

# An Overview of Abuse in Later Life

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Abuse in later life describes the intersection of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and **elder abuse**. (For more on elder abuse, please see another resource sheet in this series titled An Overview of Elder Abuse: A Growing Problem). The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life defines abuse in later life as the willful abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation of an older adult who is age 50+ that is perpetrated by someone in an ongoing, trust-based relationship (e.g., spouse, partner, family member, or caregiver) with the victim and sexual abuse or stalking by any offender, including strangers.

## Dynamics of Abuse in Later Life

The dynamics of abuse in later life are often similar to those experienced by younger victims of domestic and sexual violence. Abusers use threats, intimidation, isolation, and other forms of abuse to gain and retain control of their victims. It's not uncommon for abusers to have strong entitlement beliefs and justify abusive behavior as a means to get what they want. While less common, abuse may

occur for reasons other than power and control, such as situations where the perpetrator has a physical or mental condition that results in aggressive behavior. These cases must be evaluated carefully to ensure the abuser is not blaming a medical condition when the root of the issue remains power and control.

Perpetrators will often strive to exert their power and control over victims so they can coerce or manipulate some benefit for themselves, such as money, a place to stay, access to prescription medication, or sexual gratification (Bancroft, 2002; Stark, 2007). These abusers are often greedy and feel entitled to do whatever necessary to get what they want.



## Forms of Abuse in Later Life

Abuse in later life includes **physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation.**

**Harassment and stalking** may also be included. Often, the forms of abuse co-occur in cases involving abuse in later life (Acierno et al., 2010).

**Self-Neglect:** While many state statutes include self-neglect as a form of elder abuse, cases of self-neglect do not fall within the definition of abuse in later life. The phrase abuse in later life was created to acknowledge that older victims generally know and are in a relationship with their abuser. Since there are no offenders when self-neglect occurs, these cases are outside the scope of abuse in later life.

## Relationship Between Victim and Abuser

Older victims may be abused by intimate partners, adult children, grandchildren, or other family members, caregivers, or trusted persons in positions of authority. Society expects that these relationships are based on trust and care. In the majority of abuse in later life cases the perpetrator is the victim's family member or intimate

partner (Acierno et al., 2010; Lachs & Berman, 2011). Intimate partner violence may have been present for the entire duration of the relationship or it may emerge later in life as the couple ages. Abuse can occur in all types of intimate relationships regardless of gender identities or sexual orientation.

When the abuser is a family member—an adult child, grandchild, nephew, or niece—the older victim often protects their relative rather than focusing on their own personal safety. Older victims may feel shame, guilt, and embarrassment because they are being abused by a family member.



## Victim Gender

Individuals who are female, male, transgender, cisgender, and gender non-conforming may be victims of abuse in later life. The majority of older victims of intimate partner violence and sexual abuse in later life are women (Acierno, 2013).

## Victim Age

When defining elder abuse, most states, tribes, and organizations use a minimum age threshold that ranges from 50 to 70. The term abuse in later life applies to victims who are age 50 and older for the following reasons:

- By age 50 there is a significant decrease in the number of victims accessing services from domestic violence and sexual assault programs. This is partly because many services for domestic and sexual assault victims focus on meeting the needs of younger women and their children. Most domestic and sexual violence programs do not have programming tailored to meet the unique needs of victims of abuse in later life, such as financial planning for persons who do not yet qualify for Social Security or support groups exclusively for older women.
- Victims who are age 50 and older may need economic assistance to obtain safe housing and live independently if they choose to leave their abuser. However, victims who are age 50 to 62 may be ineligible for financial assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

program because they may not be parenting children. They also may be ineligible for Social Security and the aging services network because they are too young. Few options exist to assist victims in this age group who want to become independent from their abuser but do not have the financial resources to do so.

- Focusing on survivors age 50 and above includes older victims who have a shorter life expectancy because they experienced trauma, lived in poverty, or lacked access to health care.



## Where Abuse Happens

Abuse in later life can take place in **any setting** (e.g., a house, apartment, residential health care setting, a doctor's office, or in a public place, such as at work or in a courthouse). Most often, it occurs where the victim resides.

# Responding to Abuse in Later Life

Every survivor of abuse in later life deserves support and services that respect their decisions, values, life experiences, and culture. We encourage you to find additional resource sheets in this series to learn more about responding to abuse in later life, including [3: Unique Challenges in Abuse in Later Life Cases](#), [4: Supporting Survivors of Abuse in Later Life](#), and [5: Working Together to Effectively Address Abuse in Later Life](#).

## References

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To learn more about abuse in later life, please visit [www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us).

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