

# What You Need to Know About Elder Abuse

## What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse, or the abuse of older adults, is often defined as any act or omission that harms a senior or jeopardizes his or her health or welfare. The World Health Organization defines abuse of older adults as “a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring in any relationship where there is an expectation of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person”.

Elder abuse can take place in the home, in a residential setting, or in the community.

It is estimated that between four and ten per cent of Ontario’s seniors experience some type of abuse.

**Elder abuse is never acceptable.  
Elder abuse is often a crime.**

## What are the Types of Abuse?

There are many types of elder abuse. Persons may experience more than one type of abuse at the same time.

### **ABUSE**

Any act of violence or rough treatment causing injury or physical discomfort. This may include the inappropriate and/or unwarranted use of physical or chemical restraints (i.e. medications). Examples include: pushing, hitting, rough handling, scolding.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE**

This is sometimes called emotional abuse. Psychological abuse includes any act, including confinement, isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, intimidation, infantilization, or any other treatment which may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth of the older adult. Examples include: threatening the older adult, insulting the older adult, excluding the older adult from decision making when the person is capable.

### **SEXUAL ABUSE**

Any sexual behaviour directed toward an older adult without that person’s full knowledge and consent. Examples include: sexual assault, sexual harassment.

### **FINANCIAL ABUSE**

This is sometimes called material abuse. Financial abuse is the misuse of an older adult’s funds and assets without that person’s knowledge and/or full consent, or in the case of an older adult who is not mentally capable,

not in that person's best interests; the misuse of a Continuing Power of Attorney for Property. Examples include: use of an older adult's money for purposes other than what was intended by the older adult, cashing pension or other cheques without authorization.

### **NEGLECT**

Intentional withholding of basic necessities or care (active neglect) or not providing basic necessities or care because of a lack of experience, information or ability (passive neglect). Examples include: denying the older person food/water, denying visits from family or friends.

### **OTHER**

There are various other types of abuse that are being recognized such as medication abuse and spiritual abuse. All types of abuse or neglect hurt the older person.

## **Who are the Victims?**

Elder abuse can happen to any older adult. In fact, contrary to commonly held beliefs, most victims of elder abuse are mentally competent and do not require constant care.

Elder abuse usually occurs in situations where the victim of the abuse is dependent on the abuser in some way.

## **Who are the Abusers?**

Elder abuse can be caused by family members, friends, staff or any individual in a position of trust and authority. Most elder abuse is caused by a family member of the victim.

## **What are the Signs and Symptoms of Elder Abuse?**

Victims of elder abuse may show signs of :

- Depression, fear, anxiety, passivity
- Social withdrawal
- Unexplained physical injury
- Lack of food, clothing and other necessities
- Changes in hygiene and nutrition (e.g. signs of malnutrition)
- Failure to meet financial obligations
- Unusual banking withdrawals

## **What Should I Do If I Know Someone Being Abused?**

Sometimes people know or suspect that a friend, family member, neighbour or acquaintance is being mistreated or abused and they are not sure what to do. They worry about getting involved, not saying the right thing or wrongly identifying the situation.

If you know or suspect someone is being abused, make the effort to reach out to the person and talk to them. Ask things like :

- How are you doing?
- Are you having any trouble at home?  
Can I help you?
- Is there someone I can put you in touch with who may be able to help you?
- How would you like to be assisted?

**THE SINGLE LARGEST FACTOR THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND/OR MAINTENANCE OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS ISOLATION. TALKING TO A PERSON IS ONE OF THE FIRST STEPS TO BREAKING DOWN THIS ISOLATION. IF A PERSON DOES TELL YOU THAT THEY ARE BEING ABUSED YOU SHOULD :**

- **BELIEVE the person.** Do not question what they are telling you. You may be the very first person that has ever been entrusted with this information. It may be hard to understand what is going on especially if the perpetrator is a nice person to you or someone you know.
- **Do not judge the person.** Listen to what they are saying to you. Do not express pity or tell them what to do. Tell them you care about them and offer them a level of support that you feel comfortable providing and know that you can provide on an ongoing basis. Do not promise them things you know you can not do or do not feel comfortable doing.
- **Educate yourself on resources available to older persons who are being abused.** You can do this by calling your local community information centre, community care access centre, community support agency, talking to your own doctor, your lawyer or searching on the internet for Ontario resources and/or information.
- **Do not deny what is going on.** If you choose to deny what is going on or not to listen to a person, this will serve to isolate the person who is being abused even further.
- **Understand that making efforts to change an abusive relationship is extremely difficult.** A person who is being abused can be very afraid and not certain what to do. It can take a very long time for people to decide to make a change in their lives, to reach out for help or to even talk about their situation.
- **Encourage the person to seek help and assistance.** Offer to help them find the right place to turn to if this is something you are prepared and able to do.
- **Do not confront the perpetrator yourself.** This could put you and/or the person who is being abused in trouble.

Remember, if you or someone you know has been abused or is experiencing abuse, you are not alone - help is available.

## Provincial Contact List

*In an emergency, contact 911 or your local police, ambulance or fire service.*

Ontario Provincial Police	1-888-310-1122 (24 hour toll-free)
Crime Stoppers	1-800-222-TIPS (8477)
Ministry of the Attorney General's Victim Support Line	1-888-579-2888 (toll-free) or in Toronto 416-314-2447
Seniors' InfoLine	1-888-910-1999 (toll-free) or in Toronto 416-314-7511
Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse	416-916-6728
Advocacy Centre for the Elderly	416-598-2656
Ontario Association of Community Care Access Centre	416-750-1720
Retirement Home Complaints Response and Information Service	1-800-361-7254
Long-Term Care ACTION Line	1-866-434-0144

## Find Out More

*For more information on elder abuse and access to publications, please visit:*

Ontario Seniors' Secretariat:

**[www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/seniors/index.html](http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/seniors/index.html)**

Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: **[www.onpea.org](http://www.onpea.org)**

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence:

**[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfvcnivf/familyviolence/bilingual.htm](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfvcnivf/familyviolence/bilingual.htm)**

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