
Fact Sheet

NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

Domestic Violence: Older Women Can Be Victims Too

“Many forms of verbal and psychological abuse appear relatively harmless at first, but expand and grow more menacing over time, sometimes gradually and subtly. As victims adapt to abusive behavior, the verbal or psychological tactics can gain a strong ‘foothold’ in victims’ minds, making it difficult for them to recognize the severity of the abuse over time.”

– Witness Justice, Maryland

Domestic violence, regrettably, knows no age limits. Every hour of every day, some woman somewhere faces the horror of physical, emotional, financial, or sexual abuse by someone they know well and with whom they have an ongoing relationship—a spouse or companion, son, daughter, or other family member.

Education and support are vital to older women’s safety—Secrecy is an abuser’s best protection.

Facts on Late Life Domestic Violence

- Domestic elder abuse is primarily family abuse. Studies repeatedly show that the overwhelming majority of confirmed cases occur in domestic settings.¹
- A significant portion of elder abuse cases reported in the United States involve spouse/partner violence.²
- Older women are likelier than younger women to experience violence for a longer time, to be in current violent relationships, and to have health and mental health problems.³

Signs That Something May Be Wrong

What follows is a chart listing some of the warning signs of domestic abuse in later life. All of the signs need not be present for abuse to be occurring. Answering yes to one or several may be the cue to further questioning.

What Is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is not simply an argument. It is:

“A pattern of coercive control that one person exercises over another. Abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, emotional insults, and economic deprivation as a way to dominate their victims and get their way.”

– Susan Schechter,
Visionary leader in the
movement to end
family violence

Recognizing Domestic Violence in Later Life

A Victim May . . .

- Have *injuries that do not match explanation* of how they occurred.
- Have repeated "*accidental*" injuries.
- Appear *isolated*.
- Say or hint that she is *afraid*.
- Give *coded communications* about what is occurring.
- Attempt or think about *suicide*.
- Have a history of *alcohol or drug abuse* (including prescription drugs).
- Be "*difficult*" or hard to get along with.
- Have vague, chronic, *non-specific complaints*.
- Be emotionally and/or financially *dependent on her abuser*.
- Miss *appointments*.
- Delay seeking *medical help*.
- Show signs of *depression, stress, or trauma*.

A Perpetrator May . . .

- *Minimize or deny* the victim's injuries or complaints.
- Attempt to convince others that she is *incompetent or crazy*.
- *Blame* the victim for being clumsy or difficult.
- *Physically assault or threaten violence* against the victim or victim's family, friends, pets, or others.
- *Forbid the victim from contacting family, friends, service providers*.
- *Threaten or harass* the victim.
- *Stalk* the victim.
- Act *overly attentive* toward the victim.
- Act *loving, kind, compassionate* to the victim, especially in presence of others.
- Attempt or think about *suicide*.
- Have a history of *alcohol or drug abuse*.
- *Speak on behalf of the victim*, insist on being present during every interaction.
- Say the victim is *incompetent, unhealthy, or crazy*.
- Be emotionally and/or financially *dependent on the victim*.
- *Cancel the victim's appointments* or refuse her the use of a car or other transportation.
- *Cover up the abuse* by taking victim to different doctors, hospitals, or pharmacies.
- *Refuse to purchase needed prescription drugs, medical supplies, and/or assistive devices*.
- *Turn family members against* the victim.
- Talk about her as if she is not there or not a person (*dehumanize victim*).

Excerpted and adapted with permission from Elder Abuse: A Multidisciplinary Approach (in press), by Bonnie Brandl, Carmel Dyer, Candice Heisler, Joanne Otto, Lori Stiegel, and Randy Thomas.

Why Do Women Stay? Why Do Women Return?

- *Fear that disclosure* will lead to something far worse – mental or physical anguish, deprivation, or even death.
- *Fear of the unknown* or of going it alone.
- *Economic dependence* – Who will take care of her? Where will she live? What will she do if she has no health insurance?
- *Fear of institutionalization* – If she is frail, ill, or disabled, will she be forced to move to a nursing home?
- *Values/culture* – Separation, divorce, and legal orders of protection are not an option.
- *Shame and guilt* – Victims often blame themselves for any crime perpetrated against them. She may feel she is responsible.
- *Denial and minimization* – She may feel she needs to protect her abuser by refusing to press charges or by changing her story of what really happened.
- *Lack of information* about alternatives.

What Every Woman Should Know

- Domestic violence is a crime. Abusers are apt to play the blame game, make excuses, or deny wrongdoing. But their behavior can never be justified.
- From belittling and bullying to isolation, threats, and coercion, abusing others is a way to exert power and control. Abusers choose to act this way. It is not about loss of control, it is about *getting* control.
- Older women have both a right and a need to protect themselves.

Help Is Available

If you or someone you know is being abused, *tell someone*. You are not alone.

If you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police department right away.

National Center on Elder Abuse Partners

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE UNITS ON AGING
Lead partner
1201 15th Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
202.898.2586

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION COMMISSION ON LAW AND AGING
740 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
202.662.8692

CLEARINGHOUSE ON ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF THE ELDERLY
Department of Consumer Studies
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716
302.831.3525

NATIONAL ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES ASSOCIATION
1900 13th Street
Suite 303
Boulder, CO 80302
720.565.0906

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PREVENTION OF ELDER ABUSE
1612 K Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006
202.682.4140

Additional Resources

NATIONAL
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
HOTLINE
www.ndvh.org

NATIONAL
CLEARINGHOUSE ON
ABUSE IN LATER LIFE
Wisconsin Coalition
Against Domestic
Violence
www.ncall.org

NATIONAL ADVISORY
COUNCIL ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN
[http://
toolkit.ncjrs.org/](http://toolkit.ncjrs.org/)

AMERICAN BAR
ASSOCIATION
COMMISSION ON
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
[www.abanet.org/
domviol/
victims.html](http://www.abanet.org/domviol/victims.html)

MARICOPA ELDER
ABUSE PREVENTION
ALLIANCE
Phoenix, AZ
[www.aaaphx.org/
main/
domesticViolence/](http://www.aaaphx.org/main/domesticViolence/)

SARE OPTIONS FOR
SENIORS
Irvine, CA
[www.humanoption
s.org/elder.html](http://www.humanoptions.org/elder.html)

For emergency safety services, support, or shelter, call your local hotline or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233). Some local domestic violence programs have specialized services for older women. You don't have to stay in a shelter to get help.

If you suspect elder abuse and are concerned about your well-being or another woman's safety, call your state or local Adult Protective Services hotline.

To find help in your area, call the national **Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116** or go to the National Center on Elder Abuse Web site at www.elderabusecenter.org and then click "Where to Report Abuse."

What Others Can Do

- *Familiarize yourself with the signs* of elder abuse and the dynamics of late life domestic violence.
- *Share this information* with older women.
- *Learn about services for domestic violence* in the community. Make referrals and offer to advocate.
- *Post literature about late life domestic violence* in places where women are likely to visit and not be under the influence of the suspected abuser — doctors' offices, senior centers, restrooms, and other safe places.
- *Ask and listen*. Open the lines of communication. Ask her if there is something wrong, if she feels isolated, or if she is worried about something, and then *listen* to her story.
- *Offer friendship and support*. Women who have experienced domestic violence often cite as most helpful the person who took the time to listen, or who said, "You do not deserve to be treated like this."

Domestic Violence Knows No Age Limits

Sources

¹ National Center on Elder Abuse. *National Elder Abuse Incidence Study: Final Report*. Washington, DC, 1998; National Center on Elder Abuse. *The 2004 Survey of State Adult Protective Services: Abuse of Adults 60 Years of Age and Older*. Washington, DC, 2005.

² Harris, S. "For Better or Worse: Spouse Abuse Grown Old." *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* 8, no. 1 (1996): 1-33; Mouton, C. et al. "The Associations Between Health and Domestic Violence in Older Women: Results of a Pilot Study." *Journal of Women's Health and Gender-Based Medicine* 1, no. 9 (1999): 1173-1179; Pillemer, K. and D. Finkelhor. "The Prevalence of Elder Abuse: A Random Sample Survey." *The Gerontologist* 28, no. 1 (1988): 51-57; Podnieks, E. "National Survey on Abuse of the Elderly in Canada." *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* 4, no. 1/2 (1992): 5-58.

³ Wilke, D. and L. Vinton. "The Nature and Impact of Domestic Violence Across Age Cohorts." *Affilia Journal of Women and Social Work* 20, no. 3 (2005): 316-328.

The National Center on Elder Abuse

(NCEA) serves as a national resource for elder rights advocates, adult protective services, law enforcement and legal professionals, medical and mental health providers, public policy leaders, educators, researchers, and concerned citizens. It is the mission of NCEA to promote understanding, knowledge sharing, and action on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

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