

Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan: Supporting Older Survivors

Domestic violence occurs at all stages of the lifespan, from adolescence to young adulthood to older age. Age plays a significant role in victims' perception of abuse, the way they seek help, and their definitions of healing and justice.

Distinct Dynamics Facing Older Survivors

Some dynamics of domestic violence occur across the lifespan. For example, forms of abuse are often co-occurring and may include physical violence and sexual assault, as well as verbal, emotional, economic, and spiritual abuse. Coercive control is often at the foundation.

Domestic violence in later life (age 50+) shares these dynamics, and there are additional dynamics unique to older victims.

- **Relationship:** Spousal relationships or partnerships may be long term—for example, marriages that have lasted 50 years or more. Some are new relationships, often following the death or divorce from a previous partner. The abuse may occur throughout the relationship or be a relatively new occurrence.
- **Tactics change over time:** Physical abuse often decreases while emotional abuse, economic coercion, and verbal threats increase. Many older victims describe these tactics as even more damaging.
- **Isolation:** Many people experience social isolation due to factors that commonly impact aging adults such as an increased likelihood of living alone, the loss of family or friends, or health conditions. This is compounded by the use of isolation as a common tactic of domestic violence.
- **Financial Factors:** Economic dependence may be due to an older victim who has never worked outside the home. Alternatively, the victim may be the sole breadwinner, but due to a lifelong relationship, feel obligated to support their abuser.
- **Health Factors:** Aging-related health and capacity factors play a role in the dynamics of abuse, such as a victim or abuser being a caregiver or requiring care.

Intersections of Age and Other Dimensions of Diversity

An individual's background, culture, and identity are the context in which their life occurs; for domestic violence survivors, it's also the context in which their abuse as well as their safety and healing occur. Taking into account an older survivor's life experience, culture, and identity allows service providers to better see the distinct dynamics, barriers, and safety options that apply to that survivor. When supporting older survivors, it is crucial to consider not just their age, but also their race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability status, and other identities that make up who they are.



In addition, older victims who come from groups that have experienced multigenerational oppression due to their culture, race, or identity can experience [historical trauma](#). Some people will experience no effects of historical trauma, but for many, the impact can be profound. This is especially true when a victim comes from a cultural, racial, or ethnic group that experiences ongoing present-day oppression.

Impact

Domestic violence has serious consequences for victims across the lifespan. Regardless of age, common impacts include physical injuries, health conditions, mental health concerns, substance use disorders, and risk of self-harm or suicide, and homicide. These impacts also apply to older victims and in addition, older victims may uniquely experience loss of identity over time, more severe health consequences and poorer life expectancy.

Barriers

[Barriers](#) to seeking help and accessing safety are complex and varied. Some barriers are shared by victims across the lifespan, such as fear, shame, intimidation, and normalized abuse.

Aging plays a significant role in whether and how older victims disclose abuse and seek help. Barriers specific to older survivors include:

- **Cultural Values or Generational Contexts:** Due to cultural and generational reasons, older survivors might not identify their experience as domestic violence or may [choose to stay](#) in an abusive relationship.

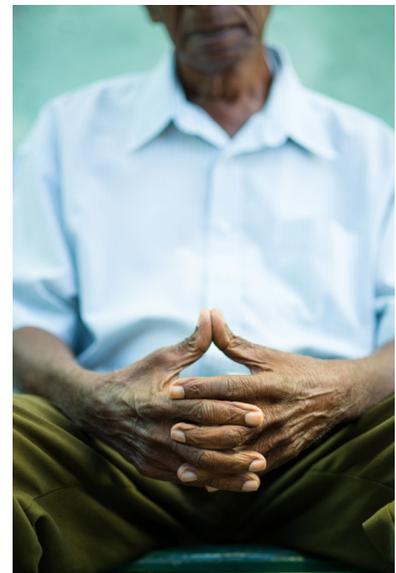
- **Inaccessibility and Lack of Tailored Services:** Older victims may have less information about services and resources available to them or feel that the services do not meet their needs.
- **Loss of Independence:** When a spouse or partner is also the caregiver, victims may fear that reporting the abuse will leave them without the ability to remain independent or that they will be forced to leave their home that may be full of memories and belongings acquired over the course of many years.
- **Ageism:** Ageist notions about an older adult's capacity to comprehend abuse, to make informed determinations about what to do, and about their values related to abuse can impede an older survivor's access to healing and safety.

Unique Dynamics Require Tailored Responses

The unique dynamics and barriers that older survivors of domestic abuse experience require tailored service and systems responses.

All survivors, regardless of age, benefit from being believed and reassured that no one deserves to be abused. Support and safety strategies specific for older older survivors include:

- **Listen:** Many older victims will not self-disclose using language like domestic violence or abuse. Careful listening can help with abuse recognition and identification.
- **Learn:** Recognize that older victims may have generational experiences and values that differ from younger people. Learn more about potential different generational values and communication styles.
- **Validate:** Compassionate messages acknowledging that the abuse is not the victim's fault and recognition of the courage needed to talk about these personal matters are important. Avoid asking questions that imply the survivor is to blame for the abuse.
- **Support Their Decisions:** Recognize that individuals are the best judges of their own safety and risk.
- **Safety Plan:** Safety planning is the victim-guided development of a plan to increase safety in high-risk situations in the victim's life. Victims are the



best judge of what will keep them safe in the future; typically, victims have developed strategies over time to keep themselves as safe as possible so far. The plan should be fluid and revisited frequently as the abuser tactics change and/or the severity of abusive incidents increases.

- **Represent:** Create a [welcoming and inclusive environment](#) for older victims. Include images of older adults from various backgrounds in physical spaces, online, and in outreach materials. Offer books, movies, and social activities of interest to individuals of all ages and generations.
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- **Provide Accessible Services:** Ensure that barriers that limit access for individuals with [mobility](#) and [communication](#) issues are addressed.
 - **Engage and Amplify:** Older survivors might learn about resources available to them through non-traditional means, such as their faith community, their financial institution, or their community center. Connect with other organizations in your community to learn about available options for older victims.

Resources

- [Preventing Intimate Partner Violence | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Intimate Partner Violence in the Golden Age: Systematic Review of Risk and Protective Factors](#)
- [Survivors in the Margins: The Invisibility of Violence Against Older Women](#)
- [Abuse in Later Life Power and Control Wheel](#)
- [Safety Planning Tips](#)
- [Safety Planning with Older Adults](#)



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