

Supporting Survivors of Abuse in Later Life

4

A Survivor-Centered Approach

Misuse of power is often at the root of abuse in later life. Perpetrators often use tactics of emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, and economic abuse to gain power over the victim. As a result, many victims lose their sense of personal power — loss of options, the ability to make decisions, or to be confident in oneself.



Consequently, professionals, regardless of their discipline, should be cognizant not to unintentionally replicate the dynamic of power and control. A survivor-centered approach restores control to the survivor by believing them, validating their experiences, prioritizing what's most important to them, and supporting their

decisions. This approach is principled on the belief that the older victim is the expert on what can and should be done to advance their safety, justice, and healing.

Strategies for Working with Abuse in Later Life Survivors

Practice survivor-defined

advocacy: Older adults deserve to regain and maintain control over their lives.

- Believe what the older adults tell you and validate their experience without judgment.
- Ask what their concerns and priorities are; some survivors may wish to address their housing, health, mental health, or other concerns that take precedence over their abuse. Focusing solely on the victimization and abuse may not address the older survivor's priorities holistically.
- Recognize that older survivors are resilient and often engage in strategies to keep themselves safe. Build on the strategies older survivors are already using.

- Provide time and space to review their options and help them make informed decisions.
- Support their decisions, remembering they are the expert on their lives.
- Many older survivors want to maintain a relationship with their abuser. The abuser may be an intimate partner, adult child, other family member, or a caregiver. The survivor may want help ending the abuse while still finding a way to have a connection with the abuser.

Reject “one size fits all”

approaches: The population of older adults is growing in diversity; culture affects how people perceive elder abuse as well as help-seeking and healing.

- Account for culture, background and identity when considering how to support an abuse in later life survivor. For example, older African Americans who have lived through decades of disparate racial treatment in the criminal justice system may prefer options to safety and justice that don't involve law enforcement. Learn more in the [Increasing Access to Healing Services and Just Outcomes for Older African American Crime Survivors Toolkit](#) and from the National Center on

Elder Abuse's web page: [Elder Mistreatment and Diverse Communities](#).

- Explore cultural avenues of support and safety for older adults, such as family networks, culturally-specific organizations, and ways to increase social and community connections.
- Welcome discussions of a survivor's faith; many older adults are faith-affiliated and their faith can be an important factor in their decision-making and safety planning. Learn more about the role of faith in the lives of older survivors from [Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse](#).
- For older LGBTQ+ adults who have experienced harassment, stigma, and discrimination, providing affirming outreach and services is particularly important, such as normalizing



using pronouns, avoiding assumptions about gender, and asking about gender identity and sexual orientation. For more information about providing support to older LGBTQ+ survivors, please consult SAGE Advocacy & Services for LGBTQ+ Elders: www.sageusa.org.

- Commit to providing meaningful language access, including translation of materials into languages other than English. Create or obtain a list of certified/qualified interpreters (foreign language and American Sign Language) to contact in advance of meeting with a survivor whose primary language is not English. Never ask family members to interpret. Learn more about best practices from the [Interpretation Technical Assistance & Resource Center \(ITARC\)](#) from the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence.



Plan for Accessibility: Some older survivors have vision, hearing, or mobility challenges and may need help addressing medical or disability issues as they evaluate their options.

- When there are concerns about an older adult's cognitive capacity, a survivor-centered approach includes working with health care providers to assess the individual's situation. In some cases, what appears to be limited or diminished cognitive capacity can be a temporary condition that is the result of trauma, inappropriate medications, infection, or lack of sleep, food, or fluids.
- For older survivors with cognitive limitations such as dementia, developmental disabilities, or a traumatic brain injury, it can be difficult or impossible to determine what they want to do and to follow-through with their plans. [Learn more about dementia and mild cognitive impairment.](#)
- Be aware of the physical needs of older survivors. Ensure they have access to their medication and food and are able to rest when needed. Ask if they need glasses to see printed materials or if they need material printed in larger font. Ask if they need

to meet in a quiet space to hear and to have a conversation.

- Shelters and housing programs should be prepared to house service animals. For information about service animals, go to: <https://disabilityrightswi.org/resource-center/service-animals/>.

Use age-relevant safety planning strategies: Tailor safety planning to account for an older adult's experience:

- Ensure safety plans consider the survivor's physical health and mobility.
- When developing safety plans for leaving an abusive situation, consider that the survivor may need to pack prescriptions, medical or assistive devices like glasses, hearing aids or canes, as well as important documents. For more information, please see NCALL's resource: "[Checklist: If You Need to Leave.](#)"
- Consider the caregiving context when safety planning. Some older survivors require care from their abuser; others are providing care for their abuser.
- Focus on harm reduction and decreasing isolation with victims who want to maintain contact with their abuser.
- Older immigrants may fear

deportation and need information about specific legal remedies such as U Visas. For more information, please visit the National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project at: www.wcl.american.edu/impact/initiatives-programs/niwap/.

Be aware of and avoid ageist assumptions: Many older adults have full capacity and are actively engaged in their communities.

- Don't assume all older adults are frail, mentally incompetent, and/or asexual. Approach older survivors with the same respect, sensitivity, and open-mindedness afforded to all survivors.
- Believe older survivors. Too often older adults are not believed when they report abuse because of ageist assumptions about dementia.
- Identify and build upon older survivors' strengths and skills.



Respect survivor confidentiality and privacy:

Confidentiality is closely tied to survivor safety and helps the older survivor build trust in service providers.

- Generational and cultural beliefs may underscore an older adult's need for privacy and confidentiality when accessing services to address abuse in later life.
- Confidentiality is often statutorily required. These legal requirements include federal and state laws mandating advocates to have a fully informed, signed, and time-limited release of information before any discussion may occur regarding the survivor's situation.

Know your state's mandatory reporting law for elder abuse:

Mandatory reporting requirements vary by state.

- Most states have mandatory reporting laws for elder abuse. Reports are commonly made to adult protective services or law enforcement.
- Engage your organization's attorney to review your state's reporting laws; determine whether you are a mandatory reporter; and understand what information you are required to report.

- If you are a mandatory reporter, let the survivor know this before they make any disclosures so they can make an informed decision about the information they choose to share.
- Have a safety planning process in place for victims who need support if a mandatory report of abuse, neglect, or exploitation has been made to law enforcement or adult protective services.

Provide outreach to older adults:

Raise the visibility of services so older adults know they are welcome.

- Develop outreach materials that depict older adults from a variety of backgrounds and populations. Learn more about how to positively frame aging in [Shutterstock x American Society on Aging's Telling Age-Inclusive Stories](#). A few age-positive image collections to check out include [AARP x Getty Images' The Disrupt Aging® Collection](#) and a [free image library](#) curated by Centre for Ageing Better.
- Use large, readable fonts for print materials and web pages. When possible, maximize the contrast of web pages, including graphics, fonts, and backgrounds. For more

information, please visit: www.vera.org/publications/designing-accessible-resources-for-people-with-disabilities-and-deaf-individuals.

- Be intentional about language used to describe abuse; some older adults will not identify with the words “abused” or “victim;” in these cases, describing behavior can be more effective.
- Consider the need for transportation assistance for an older adult to access services.

Work collaboratively: Working together as a community improves outcomes for older survivors.

- Take time to learn about the range of services and supports available to abuse in later life survivors.
- With the older survivors’ permission, refer to appropriate agencies for support and assistance.
- Uplift the work of community-based and culturally-specific organizations by learning about their services, making referrals where appropriate, and exploring partnership opportunities.
- Consult with professionals in a variety of fields on complicated cases to expand available options and ensure that survivors don’t fall through the cracks.
- Only share information with other professionals with the a signed, written, informed,

and reasonably time-limited release from the older individual.

- More information for OVW-funded organizations may be found in OVW’s [Frequently Asked Questions on the VAWA Confidentiality Provision \(34 U.S.C. § 12291\(b\)\(2\)\)](#).
- For more information on survivor-centered advocacy, please see [Working with Older Survivors of Abuse: A Framework for Advocates](#).
- For more on collaboration, please see the resource sheet in this series, [5: Working Together to Effectively Address Abuse in Later Life](#).

To learn more about abuse in later life, please visit www.ncall.us.

This project was created by the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life in 2013 with support by Grant No. 2011-TA-AX-K022 and updated in 2023 with support by Grant No. 15JOVW-21-GK-02196-MUMU awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.



References

- Davies, J., Lyon, E., & Monti-Catania, D. (1998). Safety planning with battered women: Complex lives/difficult choices (Vol. 7). Sage.
- Davies, J. (2009). Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact With Current or Former Partners.
- Davis, J., Block, K., Vera Institute of Justice, National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, & Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. (2020). Increasing Access to Healing Services and Just Outcomes for Older African American Crime Survivors: A Toolkit for Enhancing Critical Knowledge and Informing Action Within the Crime Victim Assistance Field. Annotation.
- National Center on Elder Abuse, SAGE & APS Workforce Innovations (2023). LGBTQ+ Inclusive Intake + Engagement for Elder Justice Professionals.
- National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (2016). Working with Older Survivors of Abuse: A Framework for Advocates.
- Wiglesworth, A., Mosqueda, L., Mulnard, R., Liao, S., Gibbs, L., & Fitzgerald, W. (2010). Screening for abuse and neglect of people with dementia. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 58(3), 493-500.