



Defining Elder Abuse

'Elder abuse' is a term used to describe abusive behaviour or a lack of care that results in harm or distress to an older person.

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What is elder abuse?

'Elder abuse' is a term used to describe abusive behaviour towards, or a lack of care that results in harm or distress to, an older person.



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

Elder abuse can occur in all kinds of relationships: between family generations, with intimate partners, and in non-family relationships, such as those involving carers, professionals and neighbours.

The [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study](#), conducted during 2020, defined elder abuse as:

“A single or repeated act, or failure to act, including threats, that results in harm or distress to an older person. These occur when there is an expectation of trust and/or where there is a power imbalance between the party responsible and the older person.”

There are many ways to address elder abuse, and we all have a role in recognising it and supporting older people to respond.

What does elder abuse look like?

Elder abuse can be difficult to recognise, and it can look different every time.

A person who is experiencing abuse may become withdrawn, anxious, fearful or depressed. They may be reluctant to seek help because they are worried about the consequences.

Read more about recognising elder abuse

Knowing if an older person is experiencing abuse starts by knowing what to look for.

[More information](#)



Elder abuse can take different forms: [psychological abuse](#), [neglect](#), [financial abuse](#), [physical abuse](#) or [sexual abuse](#). Often more than one type of abuse is used by the person responsible as a way of exerting their power, and it can continue over time.

Some examples of elder abuse include:

- threatening, pressuring and name-calling
- controlling an older person (or their money)
- withdrawing care as punishment
- pressuring or forcing an older person into a disadvantageous financial arrangement
- using rough handling and physical restraint
- preventing an older person from contacting family or friends
- failing to provide proper care
- causing sexual harm.



Why does elder abuse happen?

There is no simple answer, but there are some influencing factors.

Ageism is when a person is treated badly or discriminated against because of their age. Negative ageist stereotypes can promote the idea of older people being frail, dependent and cognitively impaired. This can suggest that older people are vulnerable, less valued by society, and require care. Even though these perceptions are incorrect, they can influence how someone behaves towards older people.

A perpetrator of abuse might believe these ageist assumptions and try to exert their power over an older person while pretending to care for them. Others might try to take advantage of an older family member's accumulated wealth and put pressure on them to pass on their money to younger generations.

Ageist assumptions can also make older people feel like they can't speak up about uncomfortable behaviour. All too often, older people are ignored, not believed or thought to have unreliable memories.

Elder abuse often occurs within families. As people age, their abilities and needs change, and this affects their role within the family. These changes, as well as factors such as economic pressures, relationship dynamics and intergenerational violence and trauma, can contribute to tensions and conflict, which can lead to abuse.



Is some level of abuse and disrespect just a part of getting older?

No. Every older person has a right to be safe and treated with respect. The United Nations Principles for Older Persons state that every older person has the right to:

- independence
- participation
- care
- self-fulfilment
- dignity.

Elder abuse is never acceptable. Addressing elder abuse is a way of ensuring older people are respected and valued as important members of our society.

Who experiences elder abuse?

Unfortunately, any older person can experience elder abuse. This includes people of all genders and ethnicities and from all social classes.

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study indicated that one in 6 older Australians (15%) reported experiencing abuse in the previous 12 months.

The impact of the historical treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities means that those people are subject to higher levels of violence than other members of the population. In turn, this affects the way older Aboriginal people are treated or seek help.

Older people who are isolated or who require some assistance with day-to-day tasks can be at higher risk. The same study suggested that older people with poorer health or a disability are more likely to experience elder abuse, as are those who have less frequent contact with family members and friends.

Read more about factors that increase the risk of elder abuse

Social, environmental and personal factors can increase the likelihood of an older person being mistreated.

[More information](#)



Who is capable of elder abuse?

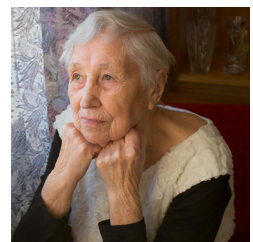
Unfortunately, elder abuse is mostly carried out by someone the older person trusts. This person might be genuinely playing a caring role while also behaving in a bullying or abusive manner.

'Coercive control' is a term used to describe patterns of behaviour where a person seeks to control and manipulate the life of another person. It's a type of abuse that often starts slowly but increases over time, and it's frequently mixed with loving and conciliatory behaviour from the perpetrator.

Read more about coercive control

Coercive control can be difficult to recognise and very difficult to prove.

[More information](#)



Elder abuse is typically committed by family members – and it often involves coercive control, as the perpetrator hides their abuse behind a pretence of family care and responsibility. Adult children are the most common perpetrators of elder abuse, followed by intimate partners, then partners of adult children, and (to a much lesser extent) grandchildren.

Both men and women have been known to use abusive behaviour towards older people. In many cases the abuser lives with the older person and might be reliant on them. A significant number of abusers are reported to have a range of challenges of their own, including mental ill health, substance abuse and financial problems.

It's important to note that many carers go out of their way to genuinely support the person they are looking after and may simply need more information and support. However, lack of knowledge is never an excuse for the mistreatment of an older person.

Elder Abuse Explained Webinar



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

REFERENCES

1. [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, 2021](#)
2. [United Nations Principles for Older Persons, 1991](#)