

Identifying Elder Abuse

Beyond the physical and mental difficulties that come with aging, becoming older and more frail makes an elder more vulnerable. Unfortunately, there are many people that can take advantage of those weaknesses, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Elder abuse can take many forms but is best defined as an action by a person in a position of trust which causes harm to an older person. While most people think of elder abuse as physical, there are six types of abuse.

The six types of elder abuse are:

- Neglect
- Financial
- Physical
- Abandonment
- Sexual
- Emotional/Psychological

Any of these can fall into one of three categories: (1) domestic elder abuse, (2) institutional elder abuse and (3) self-neglect or self-abuse. This means that the abuse can happen within the home, by a caregiver or family member, at or within an institution or care facility, or by the elder him/herself.

Who are the Abusers and Why Does It Occur?

More than two-thirds of elder abuse perpetrators are family members of the victims, typically serving in a caregiving role. Because of this, it is primarily considered a type of domestic violence. Primary reasons that abuse happen include:

- Caregiver Stress
- Impairment of Dependent Elder
- Cycle of Violence
- Personal Problems of Abusers

Many areas have 24-hour toll-free numbers that are available to report elder abuse. It is also important to contact the patient's healthcare provider to get documentation regarding the elder's condition.

The following indicators, by themselves, do not necessarily signify abuse or neglect. They may be helpful, however, in assessing abuse.

Possible Indicators of Physical Abuse

- Cuts, lacerations, puncture wounds
- Bruises, welts, discoloration
- An elder's report of being hit, slapped, kicked or mistreated
- Broken eyeglasses/frames, physical signs of punishment or restraint
- Burns or burn marks

Possible Indicators of Emotional/Psychological Abuse

- Helplessness
- Withdrawal
- Agitation
- Depression
- Implausible stories
- Denial
- Fear
- Hesitation to talk openly

Possible Indicators of Financial Abuse

- Unusual or inappropriate activity in bank accounts
- Signatures on checks, etc., that do not resemble the senior's signature, or signed when the elder cannot write
- Power of attorney given, or recent changes in or creation of a will, when the person is incapable of making such decisions
- Unusual concern by a caregiver that an excessive amount of money is being expended on the care of the older person
- Numerous unpaid bills, overdue rent, when someone is supposed to be paying the bills for a dependent elder
- Placement in a nursing home or residential care facility which is not commensurate with the size of the estate
- Missing personal belongings such as art, silverware or jewelry

Possible Indicators of Caregiver Neglect

- Dirt, fecal/urine smell, or other health and safety hazards in an elder's living environment
- Rashes, sores, lice
- Elder is inadequately clothed
- Malnourishment or dehydration
- Untreated medical condition

Possible Indicators of Caregiver Abuse

- The elder may not be given the opportunity to speak for him or herself, or see others, without the presence of the caregiver (suspected abuser)
- Attitudes of indifference or anger toward the dependent person
- Blaming the elder for uncontrollable acts, such as confusion or incontinence
- Aggressive behavior (threats, insults, harassment) by caregiver toward the elder
- Problems with alcohol or drugs
- Inappropriate display of affection by the caregiver
- Social isolation of family, or isolation or restriction of activity of the older adult within the family unit by the caregiver
- Conflicting accounts of incidents by family, supporters or the elder
- Unwillingness or reluctance by the caregiver to comply with service providers in care planning
- Inappropriate or unwarranted defensiveness by caregiver

Possible Indicators of Self-Neglect

- Inability to manage personal finances, e.g., hoarding, squandering, giving money away or failure to pay bills
- Inability to manage activities of daily living, including personal care, shopping, meal preparation, housework, etc.
- Suicidal acts, wanderings, refusing medical attention, isolation, substance abuse
- Hazardous or unsafe living conditions (no plumbing, no heat, no running water, animal infested living quarters, etc.)
- Rashes, sores, fecal/urine smell, inadequate clothing, malnourishment, dehydration, etc.
- Changes in intellectual functioning, e.g., confusion, inappropriate or no response, disorientation to time and place, memory failure, incoherence, etc.
- Missing medical appointments