

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is the maltreatment or neglect of dependent older people. It can be passive neglect, psychological abuse, financial abuse, active neglect, or physical abuse. Except in the instance of passive abuse, which is not intentionally caused and arises when a caregiver is overworked and/or under-informed, elder abuse is a deliberate act of hostility. In more active forms of abuse, there is actual intent to inflict harm or deprivation on the older person. In many cases, the caregiver is motivated to abuse by his own greed or wish to exploit his charge. Or he may become increasingly resentful of his situation and his responsibility. Unlike children, the elderly are responsible for themselves unless they are declared incompetent. Yet many are frail, dependent, and vulnerable, and as such, subject to abuse.

Definitions

Physical Abuse - the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment. It may include the inappropriate use of drugs and physical restraints, force-feeding, and physical punishment.

Sexual Abuse - non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with person incapable of giving consent.

Emotional Or Psychological Abuse - the infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or nonverbal acts.

Neglect - the refusal or failure to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an elder.

Exploitation - misusing the resources of an elderly for personal or monetary benefit.

Possible Indicators of Abuse, Neglect, or Exploitation

The following descriptions are not necessarily proof of abuse; but they may be clues that a problem exists.

Physical Signs

- Injury that has not been cared for properly
- Injury that is inconsistent with explanation for its cause
- Cuts, puncture wounds, burns, bruises, welts
- Dehydration or malnutrition without illness-related cause
- Poor coloration, sunken eyes or cheeks
- Inappropriate administration of medication
- Soiled clothing or bed
- Frequent use of hospital or health care
- Lack of necessities such as food, water, or utilities
- Lack of personal effects, pleasant living environment, personal items
- Forced isolation

Behavioral Signs

- Fear
- Anxiety, agitation
- Anger
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Depression
- Non-responsiveness, resignation, ambivalence
- Contradictory statements, implausible stories
- Hesitation to talk openly
- Confusion or disorientation

Signs by Caregiver

- Prevents elder from speaking to or seeing visitors
- Anger, indifference, aggressive behavior
- History of substance abuse, mental illness, criminal behavior, or family violence
- Lack of affection toward elder
- Flirtation or coyness as possible indicator of inappropriate sexual relationships
- Conflicting accounts of incidents
- Withholds affection
- Talks of elder as a burden

Signs of Financial Abuse

- Frequent expensive gifts from elder to caregiver
- Missing belongings, papers, credit cards missing
- Numerous unpaid bills
- When elder seems incapable of writing will
- Caregiver's name added to bank account
- Elder unaware of monthly income
- Elder signs on loan
- Frequent checks made out to "cash"
- Unusual activity in bank account
- Irregularities on tax return
- Elder unaware of reason for appointment with banker/attorney
- Caregiver's refusal to spend money on elder
- Signatures on checks or legal documents that do not resemble elder's signature

Issues Facing Vulnerable Adults

Depression

Since depression is commonly due to biological changes in the brain, it is likely to occur for no apparent reason. Biological changes to the brain and body, medical illnesses, or genetics may put groups like elderly people at greater risk for depression. Symptoms may include persistent sadness, feeling slowed down, excessive worries about finances or health, frequent tearfulness, weight changes, pacing and fidgeting, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and physical problems. The first step is to make sure the person gets a complete physical checkup because depression may be a side effect of another medical condition.

Dementia

Dementia is a medical condition that affects the way the brain works. It involves a gradual deterioration of cognition (thinking, information, processing, decision-making abilities, as well as memory). It also affects behavior to a point that interferes with customary daily living activities. Contrary to popular belief, dementia is not a normal outcome of aging, but is caused by diseases that affect the brain. One of these diseases is Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a condition that eventually erodes all cognitive and functional abilities, leading to total dependence on caregivers and eventually to death.

Fraud & Exploitation

Fraud is theft by deception, typically financial in nature and by new "best friends", thieving caregivers, religious con-artists, and financial abuse by family members. Common types of fraud include: home equity, telemarketing, and mail fraud.