

## **Elder Abuse – Private Shame, Public Disgrace**

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Elder abuse happens everywhere and it flourishes in silence. Abusers are friends, neighbors, caregivers, strangers, even family. More often than not victims know their abusers. Abusers can be opportunistic exploiters of the victim's dependency and isolation; or deliberate predators acting in complete disregard of victim rights or well being. Victimization can be an expression of anger, greed, or frustration; stem from lifelong patterns of dysfunctional relations or can involve substance abuse, sociopathy, or significant disparity in financial statuses. Abuse occurs across all social strata, freely crossing ethnic, cultural and economic boundaries. Annually reported cases average 4% of the population over age sixty-five. Unreported case estimates range anywhere from one to fourteen times the number of reported cases. The sheer number that creates is staggering—nearly 8 million people may well be being victimized.

Abuse can literally be physical battery – pushing, shoving, pinching, restraints, forced sexual contact, neglect, withholding medication, nutrition, or hydration – either to make the victim do something or stop doing something. It can take the form of financial exploitation – opportunistic encouragement of “gifts”, “loans”, outright theft of cash, securities, stripping the home of saleable items, overbilling, deliberate schemes to defraud and use of victim resources for personal gain. Abuse can be emotional as well, involving verbal insults or threats, shouting, profanity or isolation.

There is a “profile” of likely victims—they are more often women, customarily over the age of 80, socially isolated and lacking resources, have dependency needs (either financial, physical or emotional), they may have substance abuse or mental health issues, including dementia. Victims often feel shame, embarrassment or even responsible for what is happening to them.

Signs of abuse may include bruising, weight loss, new confusion, guarded responses, lost eye contact, never alone with visitors, lapses in care, left alone when unable to self evacuate in event of crisis, left alone when unable to self-care, locked doors, poor personal hygiene, sudden changes in long time relationships or trusted advisors, changes in finances, wariness, self-neglect, witnessed verbal or physical exchanges, odd pattern injuries like “grab” marks or on odd areas of the body, poor explanations for occurrences, lack of necessary helping devices, items missing from the home, inappropriate item purchases, fearfulness of caregiver or family member, home visits are refused, odors, poor hygiene, poor environmental condition in presence of assets. While the presence of two of more of these signs is not absolute proof, they are nevertheless cause for concern and intervention.

Family caregivers may be overwhelmed with the care needs of a dependent family member. Abusers may have no sense of the wrongness of their actions or have rationalized it to the point of not even acknowledging their involvement in the pattern or abuse or neglect. Adult day care, outside caregiving resources and frequent respite can help relieve the pressures that often lead to abusive episodes. Support groups, counseling and increasing

social contacts can provide support and safe environments for abusers to self report. This permits intervention in relationships where history, dementia, substance abuse, social isolation and lack of resources have combined in one way or another to create the abusive environment. Providing victims with a variety of caregivers, outlets of expression, safe opportunities to report and information concerning others in similar situations can empower those able to assist themselves to stop the cycle of abuse. Involving authorities in positions to provide outside assistance can become necessary when the victim is unable to self-assist with support or the abuser is not able to step back long enough to get help.

The best possible responses to abuse are acknowledgement, recognition, and courageous advocacy. Once you acknowledge the problem exists, it is incumbent upon those in contact with potential victims to recognize the signs and then to intervene promptly and effectively. Only then will there be an end to the public disgrace and private shame that is abuse of our greatest generation.

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