

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

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

Everyone has the right to be safe and free from abuse or neglect. No one should experience abuse. "It's Not Right!" As neighbours, friends and family members, you can do several things to help. You don't have to "fix" the problem. Caring about the people around you and paying attention when there are signs of trouble are important steps. Small actions can make a big difference.

### What We All Need to Know About Abuse

- "Ageism" is discrimination against older adults because of their age.
- Ageism is a factor in abuse of older adults.
- Everyone has the right to live without fear
- Everyone has the right to have control over their life
- It is abuse if someone uses their influence or ability to limit or control the rights and freedoms of an older adult.
- The abuse is never the older adult's fault.
- Most older adults who experience abuse are healthy
- Capable of making their own decisions.
- Many types of abuse are against the law; all abuse is unacceptable
- Older people affected by abuse are often isolated and it can be hard to see the signs.
- Impolite behaviour or rudeness is not abuse—it is important to understand that abuse means there is an abuse of power involved.
- You cannot control the abusive person's behaviour.
- It is not your responsibility to "make" the abuse stop, but you can help older adults find support.
- Everyone in an abusive relationship needs help.

### What You Can Do When You Suspect Abuse of an Older Adult

Neighbours, friends and family members are often aware of the signs of abuse in an older adult's life, but they may not know what to do about it. Here are three things that everyone can do to make a difference:

1. **SEE it!** "It's not right!" Recognize the warning signs of abuse.

2. **NAME it!** “That looks/sounds like abuse.” Talk to the older adult or someone you trust about your concerns—overcome your hesitation to help.

3. **CHECK it!** “Is it abuse? What can I do to help?” Ask questions, check with abuse experts about what to do next, check for danger—suggest safety planning.

### What Do You Need to Learn? What Should I Say?

1. **SEE it!** “It’s not right!”

- Learn about abuse so that you can recognize the different warning signs. Abuse can be physical, but it can also be psychological, sexual, spiritual, financial, or neglect. The warning signs are not always obvious. All forms of abuse cause harm.
- It is easy to ignore warning signs and to tell yourself that you must be mistaken or that it’s “not that bad” because it’s “only” one warning sign. Trust your instincts when something makes you feel uncomfortable.
- A warning sign is like seeing the tip of an iceberg; there is likely much more going on below the surface.
- Some people think abuse is “normal” or understandable.
- Abuse is never acceptable.
- When you see a warning sign, say to yourself, “It’s not right!” This will help you move to the next step

2. **NAME it!** “That looks/sounds like abuse.”

- Overcome your hesitation to help.
- If it is safe, talk to the person who you think is being abused—wait for a time when you are alone and not likely to be interrupted. Approach the person with care and concern: “I heard your daughter yelling at you again and I am worried about you.”
- Describe just the facts of what you witness. For example:
  - Do say: “I saw him take money from your wallet.”
  - Don’t use judgmental language. “I saw him stealing money from your wallet.” Do say: “I heard your daughter say she didn’t want to take you to the doctor.”
  - Don’t use judgmental language or jump to conclusions. “Your daughter is being abusive for not taking you to the doctor.”

- Find support for yourself. Talk to someone you trust about what to do next or consult a professional.

### 3. **CHECK it!** “Is it abuse? What can I do to help?”

- Check for immediate danger. If you think the situation is dangerous, call 911 or your local police.
- If you have questions and want to speak to police, ask to speak to an officer who has been trained in domestic or family violence.
- If you see a warning sign, ask questions; don’t assume you know what is happening. For example:  
“I saw him take money from your wallet... Did you say it was ok?”  
“I heard your daughter say she didn’t want to take you to the doctor... Is there anything I can do? Do you still want to go?”
- Good questions you can ask older adults:
  - Do you feel safe?
  - Is anyone in your life hurting you or making you feel uncomfortable?
  - What do you want to do? How can I help?
- Be supportive and listen. Remember that it may be difficult for them to talk at first. Let them know that you are available to listen whenever they want. Often what older adults need most is someone who will listen.
- Acknowledge that they are in a very difficult situation. Let your friend or family member know that whatever is happening is not their fault. Reassure them that they are not alone and that there is help and support available.
- Encourage them to talk to someone who can provide help and guidance. Find a local organization that provides counseling or support groups (i.e. seniors’ organization, family violence service, local health centres). Offer to go with them to talk to family and friends. If they have to go to the police, court or a lawyer, offer to go along for moral support.
- Remember that you cannot “rescue” them. Although it is difficult to see someone you care about being mistreated, that person has the right to decide about the next steps. It’s important for you to support and help the older adult find a way to safety and peace.

- If you are concerned that an older adult is not able to make informed decisions, do not try to make decisions for the person. Consult with a local health centre that serves seniors and ask how you can best be supportive.

### **Other Suggestions**

- Be patient. Listen carefully. Allow the older adults to tell their story in their own time. It may take many conversations before the whole story is told.
- Encourage them to be their own advocate and to find their own solution about what to do next.  
This can include a decision to get help from an abuse expert. People of any age are much more likely to take action if they make their own plan.
- Ask them what you can do, respect their decisions even when you don't agree.
- If a family member is a caregiver for the older adult, make sure they have the resources and support they need. Stay involved, even if you live at a distance. You can be supportive in different ways. Provide relief, offer to problem solve or listen to hear about frustrations and challenges.
- Document any abuse that you see—write down the date and what happened.
- 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. They may be afraid of and/or feel protective toward the person who is acting abusively. It is hard to ask for help. If the person you are worried about denies the abuse and you are still concerned:
  - Assure them they can talk to you anytime.
  - Keep the lines of communication open.

- Give them the warning signs brochure How You Can Identify Abuse and Help Older Adults at Risk 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.

### Overcome your Hesitation to Help

Once you see abuse, you may feel uncertain about becoming involved. You are not alone, it is understandable to hesitate, but you will need to find a way to overcome your hesitation. These are some concerns you may have about whether you should help:

1. **Concern:** You feel it is none of your business  
**Point to Consider:** Abuse causes great harm and suffering and will not go away without help. It's everyone's business
2. **Concern:** You don't know what to say  
**Point to Consider:** You can say that you care and are concerned. Listening is important too.
3. **Concern:** You might make things worse  
**Point to Consider:** Doing nothing leaves the person alone in a situation that may get worse if there is no help
4. **Concern:** You are afraid the abuse will be turned toward you or your family  
**Point to Consider:** Speak to the person being abused alone. Let the police know if you receive threats
5. **Concern:** You are afraid the person being abused will be angry with you  
**Point to Consider:** Maybe, but the person will know you care enough to try
6. **Concern:** You are afraid of becoming involved  
**Point to Consider:** You can talk to an abuse expert or a service provider anonymously
7. **Concern:** You wish to maintain a relationship with both people involved. (i.e. both are important members of your family, both are friends, etc.)

**Point to Consider:** One friend is being abused and is living in fear.  
Both friends need help

8. **Concern:** You believe that if people want your help, they will ask for it

**Point to consider:** People affected by abuse may be afraid and ashamed to ask for help or not know where to get help

9. **Concern:** You think it is a private matter

**Point to consider:** It isn't when someone is being hurt

**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 to Keep Yourself Safe From Abuse