



# Understanding Elder Mistreatment

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And why is the way we talk about it so  
important?



# Objectives

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- Identify the following about elder mistreatment:
  - Signs
  - Risk factors
  - Unique needs of older adults
  - Barriers to reporting abuse
- Understand the following:
  - Connection between ageism and elder mistreatment.
  - What solutions can help prevent abuse while also addressing existing cases.

# What is elder mistreatment?

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Elder Abuse occurs in both community and institutional settings and takes many forms, including:

- **Physical abuse**
- **Emotional/Psychological abuse**
- **Sexual abuse**
- **Neglect**
- **Financial exploitation**

**Elder Abuse is believed to be widely under-detected and under-reported.**

# Types of Abuse

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**Multiple forms of abuse can occur at once.**



**PHYSICAL**



**PSYCHOLOGICAL**



**FINANCIAL**



**SEXUAL**



**NEGLECT**

# Signs of Abuse

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It is up to all of us to know the signs of elder abuse and immediately report any suspicions of abuse occurring in the community or long-term care setting.



## Physical Signs

- Broken bones, bruises, and welts
- Untreated bed sores
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- Sexually transmitted diseases without clear explanations
- Dirtiness, poor nutrition, or dehydration
- Poor living conditions
- Lack of medical aids [glasses, walker, teeth, hearing aid, or medications]
- Over/under medicated

# Signs of Abuse (continued)

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## Emotional & Behavioral Signs

- Unusual changes in behavior or sleep
- Fear or anxiety
- Isolation from friends or family
- Withdrawal from normal activities
- Sadness

# Signs of Abuse (continued)

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## Financial Signs

- Unusual changes in a bank account or money management services
- Unusual or sudden changes in a will or other financial documents
- Fraudulent signatures on financial documents
- Unpaid bills

# Risk Factors

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- Limited social support.
- Dementia.
- Experience of previous traumatic events—including IPV.
- Disability.
- Gender.
- Living with a large number of household members other than a spouse.
- Poverty.



# Unique needs of older adults

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- **Cultural differences**

- In many cultures elder abuse is contrary to cultural role expectations. For example, American Indian Tribes revere the older adults in their communities; therefore elder abuse may often go unreported out of shame and guilt. In Korean and Japanese cultures, elder abuse often goes unreported due to the expectation to “keep family matters within the family.”

- **Isolation**

- Social isolation has been linked to increased mortality in older adults, dementia, an increased risk of hospital readmission, increased risk of falls and elder abuse, neglect and exploitation.

# Unique needs of older adults

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- **Elder specific trauma experiences**

- Holocaust, boarding school experiences of American Indians, Japanese American internment camps, racial segregation in the Jim Crow South, and periods where women were disenfranchised and domestic and sexual violence went largely unrecognized.

- **Dementia**

- Vulnerable due to impairments in memory, communication abilities, and judgment.

- **Polyvictimization**

- Types of elder abuse can co-occur in various combinations, frequently causing older adults to suffer in multiple and complex ways. In a nationwide poll of APS professionals, 75% of respondents said that older adults who experience multiple types of abuse comprise over 25% of their caseloads.

## DV in Later Life

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Older IPV victims socialized differently

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Many have suffered years of abuse, disempowerment high

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Complex, ambivalent feelings for offender normal

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Dependency upon offenders

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Desire to protect offspring inhibits self-protection

# DV in Later Life

Why it's so under reported...

**Disbelief: elders are sexually assaulted**

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graph TD; A[Disbelief: elders are sexually assaulted] --> B[Some reporting discounted as psychotic or demented]; B --> C[Forensic indicators often missed or misinterpreted on an older body]; C --> D[Response to allegations often insufficient];
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**Some reporting discounted as psychotic or demented**

**Forensic indicators often missed or misinterpreted on an older body**

**Response to allegations often insufficient**

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# Ageism & Elder Mistreatment

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- **Ageist stereotypes serve as a barrier to recognizing and responding to abuse.**
- **Internal ageism may prevent victims from reporting abuse.**
- **Ageism can result in lack of offender accountability.**
- **Ageism impacts public thinking – leads to a fatalist attitude about addressing elder abuse on a large scale.**

# Reframing Aging

From Them to Us



# Talking elder abuse.

## A FrameWorks Communications Toolkit

### The Big Picture

## Quick Start Guide to Talking Elder Abuse

**MM** Click icon to see MessageMemo

Framing is the process of making choices about what to emphasize and what to leave unsaid. Here's a quick tour of themes to avoid and alternatives to advance.

| Instead of:  | Try:   |
|--|--|
| Appealing to sympathy  | Appealing to <i>Justice</i> : This is about treating older people fairly   |
| Talking about vulnerable populations and dependent victims                         | Talking about the importance of social connections to empower older people and reduce risk factors                                       |
| Using crisis-laden or emotional rhetoric to condemn elder abuse                    | Demonstrating the collective—social and economic—costs of elder abuse  |
| Relying on the public's limited conception of abuse as a two-person relationship   | Intentionally expanding the definition of abuse to include self-neglect, sexual abuse, and systemic causes                               |
| Focusing only on individual perpetrators and victims                               | Explaining the underlying social conditions that can increase risk factors   |
| The terms "perpetrators" and "victims"   | Try less swampy language like "people who commit elder abuse" and "survivors"  |
| Using data and expert jargon to explain the causes and consequences of elder abuse | Using the <i>Social Structure</i> metaphor: Society is like a building. Let's improve it with support beams that can keep everyone safe. |
| Providing solutions that emphasize individual responsibility                       | Providing solutions that emphasize collective responsibility and systemic/policy changes   |
| Descriptions of the problem  | Telling a complete story: Why it matters, how it works, and what can be done to address the problem                                      |

*What's in the Swamp of...*  
**Elder Abuse**

***Elder + Abuse***

- Elder abuse is unacceptable
- Neglect doesn't qualify
- Sexual abuse doesn't compute

***Deterioration***

- Dependency = vulnerability
- Paternalism

***Solutions***

- Nothing can be done
- Surveillance and prosecution
- Awareness and education
- Support for caregivers

***Modern Life Is the Problem***

- Caregivers pushed to limit
- Cultural devaluation of older people
- Nursing homes as unfortunate necessity

***Spotlight on Individuals***

- Greed and laziness
- Moral character
- Sickos
- Payback
- Older people are difficult
- Everyone's responsible/no one's responsible

 **Click each title to learn more about these shared patterns of thinking.**



Where did you get this stuff?!?!  
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NCALL

FACT

FrameWorks  
Institute

# NCALL

National Clearinghouse on  
Abuse in Later Life

## Working with Older Survivors of Abuse: A Framework for Advocates



**RESPECT**

Responsive, Victim-Defined Advocacy  
Elder-Informed  
Services, Safety Planning, and Outreach  
Policies  
Equity and Access  
Collaboration  
Training and Awareness

# FACT

## Family & Children's Trust Fund of Virginia



### TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO ELDER ABUSE

ISSUE BRIEF SUMMARY



As Americans live longer and healthier lives, older adults represent the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. The number of people in Virginia aged 65 and older will nearly double between 2010 and 2030, accounting for 1 in 5 Virginians.<sup>1</sup> With this demographic change, communities must strengthen their efforts to protect older adults from abuse, neglect and exploitation and understand the unique ways older adults respond to and heal from trauma.

Due to ageism, physical limitations, loss of spouse/partner, peers, family members and various other complex factors, older adults are often isolated from their communities.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore very important that professionals and volunteers who visit older adults in their homes have a basic understanding of elder abuse, neglect, and trauma.

#### HOW COMMON IS ELDER ABUSE?



of older adults over 60 experienced elder abuse.<sup>8</sup>



1 in 24 cases of elder abuse, neglect and exploitation are reported.<sup>9</sup>

#### WHAT IS ELDER ABUSE?

Elder abuse includes physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, as well as neglect, financial exploitation and other forms of exploitation of an older person, in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust. Elder abuse can also be defined as a targeted act of violence or deception directed towards an older adult by virtue of their age or disabilities, which may be perpetrated by individuals unknown to the adult. Elder abuse also includes self-neglect in which the adult is unable to meet their basic needs due to a physical or mental health condition.<sup>3</sup>

#### TYPES OF ELDER ABUSE

Abuse of older adults takes many different forms, all of which may have various warning signs. The most common forms and signs of elder abuse are defined below. Keep in mind that it is very common for an older adult to experience multiple forms of abuse at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

**Physical abuse** is the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment.<sup>5</sup>

**Sexual abuse** is non-consensual sexual contact of any kind.<sup>5</sup>

**Emotional abuse** is the infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or non-verbal acts. Emotional abuse is one of the most difficult problems to spot, because the older adult may be unable to communicate what is happening due to illness, dementia, or fear of being neglected. Emotional abuse can range from a simple verbal insult to an aggressive verbal attack. It can also include threats of physical harm or isolation.<sup>5</sup>

**Financial exploitation** is the illegal or improper use of an elder's funds, property, or assets.<sup>5</sup>

**Neglect** is refusal, or failure, to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an older adult. If an older adult is cognitively or physically disabled, and needs help taking medication or getting dressed, it can be considered neglect if their caregiver is not providing assistance. Additionally, passive neglect occurs when the abuse is unintentional, often as the result of an overburdened or untrained caregiver.<sup>5</sup>

**Self-neglect** involves the failure of an older adult to meet their own essential physical, psychological or social needs, which threatens their health, safety and well-being. This includes failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and health care for one's own needs.<sup>6</sup> In Virginia, self-neglect is the most commonly reported form of elder abuse.<sup>7</sup>

# Frameworks

## Talking Elder Abuse



Explanatory Metaphor

### Social Structure

A metaphor for addressing the social conditions that enable elder abuse



The story you're telling:

Just like a stable building requires a strong set of support beams, we need a solid social structure so that older people can live their lives to the fullest, participate in our communities, and live free from abuse.



Strategically redirects thinking away from patterns such as:

- Dependency = Vulnerability - Fatalism - Spotlight on Individuals
- Only Solution = Surveillance and Prosecution