

Dynamics

What Is Elder Abuse?

While many definitions exist, elder abuse generally includes physical, sexual or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment and financial exploitation of an older person by another person or entity. Elder abuse can occur in any setting (e.g., home, community or facility), and can occur either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability.

What Is Abuse in Later Life?

Abuse in later life is physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, or stalking of an adult age 50 years or older. In most cases, the victim is in an ongoing relationship (such as spouse, partner, family member or caregiver) where society expects there to be a trusting, caring connection. The phrase “Abuse in Later Life” is often used by domestic violence and sexual assault advocates who work with older victims.

Who Are the Victims?

Older victims are from a variety of racial and ethnic groups and all economic levels.¹ Many older victims are active members of the community. Some older victims are frail and live with significant health issues, physical disabilities, and/or cognitive limitations.

1. Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Inc., Weill Cornell Medical Center of Cornell University, and New York City Department for the Aging. (2011). Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study Self-Reported Prevalence and Documented Case Surveys.

Who Are the Offenders?

A significant portion of elder abuse is spouse or partner abuse.² Most offenders are spouses, partners, family members, caregivers and other persons in a relationship where the victim and society expects compassion and caring.³

Sexual assault or stalking in later life may also be committed by strangers. Strangers may also commit other crimes against older adults, such as scams. In some case, older adults are targeted because of perceived or actual disabilities or vulnerabilities.

Where Does It Occur?

Most often abuse occurs in the person's home, which can include private dwellings or facility settings. Some forms of abuse, such as stalking, intimidation, and harassment can also occur in public.

How Many People Are Affected by Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation?

National incidence and prevalence data do not exist. But two recent studies found that 7.6%–11% people 60+ who can answer a phone and pass a basic dementia screen are victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation.⁴ But, these studies cannot capture older people at greatest risk: those who live in facilities; who cannot answer or do not have a phone; are too scared to speak because an abuser is close by; or people with dementia.

What Are Potential Risk Factors?

Researchers are still exploring risk factors for abuse later life. Some studies suggest that continuing to live with an intimate partner who has been abusive throughout the relationship; personal problems and dependency of the abuser; social isolation; and physical and/or cognitive limitations or perceived limitations of potential victims may be key risk factors.⁵

2. Acierno, R., Hernandez-Tejada, M., Muzzy, W., Steve, K. (2009). National Elder Mistreatment Study. Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Inc., Weill Cornell Medical Center of Cornell University, and New York City Department for the Aging. (2011). Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study Self-Reported Prevalence and Documented Case Surveys

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA)

What Is the Impact of Abuse on Older People's Lives?

Some older victims experience physical injuries and illnesses. Many older victims experience depression.⁶ Several studies found that persons who are abused are much more likely to die prematurely.⁷

Why Does It Occur?

Research indicates that power and control dynamics such as found with younger battered women often present in elder abuse cases.⁸ Greed is also a motivator in financial exploitation cases.

In a small number of cases, well intended caregivers are unable to provide care and an older adult is harmed unintentionally. Also, a small number of abusers cannot control their behavior due to medical or mental health condition that manifests in aggressive, inappropriate, or violent behavior.

Theories that elder abuse is caused by caregiver stress, anger, substance abuse, or retaliation for previous child abuse have not been supported by research. Often these issues co-exist with abuse, neglect, or exploitation but do not cause abuse. These problems may need to be dealt with as separate issues. But resolving these problems rarely enhances victim safety or improves the quality of an older victim's life.

6. Mouton, C., Rodabough, R.J., Rovi, S.L.D., Brzyski, R.G., & Katerndahl, D.A. (2010). Psychosocial Effects of Physical and Verbal Abuse in Postmenopausal Women. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 8, 206-213. doi: 10.1370/afm.1095.

Fisher, Bonnie and Regan, Sandra. (2006). The Extent and Frequency of Abuse in the Lives of Older Women and Their Relationship with Health Outcomes. *The Gerontologist*. 48 (2), 200-209.

7. Baker, M., LaCroix, A.Z., Wu, C., Cochrane, B.B., Wallace, R., & Woods, N.F. (2009) Mortality Risk Associated with Physical and Verbal Abuse in Women Aged 50 to 79. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 57, 1-11. doi: 10.1111/j.1532-5415.2009.02429.x

Dong, X., Simon, M, Mendes de Leon, C., Fulmer, T., Beck, T., Hebert, L., Dyer, C., Paveza, G, & Evans, D. (2009) Elder Self-neglect and Abuse and Mortality Risk in a Community-Dwelling Population. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 302 (5), 517-526.

Lachs, M.S., Williams, C.S., O'Brien, S., Pillemer, K.A., & Charlson, M.E. (1998). The Mortality of Elder Mistreatment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280, 438-442. doi 0.1001/jama.280.5.428

8. Pillemer, K. and Finkelhor, D. (1989). Causes of Elder Abuse: Caregiver Stress versus Problem Relatives. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 59 (2), 179-187.

Penhale, B. (2003). Older Women, Domestic Violence, and Elder Abuse: A Review of Commonalities, Differences, and Shared Approaches. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 15 (3/4), 163-183.

Why Do Victims Stay or Return to Abusers?

There are numerous reasons why victims maintain contact with abusers or feel they cannot leave an abusive relationship. Older victims of abuse often love or care about the people who harm them. Keeping the family together may be very important to the victim for many reasons, including religious and cultural beliefs. Some victims fear that they will be seriously hurt or killed if they leave their abusers. Others do not have the financial resources and/or housing they need to leave. Medical conditions and disabilities may make living on their own difficult or impossible or the abusive individual may need the victims care.⁹

What Can I Do if I Think I Am Being Harmed?

- **Help is available.** If you are in danger and want law enforcement to respond, call 911. To talk to someone confidentially for support and information, call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](https://www.nvhw.org/) at 1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224. To find your local sexual abuse victim service program, call the [Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network](https://www.ranet.org/) at 1-800-656-4673 (HOPE).
- **Remember, you are not alone.** Unfortunately, too many women and men are hurt in later life by spouses, partners, family members, caregivers, and others. You are not the only one who has experienced harm.
- **Create a safety plan.** Whether you choose to remain in your current living situation or choose to leave, consider contacting an advocate to create a safety plan. NCALL has safety planning tips and many domestic violence advocates specialize in safety planning. Advocates can provide information about what you are experiencing and offer information about services and support. For more information about domestic violence programs, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline.
- **You deserve to be treated with dignity and respect!**

9. Koenig, T.L., Rinfrette, E.S. & Lutz, W.A. (2006). Female Caregivers' Reflections on Ethical Decision-Making: The Intersection of Domestic Violence and Elder Care. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 34, 361-372.

What Can I Do if I Am Concerned About an Older Adult in My Life?

- **Talk to the older adult.** Tell them you are concerned for their safety and that you are there to help. Let them know that domestic violence, sexual abuse, and elder abuse do not stop without some sort of outside intervention.
- **Offer to accompany them.** Provide support by accompanying the older adult to speak with an advocate at a domestic violence or sexual assault program or a social worker at an elder abuse agency.
- **Be part of their “safety plan.”** A safety plan is created by the victim with the help of a professional. The intent is to plan for a victim’s safety needs before another violent episode erupts. If you believe they are in immediate danger and want law enforcement to respond, call 911.