



Recognising Elder Abuse

There are many signs you can look out for to help you recognise different types of elder abuse.

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What is elder abuse?



Note: You can find this video on [Compass.info](https://compass.info)

Each person's experience of elder abuse will be different, so it doesn't always look the same on the outside. And because the abuse is often being carried out by someone the older person trusts – and might rely on for care – they may be reluctant to talk about what's happening.

However, there are likely to be some signs that indicate something might be wrong – in particular, an unexplained change in an older person's behaviour or demeanour.



Signs to look out for

All of these signs could have an innocent explanation – but they could also indicate an older person is experiencing elder abuse.

Psychological abuse and coercive control

Unhappiness, loneliness or expressions of fear, unusual worry or anxiety may indicate that someone is experiencing [psychological abuse](#) or [coercive control](#). A person who stops going to their usual social activities, answering calls or seeing friends might be being pressured by a family member who wants to keep them isolated.

Expand and read this dropdown list for more warning signs that a person might be experiencing psychological abuse.

Warning signs in the perpetrator

- Calling the older person names or abusing them verbally
- Treating the older person like a child
- Threatening harm to the older person, other people or pets
- Engaging in emotional blackmail, such as threatening to withdraw access to grandchildren, family, friends, services or phone
- Threatening to place the older person in an aged care facility
- Preventing contact with family and friends
- Denying the person access to the phone or computer or withholding mail
- Preventing the person from engaging in religious or cultural practices
- Moving the person far away from family or friends

Warning signs in the older person

- Displaying any one or more of the following: resignation, shame, depression, tearfulness, confusion, agitation - or an increase in these behaviours
- Expressing feelings of helplessness
- Showing unexplained paranoia or excessive fear
- Having a change in appetite or sleep patterns, such as insomnia
- Expressing unusual passivity or anger
- Showing sadness or grief at the loss of interactions with others
- Withdrawing or seeming listless due to a lack of visitors
- Displaying changed levels of self-esteem
- Worrying or being anxious after a visit by a specific person or people
- Being socially isolated

Neglect

Neglect might be indicated by an older person appearing unkempt or wearing the wrong clothing for the weather, being particularly hungry or thirsty, losing weight or becoming unwell, or their home being unusually chaotic or dirty.

Expand and read this dropdown list for more warning signs that a person might be experiencing neglect.

Warning signs in the perpetrator

- Failing to provide the older person's basic needs, such as food, adequate or clean clothing, heating and medicines
- Under- or over-medicating
- Exposing the older person to danger or not supervising them, such as leaving them in an unsafe place or alone
- Acting overly attentive when other people are around
- Denying others the opportunity to provide appropriate care

Warning signs in the older person

- Wearing inadequate clothing
- Complaining of being too cold or too hot
- Having poor personal hygiene or an unkempt appearance
- Not receiving enough medical or dental care
- Having injuries that haven't been properly cared for
- Lacking necessary aids, such as a walking frame
- Being exposed to unsafe, unhealthy or unsanitary conditions
- Developing unexplained weight loss, dehydration, poor skin condition or malnutrition

Financial abuse

Money worry and anxiety, along with not being able to buy groceries or everyday items, might indicate [financial abuse](#). There might also be unusual activity in the person's bank account, changes to online passwords, or requests to visit a lawyer or bank to make sudden changes to a will.

Expand and read this dropdown list for more warning signs that a person might be experiencing financial abuse.

Warning signs in the perpetrator

- Making threats or being coercive over assets or wills
- Denying the person access to their own money or taking control of their finances against their wishes
- Abusing Powers of Attorney
- Taking or using personal items like jewellery, credit cards, cash, food and other possessions
- Using the person's banking and financial documents without authorisation
- Adding a signatory to a bank account

Warning signs in the older person

- Belongings disappearing without explanation
- Being unable to pay bills and explain why
- Making, or noticing, significant bank withdrawals
- Changing their will
- Experiencing blocks in access to their bank accounts or statements
- Accumulating unpaid bills
- Having an empty fridge
- Experiencing a difference between their living conditions and the money they have
- Having no money to pay for home essentials like food, clothing, and utilities

Physical abuse

Unexplained injuries and pain – or not being able to remember how an accident or bruise occurred – might be an indication of [physical abuse](#), particularly if the person is expressing fear and anxiety.

Expand and read this dropdown list for more warning signs that a person might be experiencing physical abuse.

Warning signs in the perpetrator

- Pushing, shoving or rough handling
- Kicking, hitting, punching, slapping, biting, and/or burning
- Applying physical restraint
- Denying the person medical treatment
- Locking the person in a room or home
- Tying the person to a chair or bed
- Intentionally causing an injury with a weapon or object
- Overusing or misusing medications

Warning signs in the older person

- Sustaining internal or external injuries, including sprains, dislocations and fractures, pressure sores, unexplained bruises or marks on different areas of the body
- Feeling pain when touched
- Having broken or healing bones
- Suffering lacerations to the mouth, lips, gums, eyes or ears
- Experiencing missing teeth and/or eye injuries
- Displaying evidence of hitting, punching, shaking or pulling, such as bruises, lacerations, choke marks, hair loss or welts
- Getting burns from things like rope, cigarettes, matches, an iron or hot water

Sexual abuse

It's not often talked about, but older people can experience sexual abuse – from long-term or more recent partners, or from another individual. Pain, fear and anxiety, as well as injuries to breasts and chest or genitals, could indicate the person is experiencing [sexual abuse](#).

Expand and read this dropdown list for more warning signs that a person might be experiencing sexual abuse.

Warning signs in the perpetrator

- Engaging in non-consensual sexual contact, language or exploitative behaviour
- Committing rape and sexual assault
- Cleaning or treating the person's genital area roughly or inappropriately
- Enforcing nudity of the older person against their will

Warning signs in the older person

- Developing an unexplained sexually transmitted disease or incontinence (bladder or bowel)
- Experiencing injury and trauma, such as scratches or bruises on the face, neck, chest, abdomen, thighs or buttocks
- Showing signs of physical trauma, including bleeding around the genitals, chest, rectum or mouth
- Having torn or bloody underclothing or bedding
- Displaying human bite marks
- Feeling anxious when around the perpetrator, and other psychological symptoms

How can I help?

If you notice that something is not right, there are things you can do to help.

[More information](#)





Common risk factors

Some characteristics, situations or risk factors can be common among older people who experience abuse. Understanding common risk factors can help us to recognise elder abuse when it occurs.

These risk factors don't mean that a person is definitely experiencing abuse, and they aren't the cause of the abuse. They simply indicate that at a population level, there is a statistical association between the risk factor and the occurrence of abuse.

For example, an older person who has some dependence on others for care may not experience abuse. However, if we were to group all the people who are experiencing abuse, a high proportion of them would be dependent on others for care. This means we can identify dependency as a risk factor, and it encourages us to pay more attention to it when we have some concerns.

Understanding risk factors also helps us decide how to support people and how to build and encourage protective factors.



Factors affecting the older person

Dependency

This includes being depended on for care and being dependent on others. An older person may look after or provide a home for someone else, including an intellectually, emotionally or mentally ill adult or a partner experiencing cognitive impairment. They might worry about who would provide that care if they stop doing so, and therefore don't complain about any abusive behaviour.

An older person who needs help with day-to-day tasks might feel they have to put up with some level of abuse in order to stay living in their own home or with family and receive that help.

A co-dependent relationship is one that works both ways. For example, the older person might be providing a home or financial support to an adult child in return for some care. However, although the adult child might be looking after the older person in some ways, they could be abusing them in others.

Regardless of the situation, if a person is unhappy or being disrespected, pressured or neglected, it might be elder abuse, and help is available.

Poor health and disability

There is a correlation between elder abuse and older people who have poor health or a disability. In some situations poor health or age-related illnesses may lead to someone requiring more care, and abuse happens in the context of that care relationship.

Elder abuse can also cause poor health in the older person, particularly if they are neglected, stressed or not being taken to appointments, exercise and social activities.

Reduced capacity

People with cognitive impairment, including dementia, have a higher risk of experiencing abuse and may face difficulties seeking help, particularly if they are not believed.

Past experiences of trauma, violence and conflict

Observations of family violence, in all its forms, have shown that people who have experienced previous trauma, including in childhood, are at increased risk of experiencing violence and conflict in later life.

Gender and sexual orientation

Women are at higher risk of experiencing elder abuse and other forms of family violence. Patriarchal beliefs about gender roles within families and marriages can lead to men's violence against women.

People from the LGBTIQ+ communities are more likely than others to experience abuse relating to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Mental health

People who experience elder abuse are more likely to experience poor mental health. In some situations it may be the effects of the abuse that lead to mental distress. In others it might be that poor mental health makes people more isolated and vulnerable to abusive behaviour.

Substance abuse and problem gambling

A person who is facing challenges with substance abuse or is engaging in problem gambling may be at risk of elder abuse through others taking advantage of their situation.

Social and cultural factors

Social and cultural factors are those related to a person's cultural environment and social networks. These factors can contribute to the type of abuse a person experiences, and they might also make it more difficult for them to stop the abuse or seek help.

Isolation

People can be socially isolated as well as physically or geographically isolated. Older people with few friends or close family, limited opportunities for social participation, or trouble accessing transport can easily be exploited. There might be no-one to ask for help and no-one to witness the abuse.

While some people are happy alone or with little company, others develop loneliness. This might make a person more vulnerable to a friend or family member who offers some company but is also abusive.

Cultural or generational attitudes

A person's culture, faith or ethnicity does not make them more likely to experience abuse, but it might influence their experience of abuse or perceptions of it. Generational attitudes and social norms can differ between cultures, particularly regarding roles and responsibilities within a family and community expectations. These beliefs and perceptions might make it more difficult to recognise abuse and seek help for it.

Language and cultural barriers

Responses and services are not always culturally safe and appropriate, which may inhibit a person from seeking help. Older people may feel reluctant to seek help if they fear racism or discrimination, or if assistance is not available in their language.

Living situation

An older person living alone may need more help from outsiders, which can increase the risk of abuse. On the other hand, an older person living with family (particularly if they have little choice about this) may be at risk of abuse if a family member takes advantage of or neglects them.

Economic factors

Financial pressures and worries about income can influence a person's decision-making and lead them to accept behaviours or situations that become abusive. Some people might have had little experience managing money throughout their life and, as a result, have low financial literacy, which can increase their risk of abuse.

Carer stress

Providing ongoing care for an older person can be stressful, particularly if there are existing tensions or conflict in the relationship. Sometimes a stressed carer can be abusive or hurtful. An overwhelmed carer may not be able to provide the necessary level of care, which can lead to neglect.

Family conflict and dysfunction

Families can sometimes be complicated. Those with a history of intergenerational violence might experience ongoing tension and conflict. Older family members may be punished as 'payback' or be caught within sibling rivalry.

Relationship breakdowns and separations can sometimes add to tensions and conflicts, particularly as family members make changes to living arrangements or care roles. Blended and step-families can sometimes be sites of complex family dynamics and conflict that can lead to abuse.

Lack of awareness of rights or help services

Some people may not know that the behaviour they are exposed to is abusive or that there are services available to help. Perhaps they are unaware of the services or don't believe their problems are serious enough to warrant getting help. Some perpetrators of abuse will deliberately isolate the older person or keep information and aged care services from them as part of the pattern of abusive behaviour.

Factors affecting the perpetrator

It's hard to work out for certain why people perpetrate elder abuse, because very few people own up to doing so. But listening to older people who have experienced abuse and looking at the context in which the abuse occurred has helped to identify some common factors among perpetrators of abuse.

The [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study](#) includes more detail about how different risk factors can relate more significantly to particular types of abuse.

Relationship to the older person

The most common perpetrators of elder abuse are the adult children of the older person. Sons and daughters commonly look after ageing parents, so it can be hard for others to recognise that the relationship might have become abusive.

The spouse or partner of an older person may engage in coercive control or abusive behaviour. Sometimes this is an extension of longstanding intimate partner violence, or it might be happening in a new relationship. It can also be conflict that has arisen from recent changes such as relationship breakdown, illness and dependency.

Other family members, such as grandchildren and sons- or daughters-in-law, can also be responsible for abuse towards an older person, sometimes while also providing some level of care.

Living situation

A significant number of older people who experience abuse indicate that the person responsible is an adult child who is living with them and dependent on them for housing. This living situation may have arisen because the son or daughter is also affected by mental or physical health issues, disability or financial problems.

An older person who moves in with a family member for care can also be at risk of abuse, particularly if they are isolated.

Mental health

In the National Prevalence Study and when accessing services, a significant number of older people report that the person perpetrating abuse has a mental health issue.

Physical health problems

A significant number of perpetrators of abuse are reported to have physical health problems, including long-term disability. This could indicate that for some situations of neglect, the abuse isn't deliberate but results from the carer being unable to provide the right care due to their own disability or poor health.

Substance abuse

A dependency on or abuse of drugs or alcohol is thought to be a significantly common factor among perpetrators of elder abuse.

Financial and housing pressures

Financial abuse often occurs in situations where the perpetrator is experiencing financial stress. This might be unemployment or housing stress, or it may be related to a failed business or a relationship breakdown.

Some perpetrators are impatient to receive the money they think of as their inheritance, or they wrongly believe their ageing parent no longer needs as much money as they have and should help struggling family members.

Who commits elder abuse?

A 2021 national survey found that family members are the most likely group of people to commit elder abuse.

[More information](#)



Recognising Elder Abuse webinar



Note: You can find this video on [Compass.info](https://compass.info)

REFERENCES AND CONTENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1. [Seven Years of Elder Abuse Data in Victoria 2020](#)

Content for parts of this page have been gathered from the following sources:

- [Seven Years of Elder Abuse Data in Victoria 2020](#)
- [ACT Elder Abuse Prevention Policy](#)
- [SA Health: Elder Abuse Risk Factors](#)
- [NSW Ageing & Disability Commission](#)
- [Advocare: Preventing Elder Abuse](#)
- [Elder Abuse Prevention Unit](#)