sexually assaults you, threatens to assault you, or commits a financial crime against you. The police will come to help. Many police officers are trained to deal with abuse in families or relationship situations. Some have special training to deal with senior abuse.

They can take you to a hospital if you need treatment. Or they can help you leave the situation safely.

The police may arrest the person who abused you if they believe that person has broken the law.

Signs and Signals of Abuse:

Do you suspect someone you know is being abused? Watch for:

- Signs of bruises, cuts, burns, sprains, or broken bones
- Frequent “accidents”
- Quiet or withdrawn behaviours
- Avoidance of social situations
- Short of cash or difficulty in paying for things

These situations can have other causes, but they may be signs that someone is experiencing abuse.

Resources: Building a Reference List

It is a good idea to create – in advance – your own list of community or other resources that can help you. Look in the telephone book for contact numbers. The following is a list of services or organizations that might be able to help you with information, support or emergency assistance.

Keep these numbers up to date as they change from time to time.

Police (local)

Can help you assess your safety and take action against someone committing a crime in non-emergency situations. Check the first few pages of your telephone book for the phone number. **Call 911 in an emergency.**

Mobile Crisis Services 24 hour Seniors Neglect and Abuse Response Line

Prince Albert and area **(306) 764-1011**

Saskatoon and area **(306) 933-6200**

Regina and area **(306) 757-0127**

Saskatchewan Health Line - 811

Source: Government of Canada. Family Violence Initiative of the Department of Justice Canada. *Elder Abuse is Wrong*. www.justice.gc.ca