



Abuse of Older Adults: Signs and Effects

What are the Signs?

Older adults who are experiencing abuse or neglect may —

- tell you they are being harmed,
- show signs of depression or anxiety,
- seem fearful around certain people,
- become socially withdrawn (having less contact with people who they have been close to in the past),
- become passive and very compliant,
- have unexplained physical injuries,
- lack food, clothing and other necessities,
- show changes in their hygiene or nutrition (e.g. signs of malnutrition),
- suddenly become unable to meet financial obligations, or
- have unusual withdrawals from their bank or other financial institutions.

Sometimes these signs are mistaken as a part of growing older or may look like other health conditions. For example, mental confusion, depression or anxiety resulting from abuse or neglect may look like dementia. People may not realize that sometimes older adults are experiencing frequent falls or have long-term pain because they are being abused or neglected.

What are the Effects of Older Adult Abuse?

Health Effects

Abuse and neglect are a major source of stress and can have long-term effects on the health and well-being of older adults. The stress of abuse may trigger chest pain or angina, and may be a factor in other serious



heart problems. High blood pressure, breathing problems, stomach problems (ulcers), and panic attacks are common stress-related symptoms among older people who experience abuse.

Abuse has a significant impact on people at any age, but older adults can be especially vulnerable. In general, older adults have less physical strength and less physical resilience than younger persons. Some older adults may be very frail, or already have disabilities or impairments that leave them particularly vulnerable. Older bones break more easily and take longer to heal. An injury or accumulation of injuries over time can lead to serious harm or death. For example, physical abuse may result in a hip fracture.

Many older adults experiencing abuse or neglect are isolated. Individuals who abuse or neglect older adults often threaten, harass, or intimidate them. For example, some abusers threaten to not let older adults see their grandchildren. Others may prevent older adults from having visitors, or may threaten to leave them alone.

As a result of abuse or neglect, older adults often experience worry, depression, or anxiety. These signs may be mistaken for memory loss or illness, when really they are the effects of stress or worry. An older adult may also feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment that someone in the family or someone close has harmed them.

Some abused older adults may start to eat less, use more medications or drink more alcohol to help cope with the emotional and physical hurt. They may have difficulty sleeping or sleep too much. Some abused or neglected older adults may lose interest in life or become withdrawn. Some may have suicidal thoughts.

Did You Know?

- Between 44% and 62% of abused older adults experience some level of depression. Up to 6% of abused older adults become severely depressed.
- Living with abuse and neglect can also significantly increase the person's chances of becoming ill or may make other health problems worse.



- Abused or neglected older adults have a 200% increased risk of early death. The stress of living in an abusive situation shortens older people's lives by several years on average.

Financial Effects

Financial abuse can have a negative impact on older adults' health and wellbeing. Many older adults who experience financial abuse also face emotional abuse.

Financial abuse can lead to ongoing distress and financial strain in the older person's life. Stolen or forged income cheques can leave a low-income senior without money for food, medications, or transportation. Financial abuse may involve loss of a home through deceit, loss of beloved personal assets through theft, or loss of money from improper use of a power of attorney.

When abusers steal or control older adults' money or other property, older adults may have fewer resources to take care of their own health, housing, good nutrition, and activities.

Social Effects

The effects of abuse and neglect can carry from generation to generation. For example, grandchildren who witness such abuse may come to view negative behaviours toward older adults as acceptable and perpetuate disrespect. Abuse and neglect of older adults is not a private matter. It affects individuals, families, communities and ultimately society at large.

Sources

Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, "Health and Abuse."

BC Health Files "Health Effects of Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults."