

Elder Abuse: A National Disgrace¹

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Overview

Elder abuse has been described as a national disgrace.

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) estimates that between 820,000 and 1,860,000 older Americans are victims of abuse each year. Elder abuse is also a disgrace to families. That's because elders are most often abused in their own homes. And, family members commit most identified cases of elder abuse.

Like child abuse and spouse abuse, elder abuse is under-reported. The numbers of abuse cases are probably much higher. If elder abuse is going to stop, we must all be aware of the signs of abuse, and we must be willing to take action to stop the abuse.

What *is* Elder Abuse?

But what is elder abuse? Who is most at risk of being abused, or becoming an abuser? This publication answers those questions by describing:

- * the categories and types of abuse,
- * risk factors of abuse,
- * resources for families and caregivers, and/or
- * how to report abuse.

Categories of Abuse

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) has identified three basic categories of elder abuse:

- abuse;
- exploitation; and
- neglect.

Abuse includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Exploitation is the misuse of the elderly persons resources for personal or financial benefit.

Neglect, is the refusal or failure to provide for the basic needs of an elderly person.

All three categories of abuse can occur in the home or in an institutional setting.

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Domestic elder abuse

Domestic elder abuse occurs in family settings. Usually, a family member is the abuser. Adult children are the abusers in nearly half of reported domestic elder abuse cases. Spouses are the abusers in one out of five domestic abuse cases.

Institutional elder abuse

Institutional abuse most frequently occurs in a long-term care facility such as a nursing home, group home, foster home, unlicensed facilities, or board-and-care homes. Abuses in institutions may seem more common than domestic elder abuse, but that is because institutional abuse is more likely to be seen and reported.

Types of Abuse

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is hitting, pulling, pinching, hurrying, or pushing, or other maltreating with the intent to cause suffering, pain, or injury. Physical abuse is often used to punish, threaten, or control the elder person.

Signs of physical abuse include:

- * injury that has not been cared for;
- * injury that is inconsistent with explanation;
- * pain from touching;
- * cuts, puncture wounds, burns, bruises, welts;
- * soiled clothing or bed;
- * frequent use of hospital or health care; and/or
- * doctor shopping.

The person who is being abused may appear:

- * fearful;
- * anxious;
- * angry;
- * withdrawn;
- * non-responsive; and/or
- * afraid to talk openly or may offer strange explanations for injuries.

The abusive caregiver may:

- * prevent elder from seeing or talking to other people;
- * act angry or aggressive;
- * have a history of substance abuse or family violence;
- * offer conflicting accounts of incidents; and/or
- * withhold affection from the elder.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse

Emotional or psychological abuse occurs when the abuser verbally or non-verbally threatens, or humiliates the older adult. Victims of emotional or psychological abuse become withdrawn or depressed. They are at a higher risk of self-neglect because they lose hope and the will to live.

Threats

- "Do as I say, or I'll put you in a home."
- "You'll never see your grandchildren again."
- "I'll just leave you here like this, then what would you do?"

Humiliation

"You are just old and useless."

"I don't know why I bother."

"You're worse than a baby."

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse occurs when the abuser carries out any unwanted sexual contact. Sexual abuse includes unwanted touching, and all types of sexual assault or battery such as rape, sodomy, or forced nudity.

Signs of sexual abuse include:

- bruises around the breasts or genital area;
- unexplained venereal disease or genital infections;
- Sexually transmitted disease/s (STDs)
- unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding;
- torn, stained, or bloody underclothing; and/or
- report of being sexually assaulted or raped.

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse, also called financial exploitation, involves the unauthorized use of funds, property, or any resource of an older person. In many cases, the abuser simply steals from the older adult. Other times abusers may force the elder to 'sign-over' rights to property, checking accounts, or other assets. Too often elders are not aware of how much money they have or where their money goes. They may use deception or trickery to fool the elder as to where the money is going. The elder may also feel obligated to give the caregiver access to their funds in order to 'pay for their keep'.

Financial exploitation may be happening when:

- the elder frequently gives expensive gifts to the caregiver;
- the elder has numerous unpaid bills although there should be money to pay them;
- frequent checks are made out to 'cash';
- the caregiver refuses to spend money on the elder;
- the elder signs on a loan; and/or
- signatures on checks or legal documents do not match the elder's signature.

Neglect and Self-Neglect

Caregivers and family members who fail to provide adequately for the elder's basic needs are guilty of neglect. But the most common form of neglect is self-neglect. Self-neglect occurs when older adults fail to take care of themselves. Neglect and self-neglect include failure to provide for the basic needs of everyday life such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and financial responsibility.

Self Neglect

Self-neglect is a serious problem in Florida. More than half of all calls to Adult Protective Services are to report self-neglect. In Florida, many older adults came from different states. Many of them become widowed after they move to Florida and are now alone. Their children and families live far away. Isolation, depression, and illness can lead to self-neglect. Because of poor health (as their physical and cognitive abilities decline) and limited resources, elders often fail to seek medical attention or obtain essential home repairs, these factors may lead to hazardous living.

Signs of self-neglect include:

- malnutrition;
- physically unclean and unkempt;
- excessive tiredness;
- dirty, ragged clothing;
- unmet medical and dental needs;
- refusing to take medicines or ignoring doctor's advice;
- filthy home; and/or
- failure to buy food or medications.

Risk Factors of Abuse

Most cases of elder abuse go unreported. That is why it is important to know who is most at risk of being abused and who is most at risk of becoming an abusive caregiver. It is also important to understand domestic and institutional settings that may contribute to the risk of elder abuse.

Elders At Risk of Abuse

- Female
- Drug /alcohol abusers
- History of abuse
- No friends or close family members
- Dependent on caregiver physically, emotionally, and/or financially
- Blames herself
- Physically or mentally ill
- Teasing or antagonizing behavior
- Lives away from neighbors

Caregivers At Risk of Becoming Abusive

- Expect elder to do more than she is able to do
- Current drug or alcohol problems
- Mentally ill
- Little or no experience as a caregiver
- Has money problems
- Feels alone
- Has also been a victim of abuse

Domestic Situations that Increase Risk of Abuse

- Isolated or rural setting
- Overcrowded home
- Pattern of domestic violence
- Not enough money to meet basic needs
- Lived together for more than 10 years

Institutional Situations That Increase Risk of Abuse

- High employee stress outside work
- High staff turnover
- Low wages
- Job frustration
- Not enough staff
- Severely ill patients

- Cultural differences
- Lack of sympathy for the elderly

Resources for Families and Caregivers

Dos and Don'ts to Protect Yourself

DO

- Keep in contact with family and friends.
- Participate in community activities whenever you can.
- Develop a buddy system to check up on each other.
- Keep regular appointments with your doctor.
- Be seen in the community.
- Ask your friends to visit you where you live.
- Have your own telephone.
- Send and read your own mail.
- Keep your belongings neat and orderly.
- Keep track of your own finances.

DON'T

- Voluntarily give up control of your finances.
- Leave cash, jewelry, or valuables lying around.
- Accept personal care in exchange for signing over your property without consulting your own lawyer first.
- Lose contact with old friends and neighbors if you move.
- Allow anyone else to keep details of your finances.

Florida Resources

Older Floridians Handbook

This guide was written for Floridians 60 and over. It contains legal information as well as contacts in addition to other useful information. It may be accessed online at [Older Floridians Handbook](#)

You can request a printed version of this handbook, if you call (305)358-2081 or write to:

Florida Justice Institute, Inc.
2870 First Union Financial Center
200 South Biscayne Boulevard
Miami, Florida 33131-2310

Elder Update

Elder Update is an on-line newspaper published by the Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA). It is updated bi-monthly and can be accessed on the web. You will need Acrobat Reader© (a free download at the Elder Update Web site or from www.adobe.com) in order to read the issues of the newspaper.

Elder Update can be accessed at

<http://www7.myflorida.com/doea/healthfamily/learn/elderservices/doeaelderupdate.html>

or, for those residing in Florida, you may order this free newspaper by sending your name, address, city, state (Florida ONLY), and zip code to:

The Florida Department of Elder Affairs
Elder Update Subscriptions
P.O. Box 6750
Tallahassee, Florida 32314-6750

Elder Update is also available in Braille or on cassette tape. To order one of these formats, call: 1-800-226-6075.

Florida Department of Elder Affairs

The Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA) is responsible for providing programs and services for older Floridians through the Area Agencies on Aging. You can contact the Florida DOEA by writing, calling, or on the Web.

Florida Department of Elder Affairs
4040 Esplanade Way, Suite 315
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-7000
(850) 414-2000 - Fax (850) 414-2004
TDD (850) 414-2001

<http://elderaffairs.state.fl.us/>

How To Report Abuse

Florida Statute 415 covers reporting suspected elder abuse. That means that anyone who suspects that an elder is being abused is responsibly for notifying the proper authorities.

Florida has established a 24-hour hotline that will accept reports of elder abuse nationwide.

All domestic and institutional elder abuse should be reported by calling 1-800-96-ABUSE - that's 1-800-962-2873.

To Report Domestic Abuse in Florida

1-800-96-ABUSE
1-800-962-2873
TDD 1-800-453-5145

Florida Long-term Care Ombudsman

To report institutional abuse in Florida contact the Long-term Care Ombudsman Council near you to investigate. Addresses and local telephone numbers for several Florida county Ombudsman Councils may be found by pointing your Web browser to:

<http://www7.myflorida.com/doea/healthfamily/learn/elderservices/doeaelderupdate.html>

To Report Institutional Abuse in Florida

If you do not have access to the Internet or your county is not listed, you may also call 1-888-831-0404 to get information regarding the closest Long-term Care Ombudsman.

Florida Long-term Care Ombudsman
1-888-831-0404

To Report Abuse Outside of Florida

Eldercare Locator
1-800-677-1116

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