



What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is a form of family violence and it is unacceptable.

Elder abuse is any act occurring within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which results in harm to an older person. Elder abuse may be physical, sexual, financial, psychological, social and/or neglect.

Elder abuse that occurs in aged care facilities and nursing homes has received a lot of media coverage, particularly in the wake of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, with a final report expected by 30 April 2020. This form of abuse violates human rights and is both illegal and abhorrent.

This factsheet refers to violence and elder abuse that occurs in a family context that is perpetrated by either a relative, friend or known and trusted associate (such as a carer).

Research shows that up to 14 per cent of older people may be experiencing elder abuse. Yet the real number is estimated to be much higher than this because elder abuse is often underreported.

Forms of elder abuse

Family violence against older people can take many forms. It is not uncommon for older people to experience multiple forms of elder abuse at one time.

Some common forms of elder abuse may include:

- › Financial abuse
- › Emotional (or psychological) abuse
- › Neglect
- › Physical abuse
- › Social abuse
- › Sexual abuse.

Responding to elder abuse

If you suspect that an older person is at risk or experiencing elder abuse, there are steps you can take to help:

- › Prior to approaching the older person, you will need to assess risk and safety for the older person and yourself as a practitioner
- › Prior to meeting with the older person, you may wish to consult with a supervisor or manager at your service.

Secondary consultation for professionals working with older people and their carers and/or family is available from Elder Abuse Prevention and Response Liaison Officers.

For contact details, visit www.health.vic.gov.au and search for 'elder abuse prevention'. Secondary consultations are also available from Seniors Rights Victoria.

Preventing elder abuse

In the context of all forms of family violence and violence against women, there are three levels of prevention:

Primary prevention

Primary prevention aims to stop all forms of family violence and violence against women before they occur. It refers to whole-of-population initiatives that address the drivers of such violence.

Secondary prevention or early intervention

Secondary prevention, or early intervention, aims to 'change the trajectory' for individuals at higher-than-average risk of perpetrating or experiencing family violence.

Tertiary prevention

Tertiary prevention or response supports survivors and holds perpetrators to account and aims to prevent the recurrence of violence.

How to discuss elder abuse

If you suspect that an older person with whom you are working is experiencing elder abuse, there are steps you can take to help.

As with other forms of family violence, older people may be unwilling or unable to tell you about their elder abuse experiences. Ask direct questions, listen and believe what the older person tells you, and support the older person to make their own decisions. Respond in a caring manner. You may be the first person they have ever told about the elder abuse.

Some questions you could ask:

- › Are you afraid of x or anyone else at home?
- › Has anyone threatened to put you in a nursing home?
- › Are you being mistreated?
- › Do you feel safe within your relationship?
- › You mentioned that x gets angry. Can you tell me more about that?
- › Do you feel safe in your home?
- › You seem to be concerned about x. Does their behaviour ever frighten you?
- › I see a lot of people with injuries like yours. Sometimes they're a result of a family argument. Has this ever happened to you?
- › I have experience working with people who are experiencing family violence. Your safety is my priority. That is why I'm going to ask - are you being abused?

If an older person discloses elder abuse:

- › Respond with kindness and maintain an attitude that does not threaten, blame, or make judgements about the older person, the perpetrator, or the choices they have made. This may only make the older person defensive, or cause them to defend the perpetrator
- › Believe the older person and be willing to listen
- › Let the older person know that they can count on you to be supportive
- › Provide choices, not interventions — empower the older person to take control of their life. Do not tell them what to do or pressure them to leave the perpetrator. They know the dynamics of the situation and must make the decision themselves
- › Let the older person know (even if they deny abuse has happened) that it's not their fault, they are not alone (family violence can happen to anyone), and that there is help available.

DO NOT respond this way:

- › Never tell the older person experiencing elder abuse what they should do, in your opinion
- › Never insist on your own timetable for changes
- › Never confront a suspected perpetrator.

Some suggested responses are:

- › Sometimes people feel that it is their fault. They think somehow, they caused the anger and abuse. Family violence is the other person's responsibility — not yours
- › What can I do to help you feel safe?
- › I'm glad that you trusted me enough to talk to me about this
- › What you have just described to me is family violence and that is against the law.

What to do if you suspect elder abuse is occurring

If an older person is concerned that they are experiencing elder abuse, help is available. For further information and for independent advice, contact:

Seniors Rights Victoria – 1300 368 821

Available from 10.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday. For more information on Seniors Rights Victoria, visit www.seniorsrights.org.au

1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732

Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For more information on 1800 RESPECT, visit www.1800respect.org.au

Men's Referral Service – 1300 766 491

Available from 8.00am to 9.00pm Monday to Friday, and from 9.00am to 5.00pm Saturday to Sunday. For more information on Men's Referral Service, visit www.ntv.org.au

If you are concerned for your immediate safety or that of someone else, please contact the police in your state or territory or call Triple Zero (000) for emergency services.

For more information, please visit www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au

