

Elder Abuse & Maltreatment



What is elder abuse?

“Elder maltreatment can lead to serious physical injuries and long-term psychological consequences.”

(World Health Organization, 2011)

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.” (World Health Organization) It can occur in the home, in the community and in institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, or other long-term care facilities.

Types of Abuse

Elder abuse, or maltreatment, is a form of violence that should be recognized for what it is – a serious violation of human rights. It can take various forms:

PHYSICAL Pushing, shaking, hitting, or the improper use of restraints.

PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL Threatening, bullying, name calling, or treating an older person like a child.

SEXUAL Assault, harassment, or molestation.

FINANCIAL (OR MATERIAL) Withholding money, theft, forcing the sale of property or possessions, coercing changes in wills.

NEGLECT Denying the older person food/water, denying visits from family or friends.

Trends

Elder abuse is typically underreported, under diagnosed, and overlooked. According to the World Health Organization (2011), approximately 4-6% of elderly people have experienced maltreatment at home.

In Canada, police-reported data shows that nearly 7,900 seniors (65 years and older) were victims of violent crime in 2009, and about one third of those seniors (35%) were victimized by a family member.

Data on the extent of the problem in institutions is scarce. However, an American survey of nursing home staff showed that:

- 40% admitted to psychologically abusing patients
- 36% witnessed at least one incident of physical abuse of an elderly patient in the previous year
- 10% committed at least one act of physical abuse

“It is predicted that by the year 2025, the global population of people aged 60 years and older will more than double, to about 1.2 billion. As a result, it’s expected that the number of cases of elder maltreatment will also increase.”

(World Health Organization, 2011)



Signs and Symptoms:

The person in the position of power may:

- Steal or force the sale of possessions
- Slap, push, rough handle or name call
- Overmedicate, undermedicate, or use restraints
- Bully, humiliate, or treat like a child
- Abandon, neglect, or isolate

The victim may show signs of:

- Depression, fear, anxiety, or passivity
- Social withdrawal
- Unexplained physical injury
- Lack of food, clothing, and other necessities
- Changes in hygiene and nutrition (e.g. signs of malnutrition)
- Failure to meet financial obligations
- Unusual banking withdrawals

(Source: Government of Ontario)

Risk Factors

Risk factors increase the potential for abuse and maltreatment of an older person. These risk factors can be broken down into four general categories:

- *Individual* – dementia, gender of the victim; person in power having significant mental health and/or substance use issues.
- *Relationship* – a shared living situation; person perpetrating the abuse being dependent on the older person.
- *Community* – social isolation of caregivers and older persons, possibly due to physical or mental infirmities or through the loss of friends and family members.
- *Socio-cultural* – including the depiction of older people as frail, weak and dependent; erosion of the bonds between generations of a family; migration of young couples, leaving elderly parents alone; lack of funds to pay for care.

What Can You Do?

If someone tells you that they are being abused:

- **Believe them** – you may be the first person they have told.
- **Listen and talk** - to break down the isolation they are experiencing.
- **Don't judge** or make judgmental comments.
- **Be an advocate** – educate yourself on resources available.
- Encourage them to **seek support**.
- **Be patient** – understand that it is very difficult to make change when someone is in an abusive relationship.
- **Do not confront the person** in power yourself – it could be dangerous to you and the person you're advocating for.

(www.seniors.gov.on.ca/en/elderabuse)

Local Support

Senior Safety Line
1-866-299-1011
(24 hours, 7 days, 150 languages)
www.elderabusewaterloo.ca

519-579-4607
Elder Abuse Response
Team (EART)
www.wrps.on.ca



519-883-2304
www.preventingcrime.ca

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