

Elder Abuse - What Is It and What Can You Do

For health care and community support professionals

Abuse, Mistreatment, Exploitation and Neglect of Older Adults

Any action that harms or threatens to harm the health and well being of an older adult. This includes physical, psychological, financial and sexual mistreatment as well as neglect.

Tactics of abuse and control are elements of child abuse, partner abuse and abuse of older persons. Domestic violence is actual or threatened abuse by someone with whom they have an intimate, familial, dependent or romantic relationship which aims to instill fear and/or to coercively control and isolate the person.

What to Do

Acknowledge Suspicion of abuse may develop over time. Accumulate/document evidence
Barriers Fear of retaliation, withdrawal of caregiver support, confidentiality
Urgency Assess immediate risk of physical harm or if basic necessities of life are at risk
Screen Assess person's ability to help themselves (competency)
Empower Inform person of their rights, resources and establish a safety plan
Refer Seek support/consultation from other professionals. No agency acts alone.

Check for

Physical Abuse -any act of violence causing injury or physical discomfort (e.g slapping, pinching, punching, or other rough handling, forcible restraint or intentional over/under medication, including sexual assault)

Indicators – unexplained injuries in areas normally covered (bruises in various stages of healing, burns or bites) alopecia and bleeding scalp from hair pulling, untreated medical problems, history of “accidents”, signs of over/under medication, sexual assault, wasting, dehydration

Psychological Abuse – any action or comment causing emotional anguish, fear or diminished self esteem or dignity (e.g threats to harm, unwanted institutionalization, harassment, abandonment, imposed isolation removal of decision making choices)

Indicators – fear, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, cowering, reluctance to talk openly, fearful interaction with caregiver, caregiver speaking on behalf of person, not allowing privacy

Financial Abuse – involves the dishonest use of the senior's money or assets. Can include theft, forgery, withholding of money, sale of property/possessions, misuse of Power of Attorney

Indicators – standard of living not in keeping with income or assets, theft of property noted, unusual or inappropriate activity in bank accounts, forged signatures on cheques, forcing a person to sign over a will or property, over charging for service/products, overdue bills

Neglect – Inability to provide basic or personal care needs (food, water, required medication, shelter, hygiene, clothing, physical aids –hearing aids, eye glasses, dentures, exercise/social interaction, lack of attention, abandonment, undue confinement, inadequate supervision or safety precautions, withholding medical services/treatment)

- Intentional failure of caregiver/trusted individual
- Unintentional failure of caregiver to fulfill duties because of lack of knowledge, skill, illness, lack of awareness of community supports/resources
- Self – person's inability to provide for own needs because of physical infirmity/inability to make sound choices due to addiction, mental illness and /or cognitive impairment

Indicators – unkempt appearance, inappropriate or dirty clothing, signs of infrequent bathing, living conditions unhealthy, dangerous and/or in disrepair, lack of food and/or medical /functional aids and medications lack of social contact, no regular medical appointments

Interview Strategy

- 1. Develop trust and be sensitive to person's culture, religion, comfort level & timing in obtaining disclosure** –Interview alone, listen, be patient, non threatening and non-judgmental, validate feelings and offer emotional support, avoid premature assumptions and suggestions.
- 2. Note suspicious histories** – Explanation vague, bizarre or incongruent with type or degree of injury, denial of obvious injury, long delay before treatment, history of doctor-hopping, fear, blaming self
- 3. Be alert to person's wishes, ability to understand.** Assume the senior is capable. Red flags that might prompt further investigation: unusual behaviour, disorientation to time/person/place; lack of reasonable judgement/memory; anxiety, depression, ambivalence or repetitive speech or aggression.
- 4. Identify what information is missing** – Frequency, duration, urgency, need for physical examination.
- 5. Be aware of interdependent relationships /power differences**
-Use of Substitute Decision Maker, be cautious of involvement of abuser, note conflicting histories, where appropriate interview family members. Some cultures may require a family member to be present during interview or may need to negotiate to interview senior alone. Also consider using an interpreter.

Possible Interview Questions

- Is there something that you would like to share with me?
- Are you afraid of anyone at home?
- Do you feel safe?
- Has anyone at home ever hurt you?
- Has anyone ever forced you to do things you didn't want to do?
- Has anyone ever failed to help you take care of yourself when you needed help?
- Have you ever signed any documents that you didn't understand?
- Who makes decisions about your life, like how or where you should live?
- Would you like some help with....?
- It must be hard for you to look after?
- Are you getting all the help you need?
- Is everything going alright at home?

Possible Interventions

Consider impact on the person, their wishes, their willingness to change and their ability to recognize abuse. Note their capability and understanding of the consequences of their decisions. Abuse is a complex issue and requires a multidisciplinary response – you are part of a community team of service providers -be aware of the appropriate resources and how to link with the broader community. Consider community resources as they relate to the possible needs of the individual senior (i.e. need for safety and shelter; need for medical aid; need for control/access to finances; need for emotional/personal support; need for the abuse to stop). Note that the abuser may also require assistance.

Education

Provide information and support according to the interests expressed by the person. Be aware of services outside the health care system which are specific to the needs of the older/vulnerable persons who are being victimized or at risk. Provide the person with a list of emergency contacts/phone numbers.

Safety Plan

The plan may include a change to an element of their environment or their relationship which could result in increasing their safety, the elimination of the role of the abuser and/or the context of the abuse. Consider:

- Home visits, telephone contact with other family/friends who are supportive, regular appointments. Talk to neighbours about the situation.
- Call Police 911, a crisis line 836-5710. Join a support group.
- Secure assets eg. Open your own bank account, change power of attorney. Give copies of important documents and keys to trusted friends or family members
- Plan your emergency escape: exits, bag of extra clothing & medicine, personal aids packed, emergency money, list of important phone numbers.

Coordination and Consultation with other Services and Support Groups

- **To report abuse/neglect** Local Police Services-OPP 1-888-310-1122 Guelph Police 824-1212 Orangeville Police 941-2522
Community Mental Health Clinic 821-2060
Community Care Access Centre of Wellington-Dufferin 823-2550, 941-4133 or 1-800-265-8338
- **Consultation** Wellington/Dufferin Elder Abuse Community Consultation Team 820-4342
- **Telephone Support** SOS –Seniors Offering Support – Working with the Community to Address Elder Abuse 767-4445, 11am-3pm, Mon-Fri
- **ER or counseling** Guelph General Hospital Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Unit 837-6640
Women in Crisis Transition Program 836-6865
Family Transition Place 941-4357
- **Personal Care** Community Care Access Centre of Wellington-Dufferin 823-2550, 941-4133 or 1-800-265-8338
- **Retirement Home** Wellington County Social Services – Special Services 837-2670 X352 *after hours homes can be accessed through Victim Services Contact police 824-1212 and the Victim Services team leader will return your call
- **Emergency Housing**