



Why is elder abuse so hard to detect?

Elder abuse in Australia is a serious and growing social issue. Part of the challenge is that it can be very hard to spot. We explore why.

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Evelyn, 79, has lived independently since her husband died 10 years ago. She maintains their home and garden, sees several long-term friends and goes on regular outings. Although she is comfortable on her own, Evelyn didn't hesitate to say 'yes' when her newly separated daughter, Shelley, lost her job and asked to move in for a few weeks.

At first, all went smoothly. Shelley, who's 49, helped Evelyn with household tasks, and she enjoyed having company again. But the 'few weeks' turned into months, and gradually the situation changed.



What is elder abuse?

Shelley became moody and unpredictable as the weeks without a job went by. She frequently lost her temper with Evelyn, yelling at her and insulting her. She started opening her mother's mail and demanded access to her bank account, insisting she should handle the bills because Evelyn 'clearly' couldn't manage them herself.

Shelley also discouraged Evelyn from seeing her friends, arguing that they were trying to get to her money and that she just couldn't see it. Evelyn had never seen her daughter act so explosive, and she grew frightened. It felt safer to let the friendships go than insist on keeping them.

Evelyn is experiencing elder abuse: abusive behaviour towards an older person, or a lack of care, that causes them harm or distress.

Elder abuse can happen in all kinds of relationships:

- between family generations
- with intimate partners
- with carers and professional services
- with friends and neighbours.

It may take different forms, and the person responsible may use more than one type of abuse. The most common forms are:

- psychological abuse
- physical abuse
- financial abuse
- sexual abuse
- neglect.

Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, people don't realise that what's happening to them is abuse. That's why Agnes (below) didn't ask for help.

Normal behaviour or elder abuse? Agnes's story

Agnes had been seeing a counsellor for several months to help her manage 'life problems'. During the sessions, she mentioned that her adult son often put her down, yelled at her, and demanded financial support. The counsellor recognised these behaviours as emotional and social abuse.

With the counsellor's help, Agnes came to see the treatment as abuse, not 'life problems'. She realised that she had not questioned or objected to this behaviour because it mirrored the way her ex-husband used to treat her.



Elder abuse is complex

Evelyn found herself feeling isolated, jumpy and confused as time went on. Shelley told her she was 'getting old and forgetful' and was lucky to have her there to help her.

Evelyn didn't know what to do. She struggled to believe her daughter was behaving this way. She was also scared of Shelley's increasingly unpredictable reactions to anything she did.

Elder abuse can be hard to recognise, define and measure, whether it's happening to you or to someone else. The reason is that elder abuse is a complex issue:

- it takes different forms and can be deliberate or inadvertent, so it's more complicated to address
- it can start as minor, unpleasant behaviours and gradually get worse, so it's hard to tell when it became abuse
- it may involve people who should be trustworthy, so their abusive behaviour can be hard to believe
- it can happen anywhere – at home, in other people's homes, in residential care homes, in support service visits – which makes it harder to define
- it often happens out of sight, so there are no witnesses, and the abused person may feel unsure about what happened
- it can be understood differently in different cultural contexts, with factors such as language barriers and attitudes to money management complicating perceptions.

Many people find it difficult to name the way they're treated as 'elder abuse', especially if the person causing them harm is their adult child. They may fear losing the relationship with their child or getting them into trouble. They may even feel that they failed as a parent.

Experiencing abuse can drain a person's confidence, so it can become hard to make sense of what's happening. Feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt are common and can make it hard to reach for help.

Fear of possible consequences is a common reason why older people don't speak up against abuse. The people causing harm sometimes threaten to withdraw access to grandchildren, 'put you into a home', or take away care services.

Many older people were brought up not to complain. Others, like Evelyn and Shauna (below), may find it hard to admit that someone they trust could act as they do.

Family loyalty gets in the way: Shauna's story

Shauna's adult son, Patrick, moved into her home after her husband died. However, Patrick became physically and psychologically abusive towards his 75-year-old mother.

Shauna was reluctant to get help because Patrick has problems with drug addiction. She felt the abusive behaviour was not the 'real' Patrick and that the drugs made him behave this way.



Other reasons elder abuse is missed

Evelyn's friends didn't realise what was going on. They were surprised that she had lost interest in seeing them, but Shelley explained that her mother had decided to spend her time doing other things at the moment. Shelley was always so warm and friendly that they didn't question what she said.

The garden club coordinator did think it a little strange that one of her most enthusiastic attendees had stopped coming to the monthly meetings, but she decided it was none of her business. Besides, she thought, older people get a bit erratic with age.

Elder abuse can be hard to detect because other people aren't there to see the behaviour when it happens. Or if they are there and the person causing harm behaves differently in front of them, there's no reason to suspect anything.

There are many other reasons why people may not see the signs of elder abuse. If several are combined, the potential to miss what's happening can be powerful.

- They may not be aware of elder abuse or know what to look for.
- They may not be in regular contact with older people in their neighbourhood or extended family, so they don't notice that anything has changed.
- Abuse in the form of manipulation, control or threats is harder to spot than something tangible, like increased withdrawals from bank accounts.
- In some areas and cultures, family matters are considered private or there might be social stigma attached to any disharmony.
- They may not understand what 'abuse' is, due to language and literacy barriers or long-held societal or cultural beliefs.
- Ageist thinking may mean the complaint is not taken seriously when an older person does speak up. For example, diminished confidence may be dismissed as 'getting vague in their old age'. Odd financial transactions may be taken as a sign of 'losing their faculties'.
- If the older person is unable or unwilling to speak up, there may not be enough for anyone else to notice.

Older people who have been isolated by the abuse have limited opportunities to speak up – or for anyone else to hear them if they try. This happened to Kemal (below).

Unable to seek help: Kemal's story

Kemal, 85, had managed living by himself at home for some years after his wife died. They had no children, but his niece, Fatma, visited now and then. She helped him arrange home care services, as he struggled with more complex forms and processes in English.

As Kemal's mobility became more limited, Fatma started suggesting that she move in to take care of him. Kemal eventually decided to accept her offer. Managing alone was getting more difficult, and he thought the company would be nice.

After moving in, Fatma cancelled the home care services, saying she was there to do the caring. At first she attended to Kemal's needs, but she quickly started skipping things, like helping him shower daily and remember his medications. She went out a lot and left him alone for most of the day.

Soon Fatma stopped providing any care that Kemal needed. His medications had run out, his clothes were never washed, and he saw no one other than Fatma for weeks on end. He felt unclean, distressed, helpless and increasingly depressed. He couldn't leave the house on his own and didn't know who he could call to get help. Meanwhile his niece continued to live rent-free in his home.



Recognising the signs of elder abuse

Evelyn was admitted to hospital after a minor fall. The nursing staff soon noticed that whenever Shelley visited, Evelyn became anxious and confused. They also noticed that Evelyn talked about people she 'used to see', yet no friends came to visit. Concerned, the staff arranged for a social worker to pop by and chat with her.

As Evelyn answered the social worker's gentle questions, she finally admitted she felt unhappy, trapped and confused. She struggled to call Shelley's behaviour 'abuse', because she was her daughter. Evelyn couldn't see a way to solve the problem when Shelly had nowhere else to live. She was worried about being alone again, too, because she had lost much of her old confidence.

In Evelyn's case, her friends and contacts hadn't picked up on all the clues for various reasons, including lack of awareness, Shelley's deception, and busy lives. However, the health care professionals had been trained to recognise signs of elder abuse and to know what to do.



Getting help can stop elder abuse

The hospital social worker arranged contact with a local community legal centre. The lawyer talked to Evelyn about the different types of elder abuse and her rights and options. They helped her with the difficult process of talking to Shelley about her behaviour and telling her to move out. With the legal support, Evelyn could take back control of her finances.

Evelyn found this stage emotionally difficult. The loss of trust in Shelley was very painful to face, but the social worker provided lots of time and support. Reconnecting with her friends and rejoining their activities also helped.

A year later, Evelyn finally felt she had regained her former confidence and independence. Shelley was making efforts to restore the relationship. She had found another job and had seen a counsellor about her underlying issues. Evelyn set firm boundaries around her contact and behaviour, and they only met up when another person was around.

Evelyn's situation changed because she was put in touch with people who could help her. Until then, she didn't know what help was available or what she could do.

Compass aims to raise awareness of elder abuse, its warning signs and where to get help. Making information and resources available can empower older people to speak up and regain control of their lives if they are experiencing elder abuse. Their families, friends and supporters are also enabled to step in and provide assistance.

With increased awareness, open discussion and shared resources, real change is possible. Everyone has the right to feel safe and the right to independence and autonomy. Age doesn't change that.



Where to get help for elder abuse

- In an emergency, call 000 for police
- Compass.info – look under the Find Help tab for information, service providers and advice in your state or territory
- 1800 ELDERhelp (1800 353 374) – call this national elder abuse helpline to be directed to appropriate support services in your state or territory
- Community legal centres
- Advocacy services such Seniors Rights Service and Relationships Australia
- Your doctor or other professional supporter
- Family members, friends and social contacts



Find out more

Compass resources

- 'Defining elder abuse' and 'Recognising elder abuse' webpages
- 'Helping me respond' and 'Helping others to respond' webpages
- 'Age isn't the problem. Ageism is.' article

Research and policy

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