

About elder abuse

Elder abuse is common and often hidden. Many victims are ashamed or unable to report abuse, and they may fear retribution if they do report it. Their abusers – usually family members taking care of elderly relatives – often experience stress and don't know how to get help.

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse, the mistreatment or neglect of an elderly person, usually is inflicted by a relative or other caregiver. It may include physical violence, threats of assault, verbal abuse, financial exploitation, emotional abuse, neglect or violation of an elderly person's rights.

Who are the victims?

Nationwide, victims are most likely to be women, dependent on the abusing caregiver for basic needs, and suffering from mental or physical illness. However, abuse can occur among financially independent elderly people in good physical health.

Why does it occur?

Many factors can lead up to abuse. It's hard for an older adult to become dependent and accept care. It's also difficult to accept deteriorating emotional or physical health. If the elderly person begins to lose physical and mental abilities, more and more is required of a caregiver. A role reversal can occur, with the older adult becoming more childlike and the caregiver becoming more like a parent, especially in families. Such a change requires time for emotional and psychological adjustment – for both. But sometimes, in the case of a sudden illness, for instance, there is no time to adjust.

In addition, unresolved issues from the past may exist between the elderly person and the family caregiver. They may not have an emotionally healthy relationship, so with more frequent contact, old conflicts flare up.

Furthermore, the elderly person may require physical, financial and emotional help, which also can cause conflict. Other factors, such as alcohol or drug abuse by either the elderly person or the caregiver, compound problems that already exist. Those issues – with the added stress of physical and emotional care giving – can result in abuse.

Types of abuse

Abuse of elders may take many forms. Psychological abuse includes isolation, threats or degrading language. Physical abuse includes kicking, punching, slapping or beating. Neglect includes failure to provide medicine,

food or such personal care as help to use the bathroom. Financial exploitation includes stealing money or forcing an elderly person to sign a will.

The rights of the elderly also may be violated if they're unfairly confined or forced out of the home or if their behavior is strictly controlled.

Other abuse includes unsanitary living conditions: unventilated, poorly heated rooms; overmedicating; or withholding such aids as eyeglasses or dentures.

How caregivers can cope

If an elderly person has an impaired memory, as with Alzheimer's disease or a stroke, a caregiver can become physically and emotionally exhausted. The needs of the older person may isolate a caregiver from much needed support from friends and family. Feelings of anger, fatigue, helplessness, grief and loneliness are common. Caregivers should find a constructive outlet for these feelings.

If you're a caregiver, be realistic about what you can do. And be realistic about your loved one's changing ability.

- **Forgive your-self.** If you lose patience and get angry, don't waste energy by being hard on yourself. Give a soft word and gentle touch to the elderly person.
- **Let family and friends know you need help,** whether it's counseling, money or day-to-day help. Share responsibilities.
- **Lessen your contact with the elderly person.** Find someone to help care for the person.
- **Get practical financial and legal advice** from an attorney, an accountant or the Social Security office. Ask a support group how to make your home safer, so you can decrease your supervision time. These steps can reduce your stress.
- **Be good to yourself,** Indulge in your favorite activities – read a good book, go to a movie, eat, and go out for dinner.
- **Allow time for your feelings.** Talk to a friend, family member, family doctor or clergy.

If you need more help ...

If you need more advice, call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 or toll-free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. © www.genhs.org

