

# Forms of Elder Abuse

Elder abuse generally includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and stalking. Some state statutes include other behaviors such as abandonment and self-neglect. Tragically, some cases of elder abuse end as homicides, homicide/suicides, or homicide/attempted suicides. This handout shares definitions offered by [The National Center on Elder Abuse](#).

## Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment. Physical abuse may include but is not limited to such acts of violence as: striking (with or without an object), hitting, beating, pushing, shoving, shaking, slapping, kicking, pinching, and burning. In addition, inappropriate use of drugs and physical restraints, force-feeding, and physical punishment of any kind also are examples of physical abuse.

### **Signs and symptoms of physical abuse include but are not limited to:**

- Bruises, black eyes, welts, lacerations, and rope marks;
- Bone fractures, broken bones, and skull fractures;
- Open wounds, cuts, punctures, untreated injuries in various stages of healing;
- Sprains, dislocations, and internal injuries/bleeding;
- Broken eyeglasses/frames, physical signs of being subjected to punishment, and signs of being restrained;
- Laboratory findings of medication overdose or under utilization of prescribed drugs;
- An elder's report of being hit, slapped, kicked, or mistreated;
- An elder's sudden change in behavior; and
- The caregiver's refusal to allow visitors to see an elder alone.

## Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with an elderly person. Sexual contact with any person incapable of giving consent is also considered sexual abuse. It includes, but is not limited to: unwanted touching, all types of sexual assault or battery, such as rape, sodomy, coerced nudity, and sexually explicit photographing.

### **Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse include but are not limited to:**

- Bruises around the breasts or genital area;
- Unexplained venereal disease or genital infections;
- Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding;
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing; and
- An elder's report of being sexually assaulted or raped.

## Emotional Abuse

Emotional or psychological abuse is the infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or nonverbal acts. Emotional/psychological abuse includes but is not limited to: verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, and harassment. In addition, treating an older person like an infant; isolating an elderly person from his/her family, friends, or regular activities; giving an older person the "silent treatment;" and enforced social isolation are examples of emotional/psychological abuse.

- Being emotionally upset or agitated;
- Being extremely withdrawn and non communicative or non responsive;
- Unusual behavior usually attributed to dementia (e.g., sucking, biting, rocking); and
- An elder's report of being verbally or emotionally mistreated.

## Neglect

Neglect is the refusal or failure to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an elder. Neglect may also include failure of a person who has fiduciary responsibilities to provide care for an elder (e.g., pay for necessary home care services) or the failure on the part of an in-home service provider to provide necessary care.

Neglect typically means the refusal or failure to provide an elderly person with such life necessities as food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medicine, comfort, personal safety, and other essentials included in an implied or agreed-upon responsibility to an elder.

### **Signs and symptoms of neglect include but are not limited to:**

- Dehydration, malnutrition, untreated bed sores, and poor personal hygiene;
- Unattended or untreated health problems;
- Hazardous or unsafe living condition/arrangements (e.g., improper wiring, no heat, or no running water);
- Unsanitary and unclean living conditions (e.g. dirt, fleas, lice on person, soiled bedding, fecal/urine smell, inadequate clothing); and
- An elder's report of being mistreated.

## Financial Exploitation

Financial or material exploitation is the illegal or improper use of an elder's funds, property, or assets. Examples include, but are not limited to: cashing an elderly person's checks without authorization or permission; forging an older person's signature; misusing or stealing an older person's money or possessions; coercing or deceiving an older person into signing any document (e.g., contracts or will); and the improper use of conservatorship, guardianship, or power of attorney.

### **Signs and symptoms of financial or material exploitation include but are not limited to:**

- Sudden changes in bank account or banking practice, including an unexplained withdrawal of large sums of money by a person accompanying the elder;
- The inclusion of additional names on an elder's bank signature card;
- Unauthorized withdrawal of the elder's funds using the elder's ATM card;
- Abrupt changes in a will or other financial documents;

- Unexplained disappearance of funds or valuable possessions;
- Substandard care being provided or bills unpaid despite the availability of adequate financial resources;
- Discovery of an elder's signature being forged for financial transactions or for the titles of his/her possessions;
- Sudden appearance of previously uninvolved relatives claiming their rights to an elder's affairs and possessions;
- Unexplained sudden transfer of assets to a family member or someone outside the family;
- The provision of services that are not necessary; and
- An elder's report of financial exploitation.

## Stalking

While legal definitions of stalking vary from one jurisdiction to another, a working definition of stalking is a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Unfortunately, older adults may be stalked by spouses, partners, acquaintances, caregivers, other family members or strangers.

## Homicides, Homicide/Suicides, Homicide/Attempted Suicides

Sadly, older adults may be killed in later life, most often by spouses, partners, family caregivers, or someone known to the victim. Over the past several years, [End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin's](#) annual Homicide Report has documented that a significant percentage of domestic homicides involve older victims. Follow [this link](#) to view the current Homicide Report.

Also tragic are homicide/suicides in later life. Most homicide/suicides in later life are not mercy killings because a partner is ill or suicide pacts so the couple can leave this world together. In many cases, homicide/suicides or homicides/suicide attempts in later life involve ongoing domestic violence or power and control dynamics.