

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

What You Can Do to Keep Yourself Safe From Abuse

Everyone has the right to be safe and free from abuse. No one should experience abuse. “It’s Not Right!”

If you are being hurt or neglected and you aren’t sure how to protect yourself, this brochure can help you to set limits and stay safe.

You may have neighbours, friends or family members who know a little about what is happening to you, but they may not know how to help. You can reach out for their support so that you are not alone. There are people in every community who want to help.

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What is Abuse?

Abuse can be a hard word to accept. People from all walks of life have found themselves in abusive relationships- it can happen to anyone. Most situations of abuse occur in families and also in other relationships with people we know and trust. Abuse happens in different ways. Abuse can be financial, psychological, sexual and spiritual, as well as neglect or physical violence. All forms of abuse can harm.

It is called abuse anytime people use their ability or influence to limit or control your rights and freedoms. The relationship is not equal because you are afraid that if you speak up or take action, you will be threatened, hurt, or the relationship will end. Abuse is never your fault.

If You Are Being Threatened or Hurt

My forty-year-old son has been living with me for ten years. I have been afraid of him for most of this time and never told anyone. I was so thankful when I finally got information on how I can protect myself.

- Tell someone you trust about the abuse. Choose individuals who will respect your decisions and who can listen without telling you what to do. You might want to ask them to just listen so that they don't feel pressure to solve the problem for you.
- You may need to plan some next steps. Those steps should be realistic. You are the expert in your own life and the best person to decide what you can do to set limits and to increase your safety.
- If you are afraid the situation will get worse, make a safety plan that includes where you can go in an emergency and what you will take with you. Think about where you will stay and how you will get there.
- Consult a lawyer or legal service about your rights and options (your local seniors' organization can help you find a lawyer or service).
- Keep track of your financial statements and other legal documents. Talk to your bank about how to protect your assets.
- Visit your local library, health or community centre to find out information about other services that are available to support you. If you live with the abusive person and want to look for services on your home computer, be sure to cover your tracks by erasing the history.
- If you are in danger, call 911 or the local police

Staying Silent in an Abusive Relationship

There are reasons why you may feel trapped in an abusive relationship. You are not alone. Older adults who experience abuse often feel conflicted about seeking help or telling others about what is happening.

These are some of the most common reasons:

- You may feel too afraid to speak up or take action.
- You are embarrassed.

- If you have been living with abuse for many years, you may not believe that you deserve help or you may believe the abuse is your fault.
- Your family believes that abusive behaviour is “normal” and that what goes on in a family should remain private.
- The person abusing you is well liked and admired in the community. You aren’t sure anyone would believe you even if you reached out for help.
- 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 want to do anything to get them in trouble.
 - You are afraid they will end your relationship.
 - You feel it is your fault that they act the way they do.
 - They need you and you have to help them.
- If the person abusing you is your spouse or partner, you may
 - believe that keeping the family together is important, no matter what;
 - feel guilty about staying in the relationship for so long;
 - feel obligated to stay in the relationship.

What You Need to Know

- You have the right to be safe and free from abuse.
- 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 children are abusive, they need help. They will never find peace in life without first taking responsibility for their actions.

How to Find Help

There are different kinds of services in most communities.

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.

Rural and Remote Communities

If you live in a place where there are no services for older adults, reach out to people in your community whom you trust and who will support you. There are people in every community who care and want to help.

Local Seniors' Organizations

Visit your local library, community or health centre to find information about seniors' organizations in your community. Libraries and community centres often have computers that are for public use. If you don't know how to use the computer, ask one of the staff to help you search for the information or show you how to search.

Provincial/Territorial Telephone Numbers

- Information Lines

All provinces/territories have information lines you can call to ask questions about the services that are available in your community. You can usually find the telephone number in the front of your phone book or on the government Web site listed on the back cover of this brochure.

- Seniors Abuse Lines/Family Violence Helplines

Some provinces/territories have Seniors Abuse Lines or Family Violence Helplines that you can call to talk about abuse. You don't have to give your name if you want to be anonymous. The person answering the phone has usually been trained about abuse and can listen or offer you suggestions about where you can find services in your community.

- Legal Services Telephone Lines

Some provinces/territories have a Legal Services Line you can call to talk about your rights and ask questions about the law, the justice system, or how to find a lawyer. If you have access to the Internet, there are many good legal resources online.

Domestic Violence Shelters/Elder Abuse Safe Accommodation Programs

If your spouse is abusive, you may want to talk to domestic violence experts at your local shelter. Shelters are located in many communities to provide temporary emergency housing if you need to leave your home and if you need protection from your spouse. Shelters are often used by younger women and their children; however older women will find support at a shelter as well. Shelter workers should be able to tell you if there are specific domestic violence services available for older adults and/or for men who are being abused.

Victim Services

Victim Services organizations support anyone who is a victim of a crime or accident. Often they work closely with police services and can provide information about the justice system, practical help, emotional support and referrals to other services and programs in your community.

Health Care Providers

You will be able to find information about abuse at most local health authorities or community care access centres. Health care professionals will be able to assist you if they know that you are experiencing abuse. Tell them what is happening to you and ask for their support.

Mental Health Programs

Older adults experiencing abuse may also experience mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety. Contact the Canadian Mental Health Association in your area for information about programs and services. If you seek help for your mental health, tell your counselor that you are also experiencing abuse. Not all professionals are trained to recognize abuse

and they will be better able to help you if they know that abuse is happening.

In an Emergency

If you are in danger, call 911 or your local police.

Safety Planning

If you are living with the person who is abusing you, you may need to make a plan to increase your safety. You can make a safety plan yourself or contact an abuse expert to help you. Safety plans can involve two different sets of steps:

- while you are living with the person who is mistreating you
- if or when you decide to leave

Safety Planning With an Abuse Expert

Police-based Family Violence consultants, Victim Services or Domestic/Family Violence or Elder Abuse professionals in your community are trained to do safety planning. The provincial/territorial Seniors Abuse/Family Violence lines can also direct you to a professional in your area or provide information about how to do safety planning. Abuse experts will give you information about services that are available and will help you develop a plan of action.

Neighbours, Friends and Families is an Ontario domestic violence public education campaign with lots of good resources online. The campaign materials focus on “woman abuse” because women experience the most serious injuries and are almost always the victims of domestic homicide. If your spouse is abusive and you are looking for information about safety planning, go to: www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca

“I have found retirement to be a big adjustment. My days are not structured anymore, and I am often alone. I didn’t realize how isolated I was becoming until my daughter came to live with me.”

What You Can Do to Prevent Abuse

Abuse happens to older adults from all walks of life. By staying involved with people and activities, you are less likely to find yourself alone in an abusive relationship. Staying active and involved also helps you stay healthy. People in your community need you as much as you need them.

Your Physical and Emotional Well Being

There are some things you can do to look after your physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

- Know your rights- everyone has the right to be safe and free from harm at home and in the community
- Stay in regular contact with people who support you and respect your decisions
- If you are often alone, make the effort to connect with someone you care about and talk about how you can become more involved in your community. There are senior's organizations in many communities that offer activities and events where you can meet people.
- Reach out to other seniors who may be alone. Thinking of others is a good way to make a contribution to the whole community.
- Involve yourself in meaningful activities that give you enjoyment, strength and comfort. Go on outings with friends, volunteer, attend church, join a gym, or visit your neighbours.
- Stay physically active. Eat regularly and well.
- If you feel depressed and have no one to talk with, seek support from a friend, your minister, priest, faith leader, or from social service agencies in your community. You don't have to be alone with problems. There is no shame in asking for help.

Your Financial Security

Your peace of mind about financial security is important. Stay involved in and aware of what is happening with your money and belongings.

- Keep track of your possessions; open and send your own mail; review your bank statements every month and contact the bank if you see anything unexpected.
- Your money and property belong to you, not to your family. If family members are pressuring you in any way about your finances, remind them that you have the right to make your own decisions even when they don't agree. Ask them to respect your choices.
- It is a crime if a family member forges your signature on a cheque or uses your bank or credit card without your knowledge. It is serious. You should contact the police—if it happens once, it can happen again.
- If a family member or friend comes to live with you, they should contribute financially to the rent and food.
- If you want to lend money or transfer ownership of your house or property to your children, have a lawyer work out an agreement plan beforehand about repayment and/or conditions under which they might sell.
- Think about your future and consult an attorney about future planning, caregiving arrangements, and reviewing your will. Share your plan and wishes with someone you trust.
- Keep your financial information and other important documents in a safe place. Tell someone you trust where to find the information.
- Learn more about power of attorney in your province/territory. Plan ahead so that if anything happens and you become unable to make decisions, you will have already selected a person you trust to step in. Family members should know that they can ask this person for accounting at any time and that the power of attorney can be revoked.

See also:

“It’s Not Right!”

Neighbours, Friends and Families for Older Adults

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

- What You Can Do When Abuse or Neglect Is Happening to an Older Adult in Your Life