

Elder Abuse

Every year an estimated 2.1 million older Americans are victims of physical, psychological, or other forms of abuse and neglect. Believe it or not, this statistic is believed to be on the low end of the scale. For every case of elder abuse and neglect that is reported to authorities, it is believed that there may be as many as five cases that have not been reported. In looking at statistics of the reported cases, most victims were found to be older women, the majority of which were Caucasian. In 20 of the 50 states, more than two in five victims were age 80 or older.

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse is the infliction of physical, emotional, or psychological harm on an older adult. Elder abuse can also take the form of financial exploitation or intentional or unintentional neglect of an older adult by the caregiver.

- Physical abuse can range from slapping or shoving to severe beatings. When the caregiver or other person uses enough force to cause unnecessary pain or injury, the behavior can be considered abusive.
- Emotional or Psychological abuse can range from name calling or give the “silent treatment” to intimidating and threatening the individual. When a person behaves in a way that causes fear, mental anguish, and emotional pain or distress, the behavior can be regarded as abusive.
- Sexual abuse can range from sexual exhibition to rape. It can include inappropriate touching, photographing, or any unwanted sexualized behavior.
- Neglect can range from withholding appropriate attention from the individual to intentionally failing to meet the physical, social,

or emotional needs of the older person. It can include failure to provide water, clothing, medications, and assistance with the activities of daily living or help with personal hygiene. Neglect can also include failure to pay the bills or to manage the elder person's money if they have taken on that responsibility.

- Financial exploitation is anything from the misuse of an elder's funds to embezzlement. It includes fraud, taking money under false pretenses, forgery, forced property transfers, purchasing expensive items without the person's permission or knowledge, or denying the elder access to their own funds.

Where does Elder Abuse occur?

Although we do know that elder abuse can occur in health care settings and nursing homes, the majority of abuse cases were reported to have occurred in a domestic setting. Often the abuse is subtle, and the distinction between normal interpersonal stress and abuse is not always easy to differentiate. One of the most common causes of elder abuse is related to changes in living situations and relationships brought about by the older person's growing frailty and dependence on other for companionship and for meeting basic needs. Another factor in elder abuse is being put into a situation where family discord was already present. In some instances, elder abuse is a continuation of abuse that has been occurring in the family over many years.

Family Stress is another factor than can trigger elder abuse. When a frail or disabled person moves into a family member's home, the lifestyle adjustments and accommodations can be overwhelming. In some instances, the financial burdens of paying for health care for an aging parent or living in overcrowded housing can lead to stress that can trigger elder abuse

Signs of Abuse

Signs of abuse may come from situations that cannot be explained medically. Symptoms such as these should prompt further investigation to determine and resolve the cause.

Signs of physical abuse may include:

- Bruises or grip marks around the arms or neck
- Repeated unexplained injuries
- Minimizing attitudes or statements about the injuries
- Refusal to go to same emergency department for repeated injuries

Signs of emotional abuse may include:

- Uncommunicative and unresponsive
- Unreasonably fearful or suspicious
- Lack of interest in social contacts
- Evasiveness

Signs of Neglect may include:

- Sunken eyes or loss of weight
- Extreme Thirst
- Bed Sores

Signs of Financial Exploitation may include:

- Signatures on checks do not match elder's signature
- Large withdrawals from bank accounts, switching accounts, unusual ATM activity
- Life circumstances do not match the size of the estate

Another, more subtle sign of elder abuse is social isolation. Isolation can be extremely dangerous because it is harder for people to see what is happening and intervene in a situation to protect the older person and offer help to the abuser.

There are certain societal attitudes that make it easier for abuse to continue without detection or intervention. Some of these factors include the devaluation and lack of respect for older adults and certain society's belief that what goes on in the home is a private matter. When older people are regarded as being disposable, society fails to recognize the importance of assuring dignified, supportive, and non-abusive life circumstances for every older person. If elder abuse or neglect is suspected, proper authorities should be contacted to remedy the situation and provide help to the victim and the abuser. These authorities may include, but are not limited to, police, adult protective services, or the victim's primary care physician.

Helpful Information:

Michigan Adult Protective Services hotline: (800) 996-6228

National Adult Protective Services Association: (720) 565-0906

National Center on Elder Abuse: www.elderabusecenter.org

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Reference:

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