



## Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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## Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements envers les aîné(e)s



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## What is Senior Abuse?

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In its most basic sense, senior abuse is a harm to an older adult. In 2002, the World Health Organization defined abuse and neglect of older adults as:

“...single or repeated acts, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person.” <sup>(1)</sup>

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## What Does that Mean?

Senior abuse involves doing something that causes harm or distress to an older person. Senior abuse also includes not doing something (inaction) that the person has a duty to do, such as not providing medications to an older adult who needs them.

Some abuse occurs in relationships, such as

- in a family,
- between a husband and wife,
- between friends,
- between an older adult and someone they are relying on such as an accountant or other paid person, or
- when someone is providing services in an older adult's home.

We refer to these as "relationships where there is an expectation of trust."

Not all abuse is individual actions and not all abuse occurs in a personal relationship. Some abusers actively seek out people that they think will be easier to exploit.

Sometimes, just the "usual way that things are done" can be abusive to older adults.

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## **Are Frauds and Scams Part of Senior Abuse?**

Many Canadian communities have different opinions on whether or not to include frauds and scams against older adults as part of "senior abuse".

It is very clear that these are important issues that need to be addressed in communities as a legal matter. The persons committing the fraud or scam specifically seek out people that they think will be easier to victimize. So, they often target seniors.

The prevention and education information as well as the approaches for helping people recognize frauds and scams in later life may be different than those used for very personal harms such as physical, psychological, or sexual abuse.

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## **Do Older Adults Define Abuse the Same Way that Others Do?**

Yes and no.

According to the international publication "Missing Voices",<sup>(2)</sup> older adults around the world tend to think of "abuse" in terms of three different categories:

- **neglect** (where older people are isolated, abandoned, being excluded from society or not being treated as a valued member of society);
- **violation of rights** that other people take for granted (e.g. privacy, non-discrimination, control over their health care and treatment, as well as lack of access to appropriate care and support, not having their legal rights respected); and
- **being deprived of choices**, personal decisions, status, finances, and respect.

Many older adults who have lived with family violence note that attitudes to family violence have changed over the past forty years. Compared to the social attitudes that were common when they were younger, older adults may find abuse is less likely to be treated as a private matter and kept hidden. Many older adults find it is safer today than previously to acknowledge the abuse has been happening in their lives; others still find it difficult to share this intimate information.

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## **What Are Common Types of Abuse?**

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### **Psychological Abuse:**

This is sometimes called emotional abuse. Some researchers refer to it by formal terms such as "chronic verbal aggression".

Psychological abuse can make the older person feel "less of a person". It diminishes the person's sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth. Abused people often find that psychological or emotional abuse is the most hurtful form of abuse.

Psychological abuse may make an older person fearful or cause the person mental anguish. This may be done in several ways, including by

- making the people uncertain about themselves and their abilities (lowering their self esteem),
- threatening some form of violence, or
- threatening to abandon or neglect the person.

Psychological abuse includes behaviours such as:

- Name calling,
- Yelling,
- Insulting the person,
- Threatening the person or threatening to take away something that is important to them,
- Imitating or mocking the person,
- Swearing at them,
- Ignoring,
- Isolating the person,

- Excluding them from meaningful events or activities.

Psychological abuse also happens when the older adult is excluded from decision making when the person is capable and wants to be included (in other words, "making decisions for them"), and depriving them of their rights.

Justice Canada includes these as some examples of psychological abuse: <sup>(3)</sup>

- Threatening to use violence
- Threatening to abandon them
- Intentionally frightening them
- Making them fear that they will not receive the food or care they need
- Lying to them
- Failing to check allegations of abuse against them
- Insulting, swearing, or name calling
- Making derogative or slanderous statements about them to others
- Socially isolating them, or failing to let them have visitors

It can also include:

- Withholding important information that they have a right to know
- Demeaning them because of the language they speak
- Intentionally misinterpreting their traditional practices
- Repeatedly raising the issue of death with them
- Telling them that they are too much trouble
- Ignoring or excessively criticizing them
- Being over-familiar and disrespectful
- Unreasonably ordering them around
- Treating them like servants
- Treating them like children.

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## **Financial Abuse:**

This is also known as material abuse. Financial abuse is the misuse of a senior's funds and assets, loss of or to damage to an older person's assets or property, obtaining the person's property without his or her knowledge and full consent. In the case of a senior who is not mentally capable, it can also include not representing or acting in that person's best interests.

Financial abuse can involve the theft or misuse of the older person's money or property. It includes behaviours such as:

- Misusing a power of attorney,
- Persuading, tricking, or threatening the older adult out of money, property, or possessions (and this includes attempts to do any of these);
- Cashing pension or other cheques without authorization;
- Use of the older adult's money for purposes other than what was intended by the older adult.

Many of these actions are crimes.

Justice Canada points out that financial abuse also includes *unduly pressuring\** older adults to:<sup>(3)</sup>

- Move from, sell or relinquish their home or other personal property
- Make or change a will
- Sign legal documents that they do not fully understand
- Change or keep their marital status
- Give money to relatives or caregivers
- Engage in paid work to bring in extra money
- Care for children or grandchildren.

Financial or material abuse against older adults may also include family or friends:

- Refusing to move out of the older adult's home when asked
- Sharing their home without paying a fair share of the expenses
- Unduly pressuring the older adult to buy alcohol or drugs.

The abuser in financial abuse situations is commonly a trusted person in the senior's life (such as a spouse or partner, family member (often an adult child), caregiver, or friend). Financial abuse is often accompanied by other forms of abuse, such as psychological abuse, physical abuse or denial of rights.

\* Encouraging people of any age to make choices or plan for their future is not the same as unduly pressuring them.

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## Neglect:

Some people have a legal or social responsibility to care for and support an older adult who is unable to meet those needs himself or herself. "Neglect" occurs when the other person fails to live up to that responsibility. Neglect has two forms.

- **Active neglect** which is the intentional withholding basic necessities of life (including care).
- **Passive neglect** is not providing basic necessities of life because of lack of experience, information, or ability.

Neglect can be physical, psychological, or financial in form.

Neglect includes denying the older person any of the things that are essential to life, such as food, water, medications, medical treatment, therapy, nursing services, therapeutic and equipment aids, clothing, visits from people important to the older person, and rights. Justice Canada includes these as some examples of neglect. <sup>(3)</sup> Failing to provide:

- Adequate nutrition, clothing and other necessities
- Adequate personal care, e.g. failing to turn a bedridden older adult frequently
- Safe and comfortable conditions
- A clean environment
- Prerequisites for personal cleanliness
- Sufficient bathroom space for privacy
- Sufficient space for personal privacy
- Transportation to necessary appointments
- (At least occasional) outings.

It may also include:

- Leaving incapacitated older adults alone too long or failing to remain with those who need help
- Abandonment.

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## **Physical Abuse:**

This refers to the non-accidental use of physical force to coerce or to inflict bodily harm. It often causes physical discomfort, pain or injury, but the person doesn't have to have an injury to have experienced physical abuse.

Physical abuse may include, for example:

- Beating the person
- Punching
- Burning or scalding
- Pushing or shoving
- Hitting with a hand or instrument or slapping
- Rough handling or physical coercion
- Stabbing
- Tripping
- Spitting.

Physical abuse against older adults may also include:

- Tying them to furniture
- Using or misusing physical restraints
- Restraining them through the use of alcohol, tranquilizers or other medication\*
- Forcing them to remain in beds or chairs
- Forcing them to remain in rooms (including locking them in).

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## **Sexual Abuse:**

Sexual abuse is any kind of sexual behaviour directed towards an older adult without the person's full knowledge and consent. It includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape. Sexual abuse can happen to mentally capable seniors by their spouse, partner, a family member or trusted people in their lives. It can also happen to mentally incapable older adults.

Sexual abuse is different than physical abuse. It has both a physical and psychological component, and its purpose is often to exert power and control over the adult or to demean the person.

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## **Violation of Rights:**

This refers to denial of a senior's fundamental rights as an adult. It includes the negation or disregard for the human and legal rights of an individual. For example, common examples of rights violations include:

- withholding information,
- mail censorship (going through their mail),
- denying the person privacy,
- denying the person visitors,
- restricting the person's liberty and freedom.

Unless the older adult has agreed to the restrictions, or has been found at law to be mentally incapable, no one has the right to deny the human rights of another person. When someone is denied their human rights, it affects their self-esteem and confidence, and demoralization sets in.

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## **Other Forms**

There are other forms of abuse or neglect that are recognized. Spiritual abuse or neglect may include:

- Using their religious or spiritual beliefs to exploit, manipulate, dominate or control them
- Ridiculing their beliefs
- Preventing them from engaging in spiritual or religious practices
- Acting in a disrespectful way toward their spirituality.<sup>(3)</sup>

Each of these types of abuse or neglect hurt the older person.

## Is "Self Neglect" a Form of Abuse or Neglect?

Self neglect refers to a person's inability to provide care and support to himself or herself. Self neglect can happen as a result of an individual's choice of lifestyle, or the person may

- be depressed,
- have poor health,
- have cognitive (memory or decisionmaking) problems, or
- be physically unable to care for self.

Conceptually, self neglect is different than someone else harming the older adult.

Some provinces have special laws to protect or offer help to people who are experiencing self neglect. Sometimes it is difficult in the beginning to know whether "neglect" or "self neglect" is occurring.

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(1) World Health Organization & International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (2002).

(2) Missing voices: Views of older persons on elder abuse. (Geneva, Switzerland: WHO). Online at: [www.who.int/hpr/ageing/MissingVoices.pdf](http://www.who.int/hpr/ageing/MissingVoices.pdf)

(3) Abuse of Older Adults: A Fact Sheet from the Department of Justice Canada. <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/adultsfs.html>

### \* An Important Note on the Use of Restraints:

Legitimate use of medication as a restraint should only occur when used for the person's safety (or safety of others) and when used in least restrictive manner. Even then, the risk to the person or others must be demonstrable and significant. "Possible" risks are not sufficient justification for the use of medication as a restraint. Non-justifiable uses of medications to control behaviour can be abusive.