

It's Not Right! Neighbours, Friends and Families for Older Adults

How You Can Help Identify Abuse and Help Older Adults at Risk

We have a shared responsibility to promote respect for all members of our society. Everyone has a role to play. You may be the neighbour, friend or family member who can make a positive difference in the life of an older adult experiencing abuse. This brochure can help you to recognize the warning signs and learn how to be supportive and safe. If you are an older adult experiencing abuse, this brochure can help you break the isolation and find support.

Ageism is part of abuse

Ageism is discrimination against older adults. It happens when older adults are treated as if they were less important or less valued because they are older. These attitudes are a factor in abusive situations because they allow people to believe that they have the right to ignore, harm or control an older adult. Ageism is common in our society.

What is abuse of older adults?

The terms “elder abuse” or “senior abuse” are often used to describe the experience of older adults who are abused, usually by someone they know and often by someone they care about.

It is abuse whenever someone limits or controls the rights and freedoms of an older adult. The older adult is unable to freely make choices because they are afraid of being humiliated, hurt, left alone or, of the relationship ending.

When a spouse is abusive, it is called domestic violence. When abuse is used to maintain power and control over a spouse, it is called coercive control. Women are most often the victims of coercive control.

Abuse can be physical, verbal, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or neglect.

WARNING SIGNS:

- A disclosure (believe it if someone tells you they are being abused)
- Injuries such as bruises, sprains, broken bones, scratches, especially when the explanation does not fit the injury
- Changes in behaviour of the older adult such as depression, withdrawal, fear
- Changes in regular social activity such as missing church or other social events
- Changes in living arrangements such as previously uninvolved relatives or new friends moving in
- Changes in financial situations such as cancellation of service (e.g. television, Internet, phone) because the bills are not paid, things “disappearing” from the house
- Signs of neglect such as no food in the house, being left alone for long periods of time, not having glasses or hearing aids that are needed, not having proper clothing

WARNING SIGNS: Abusive Behaviour

- Controlling behaviour such as isolating an older adult from friends and family
- Blaming the older adult for the abuse: It's your fault that I pushed you

- A strong sense of entitlement: I can do whatever I want/you owe me
- Treating the older adult like a child: Do what I tell you
- Frequent arguments, name calling or threats
- Neglect, leaving a dependent person alone for long periods of time

Is my behaviour abusive?

Abusive behaviour is not unusual, it can creep into any relationship.

Warning signs that your actions may be abusive:

- If the person is afraid of you
- If the person is capable and yet you are making all of the decisions
- If you take their money or possessions and feel entitled to it
- If your need to 'solve' a situation allows you to ignore the other person's feelings
- Notice your impact on others. Don't be afraid to get help.
- Talk to someone you trust. You can change the situation

Who is abusing older adults?

Abuse of older adults often occurs within the family, by adult children or grandchildren. Other relatives, friends, neighbours, paid or unpaid caregivers, landlords, financial advisors or any individual in a position of power, trust or authority can also be abusive.

What are the risk factors?

- Isolation—physical, social or cultural
- History of domestic violence
- Shared living situations
- Dependency on an older adult (for shelter or financial help)
- Addiction issues
- Depression and other mental health issues
- Cognitive impairment

What neighbours, friends and family members can do to help

Neighbours, friends and family members can learn to do three things:

1. SEE it! "It's not right!" Recognize the warning signs of abuse.
 2. NAME it! "I'm worried about you." Talk to the older adult. Name your concern.
 3. CHECK it! "What can I do to help?" Ask questions, check with professionals, check for danger—help with safety planning.
- Be patient. Listen carefully. Don't judge or jump to conclusions.
 - Encourage the person to be their own advocate. People of any age are much more likely to take action if they make their own plan.

- Ask what you can do, respect their decisions even when you don't agree.
- Don't confront or accuse the abusive person, who may take it out on the older adult after you leave.
- Learn about safety planning.
- Find out what local services are available in your area.

When Support Is Not Wanted

Many people don't want to talk about abuse. It is hard to ask for help. If the person you are worried about says they are not being abused and you are still concerned:

- Keep the lines of communication open.
- Give them the warning signs brochure and talk about what you have noticed.
- Show compassion; don't allow yourself to become frustrated or angry. It can be hard to understand the decisions of others, but they should be respected.
- If you have immediate concerns about safety, call the police.

Keep yourself safe from abuse

We are all aging. You are less vulnerable to abuse if you stay active and involved in your community. Pay attention to your finances. Remember that people in your community need you as much as you need them.

If you are being hurt or neglected and aren't sure how to protect yourself, you may have neighbours, friends or family members who know a little about what is happening, but not know how to help. Reach out for their support so that you are not alone.

Staying silent in an abusive relationship

There are reasons why you may not feel able to speak out or seek help. These are some of the most common:

- You may feel too afraid to speak up or take action
- You are embarrassed
- You may blame yourself
- Your family believes that abusive behaviour is "normal" and "private"
- The person abusing you is well liked and admired in the community
- Your friends have problems of their own and you don't want to burden them
- You live with the abuse because you don't know where else you could go
- You feel protective of the person who is mistreating you, especially if the person is your child

You don't have to be alone

- There is nothing you have done that causes the abuse. The person who is mistreating you is always responsible for their actions.
- People who are abusive need help. Abuse rarely goes away by itself and it usually becomes worse over time.

- If your child or grandchild is abusive, they need help. They will never find peace in life without first taking responsibility for their actions.

Safety Planning

If you are living with the person who is abusing you, or if you are planning to leave an abusive situation, you need a safety plan. Contact a professional to help you. If you are a woman being abused by your spouse, the local women's shelter can help. Many police services have officers who are specially trained about abuse issues and safety planning. For more information about safety planning see the It's Not Right! website, www.itsnotright.ca.

How to find help

Whether you are a person experiencing abuse or the neighbour, friend or family member of an older adult being abused, you are being impacted. You don't have to be alone with your fear and concerns. Talk with someone you trust. You can call helplines and ask for advice anonymously. There are also services for older adults in most communities. Ask your local seniors organization or health authority.

If you decide to call a helpline or an organization and you can't get through or the person you talk to isn't helpful—don't give up, try again. It is important that you find help and that you feel supported. Only you can decide what really helps and what kind of support feels right. You shouldn't feel pressured by anyone to do something you aren't ready or willing to do.

See also: "It's Not Right!" Neighbours, Friends and Families for Older Adults

Go to: www.itsnotright.ca

- How You Can Identify Abuse and Help Older Adults at Risk
- What You Can Do to Keep Yourself Safe from Abuse
- What You Can Do When Abuse or Neglect Is Happening to an Older Adult in Your Life

If you are a woman experiencing domestic violence, go to Neighbours, Friends & Families: www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca

For More Information

In Canada, you can visit the Government of Canada's website to find the reporting agency in your province or territory. Go to: www.seniors.gc.ca and search for "Elder Abuse" or call 1-800-622-6232.

Western Education | Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

This project is made possible through funding by Employment & Social Development Canada under New Horizons