

# Preventing Abuse and Neglect in Later Life

Older adults can experience several different kinds of harms from people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an adult's health, happiness and safety.

Abuse is not limited to older adults of any particular culture, ethnic group, social background or religion. Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia experience abuse or neglect at some point. Abuse of older adults can occur at home, in the community or in institutional settings. Those who abuse are most often family members (the person's spouse or children), but they can also include friends, landlords and staff.

## What types of abuse or neglect can older adults experience?

Abuse and neglect can take many forms, including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Some types of abuse and neglect violate the older adult's basic rights and several types are crimes.

- **Physical abuse** includes violence or rough treatment, even if it does not leave an injury. A push that might not hurt a younger person can be very harmful to an older adult.
- **Emotional abuse** includes name calling, intimidation, threats or any treatment that offends an older person's sense of dignity and self-worth. Emotional abuse is often a way that people attempt to control an older person.
- **Financial abuse** is the most common form of abuse that older adults face. Examples of financial abuse include pressuring an older adult with requests for money; family or other people using an older adult's property or money without the person's full knowledge and consent or the improper use of power of attorney.

- **Sexual abuse** is when a person pressures an older adult for intimacy or sexually harasses or sexually assaults them. Sexual abuse can also include sexual comments or jokes, touching or leering. People of any age can experience sexual abuse, and it happens more often to older women than older men.
- **Violations of rights** means ignoring older adults' rights to privacy, information or community supports. In some cases, rules or policies may violate an older adult's rights.
- **Neglect** refers to situations where a person has a duty to provide care or assistance to an older adult, but does not. For example, the caregiver might stop paying the bills or providing food, medication or other forms of assistance that the older adult needs. Some people may do this on purpose. Others simply do not know how to help.

## Why does abuse happen?

Some people learn to use violence and control in their relationships with other people. Many people in society have negative beliefs about older people or may not understand them. Others do not treat older adults with respect. This may increase the risk of abuse or may be the excuse people use for their abusive behaviour.

Some people experience personal problems or stresses that may increase their risk of harming or neglecting others. Living together with older adults or poverty may create family tensions and may lead to abuse or neglect. In some cases, family pride can keep abuse hidden, but caring communities can also help protect people from abuse and neglect. It does not matter who the abuser is, or what the person's reason is, no one deserves to be abused or mistreated.

## Abuse and neglect hurt

When abuse or neglect happens to an older adult, it often affects the person's physical and emotional health. Abused older adults lose trust and sometimes begin to question their own judgment and decision making. They can feel depressed and even suicidal. Abusers can also feel mixed emotions about their harmful behaviour. Abuse and neglect have significant impacts on families and communities.

## Abuse and neglect can be prevented

Abuse or neglect rarely stops by itself. It takes many people working together to make it stop. There is no law in British Columbia that requires people to report abuse and neglect of older adults. However, you can help an abused or neglected senior to get help and prevent the situation from getting worse.

- Recognize abuse and neglect and speak up about it.
- Listen to the older person in a non-judgmental manner.
- Respect the person's choices.
- Know where to call to get information.

### If you are a service provider working with older adults:

- help older adults and families learn more about their rights and responsibilities;
- help older adults build or regain their confidence and skills;
- help to reduce the person's social isolation; and
- have appropriate resources in place to help older adults and families.

## For more information

**If you discover a crime or dangerous situation is occurring to an older adult, call the police or 911 immediately.** If you are not sure if an older person is being abused or neglected and you want to talk to a health professional, you can call the BC NurseLine 24 hours a day for information and advice.

For resources available in your community, contact the **Home and Community Care Office** in your local health authority or contact the

**B.C. Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors** at 604-437-1940 or at <http://www.bceas.ca/>.

The staff of your local **Home and Community Care Office** has a responsibility to investigate more serious reports of suspected abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults. The **Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee** may be able to help if the older adult is not mentally capable of making decisions or judging their own ability to live at risk.

For information on legal services, including how to access legal aid and advice, contact the **Legal Services Society of BC LawLINE** at 604-408-2172 or 1-866-577-2525 (outside of Greater Vancouver) or at <http://www.lss.bc.ca/>.

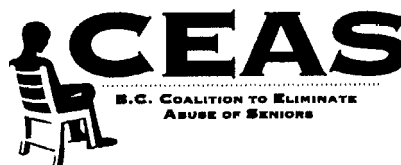
**Victim Link** also provides information for victims of family and sexual violence and crime. You can call 1-800-563-0808 any time and from anywhere in British Columbia. Victim Link offers multi-language services and services for people who are deaf or hearing impaired.

**For more information, see other topics in the [BC HealthFiles Elder Abuse Prevention Series](#).**

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# Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Information for Family Caregivers

## Most families are supportive

Eighty per cent of caregiving to older adults is provided by families, usually by the person's spouse or partner or by adult children, quite often a daughter or daughter-in-law.

Families may help an aging parent or spouse with daily activities, finances (such as banking or paying bills) or personal care such as bathing and dressing. They may take on these responsibilities out of love, a sense of personal or family duty, feelings of guilt or because there is no one else available. Every family is different. Some family relationships are very positive and mutually supportive. Others are filled with mixed feelings, conflict and tension.

## Sometimes abuse or neglect occurs

Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia experience abuse or neglect at some point. In many cases, the person who is abusive is their spouse or partner, a family member or other people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an older adult's health, happiness and safety. It can take many forms, including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social.

## Why do some family members become abusive or neglectful?

Most people do not intend to become abusive or neglectful. They may not feel comfortable with the changing roles in their family, especially if the older adult now needs to rely on them. Some family members may not know how to provide the care or assistance needed. They may not understand the nature of the disease or condition and how it affects the older adult's abilities or behaviour.

For some spouses in later life, both the person providing care and the person receiving care may have some difficulties with their health, memory or ability to make decisions. This can affect how people relate and react to each other.

In some situations of abuse, people have used physical force or emotional control over the other person throughout the relationship. Some people receiving care may have been abusive or controlling earlier in life. Now that the older person depends on others, the caregiver may feel it is their turn to treat the parent or spouse in a similar way.

Family caregivers often have many competing responsibilities for their children, their spouse or partner, and their job. Trying to juggle these can lead to tensions and conflicts within the family.

Sometimes family caregivers may have significant personal problems, including financial, mental health, substance abuse, or gambling problems. This may mean that hands-on caregiving may be difficult for them to safely offer.

## Helping with finances creates special risks

A family member may not realize what their legal responsibilities are when assisting an older adult with finances, particularly through a power of attorney. They may take over the finances because it simply seems easier. Some may incorrectly feel they are entitled to the money or property or assume they will get it anyway when the person dies, so they might as well use it now. This may lead to financial abuse. For more information, see BC HealthFile [#93e Financial Abuse of Older Adults](#).

## Does stress lead to abuse?

Most people giving care to someone else (even someone they care about deeply) can feel very stressed at times. Fortunately, people can learn to recognize the warning signs of stress and plan ways to avoid the situation becoming abusive. To prevent a stressful situation from "going too far," pay close attention to your own emotional and physical health.

## Some warning signs of stress

- Changes in your feelings (such as becoming anxious

or depressed).

- Always feeling exhausted.
- Needing medication to help you sleep or cope.
- Changes in your lifestyle, including the amount that you eat, the amount of tea, coffee or alcohol you drink.
- Visiting your doctor more often, or developing health problems.

Everyone has a limit and each person's limit is different. People's needs and abilities, including your own, can change over time. Be willing and able to accept help, especially when it is offered. Ask for it, when it's not.

## Take care of yourself

Taking some regular time for you is an important part of good caregiving. Even little breaks from caregiving, including short walks or a favourite hobby can help refresh you mentally and physically. Set aside part of the day to do these things. Give up some of the responsibilities you used to do. Make use of local caregiver support groups. They can help you find resources or learn useful tips, as well as to share your feelings.

## Abuse prevention starts with families

There are many different ways that families can reduce the chance of abuse or neglect happening to others or themselves in later life.

### 1. Good communication helps

Discussion and support within families, as well as between couples is very important. Talk about the current situation and plan for future needs. What does the older adult want? What can they do on their own or with some support? This can help to create realistic expectations in families.

Regular contact between family members is very useful. This can help everyone become aware of changes in a parent, spouse or partner's health. Families may recognize problems earlier and help avoid a crisis from developing.

Couples can often make small changes in housing and support as they grow older. Some health changes can be prevented or slowed down.

### 2. Work together

Good caregiving means having the time, right temperament and resources to take on this

responsibility. Where possible, try to share the caregiving responsibilities. Family members often have different kinds of skills and can be supportive in various ways. Also learn about any available community resources.

### 3. Strengthen relationships

Even if an older person's health or abilities change, many aspects of the relationship remain very rewarding. Some families strengthen relationships by keeping in touch, sharing old traditions and building new ones.

## Help is available

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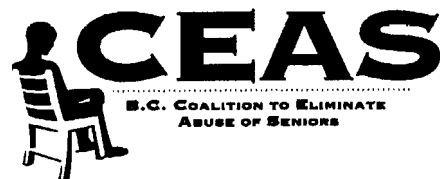
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## Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Understanding Gender Differences

Older adults can experience several different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an older adult's health, happiness and safety.

Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia will experience abuse or neglect in later life. Abuse of older adults can occur at home, in the community, or in institutional settings. It can take many forms, including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Some forms of abuse and neglect violate the older adult's basic rights, and several types are crimes.

### Who is abused? Who is the abuser?

Older women are more likely to be victims of family violence than older men. Two out of every three victims of abuse in later life are women.

Both men and women can be abusive or neglectful. However, in approximately two thirds of the abuse cases that come to the attention of community agencies, the abusers are men. Eighty per cent of those accused of violently harming an older family member are men.

In most cases, older women usually experience abuse or neglect from their spouse, partner or her adult children.

For older men, the abuse or neglect is most likely to come from his adult children or close friends.

Although older adults may experience harm from strangers, this is much less common.

### When might the abuse begin?

Women are more likely than men to experience abuse in their younger years that may continue into later life. The effects of many years of abuse can be hard on a person's health.

For many older men, their first experience with abuse or neglect may occur in later life. It may begin after the man has developed a disabling condition and is relying on others for help.

### Differences among women and men

Abuse hurts both older men and older women. However, they may face different risks and may be affected in different ways.

- Older women are more likely than older men to have experienced many years of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- On average, a woman tends to be smaller than a man, and she may have less ability to defend herself from physical abuse.
- Older women are more likely than older men to have disabling conditions, be widowed or living alone.
- Older women are much more likely than older men to live in a residential care facility, where abuse may occur from staff, family or volunteers.

Because an older woman may have fewer resources, she may be reluctant to leave the abusive relationship.

### Similarities among women and men

Abuse and neglect significantly affect older adults emotionally and physically. Both older women and older men may feel shocked, embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed that someone they trust is hurting or taking advantage of them.

A woman may be concerned about how it reflects on her as a mother or grandmother. A man experiencing abuse may hesitate telling anyone if he feels it will reflect badly on him.

## Money, gender and abuse

Financial abuse is the most common form of abuse that older adults are likely to face. It may affect older women and older men in important ways.

- Older women are more likely to depend on others to help them with financial matters.
- Some older women have little financial experience and may not have had a bank account.
- Older men are more likely to have regular income, such as a pension.

Women may often have fewer financial resources to begin with and they tend to live longer than older men do. This means that if women lose income or assets through financial abuse, it will probably affect them significantly and longer.

## Seeking help

In helping an older person who is experiencing abuse or neglect, it is important to understand their situation and how they feel. It is important to understand why abused older adults stay or "put up with abuse". Be aware of any stereotypes or assumptions you may have about older adults, families, or diverse cultures. Recognize circumstances that may contribute to older adults not seeking the help they need.

- Often older adults may not realize there are local resources available for them. Some older adults may feel they must help and protect their spouse or grown children, even if they are abusive. They may not think about the consequences or effects on themselves.
- Many older women who experience abuse are concerned they will be worse off financially if they leave their spouse or partner.
- In spousal abuse, family members may discourage the parent from taking action. They may be protective of the other parent, or may not want to take sides.
- Some older women and men depend on others, including people from whom they may experience abuse, for assistance with daily living. This can have a major impact on the older person's decision about whether to leave, or not, and how to seek help.

- An older person's community, culture and perspective on life can also affect how they react to the abuse. In many cultures, people expect families to keep problems private or hidden. Older immigrants may face language barriers to seeking help. They may also have no pension or other resources of their own, and they may have little family support.

## For more information

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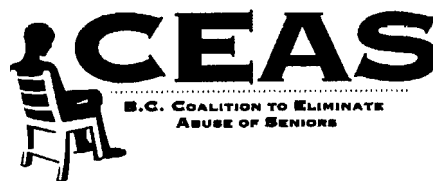
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## Health Effects of Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults

Older adults can experience several different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an older person's health, happiness and safety.

Abuse can occur to older adults of any culture, ethnic group, social background or religion. Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia experience abuse or neglect at some point. Abuse and neglect of older adults can occur at home, in the community, or in institutional settings. It can take many forms including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Some forms of abuse and neglect violate the older adult's basic rights, and several types are crimes.

### Why does abuse and neglect happen?

Some people learn to use violence and control in their relationships with other people. Many people in society have negative beliefs about older people or may not understand them. Others do not treat older adults with respect. This may increase the risk of abuse or may be the excuse or reason people use for their abusive behaviour.

Some people experience personal problems or stresses that increase their risk of behaving in harmful ways towards others. Living together with older adults or other factors, such as poverty, may create family tensions and lead to abuse or neglect. In some cases, family pride can keep abuse hidden. Caring communities can help protect people from abuse.

### Signs of abuse and neglect

The most obvious signs of physical abuse are falls, unexplained bruises, broken bones, and burns. An older adult who experiences abuse may also have head injuries or injuries to the mouth that need dental care and attention. An older adult who is neglected may be severely dehydrated or suffering from malnutrition.

Other health effects of abuse or neglect are less obvious and may include sleeping difficulties, stomach problems, or breathing problems. Many of the signs of abuse and neglect may be hidden. Some of the signs of abuse, such as frequent falls or confusion, may be mistaken as a part of aging. Some signs of abuse or neglect may look like other health conditions common in later life. People may not recognize or identify these as abuse.

Health effects do not always show up the same way for everyone. Older adults who experience abuse or neglect may have difficulty sleeping, lose interest in life, change their habits, such as eating, drinking or medications, or have suicidal thoughts.

### What are the health effects of abuse and neglect on older adults?

Abuse and neglect can have long-term effects on the health and well-being of older adults. This often depends on emotional support and the response of family and friends. It also depends on whether the individual feels some control of their situation.

In general, older adults have less physical strength and are less able to defend themselves from physical abuse. Older bones break more easily and take longer to heal. These injuries can lead to serious harm or death in older adults. For example, physical abuse may cause a hip fracture, and the injured adult would need surgery and community supports.

Living with abuse and neglect can significantly increase the person's chances of becoming ill or dying early. The stress of living with abuse or neglect may also make other health problems worse.

Many older adults who experience financial abuse also face emotional abuse. This can lead to ongoing distress and financial strain in the older person's life. If the abuser controls the older adult's money, the older adult may have fewer resources to take care of their own health with proper housing, good nutrition and healthy activities.

## Emotional effects of abuse and neglect

Individuals who cause abuse and/or neglect to older adults often threaten, harass, or intimidate them. They may cause fears in older adults by threatening to not let them see their grandchildren or threatening to leave them alone or place them in a residential care facility.

Older adults often experience worry, depression, or anxiety as a result of abuse and neglect. Some people may mistake these as signs of memory loss or illness, when really they are the effects of stress or worry. An older adult may feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment that someone in the family or someone close has harmed them. An older adult who feels abused or neglected usually loses trust in the person who causes the harm. Sometimes when older adults tell someone about the abuse, the person hearing it might act as if they do not believe them. This can cause further harm to the person's feelings.

Some older adults who have experienced abuse earlier or throughout their lives may use alcohol or prescription drugs to help with sleep or anxiety. It is their way of coping with the emotional and physical hurt. Some may develop a dependency on alcohol or medications.

Today, older adults are more willing to seek counselling or the support of a group. This may help them with the emotional and other effects of abuse or neglect. They may find this support very helpful for regaining their self-esteem and self-confidence.

### You can help

Many of the emotional effects of abuse and neglect can be overcome with time and help. There are several ways you can help an older adult who may be or feel abused or neglected:

- Believe the older adult if they confide in you about a difficult situation;
- Take time and listen non-judgmentally to the older adult;
- Reassure them that they did not deserve the abuse, and they are not responsible for the behaviour of the individual who caused the harm;
- Encourage the older adult to ask a professional for confidential help; and

- Be careful not to take sides with the person who caused the harm.

Trained persons can help an older adult assess his or her own personal safety, and help the person develop a safety plan. A person's risk can change quickly over time. Health professionals and other service providers are trained to recognize the common signs and screen for abuse and neglect, and they know how to help. This can help prevent the situation from becoming worse.

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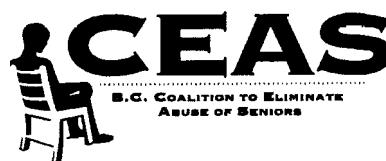
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## Financial Abuse of Older Adults

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### What is financial abuse?

Financial abuse is the most common type of abuse that people may experience in later life, representing over one-half of known situations of abuse. Financial abuse means using a person's money or property without their permission. Financial abuse can take away the older person's resources, choices, and options.

Financial abuse typically involves a family member or another person who puts themselves in a position of trust with the older adult. Financial abuse can occur when a family member or friend takes over financial decisions and control of the older adult's money. Financial neglect occurs if a family member or friend controls the money and does not meet the older adult's needs.

Financial abuse and neglect negatively affect the trust that family members have in each other. Adult children may not consider or realize that their actions are financially abusive or neglectful toward their parent(s).

Common examples of financial abuse include:

- A family member who repeatedly pressures a parent for money or borrows money from them, but never repays it;

- A person who misuses a power of attorney;
- A family member who sells a parent's house or other property and then uses the money for one's own benefit;
- Adult children who use a parent's pension, and then make the parent ask them for pocket money.

Financial abuse may involve any amount of money or any size of property. Some forms of financial abuse involve theft or fraud, and these are considered crimes.

### Who can experience financial abuse?

Both older men and older women can experience financial abuse. Women tend to experience financial abuse more often than men. Some women may be financially inexperienced, particularly if they have not worked outside the home or have not had much experience managing money.

Older women also tend to have fewer resources. They may be forced to live in a situation of abuse or neglect for a longer time period because they tend to live longer than men.

### Why does financial abuse occur?

Financial abuse occurs when a person's sense of need, entitlement, or greed for the money is greater than their ability to remain fair, honest and caring with the older person.

In some cultures, there are expectations and assumptions about who gets money after a parent dies. Others in the family may feel this is not fair, but they may not be able to do anything about it.

Older parents and their grown children may use banking machines or joint accounts together to make helping easier, but they may not recognize the risk in doing so.

Financial abuse is more likely to occur during a health crisis or after a major change in health. Some older adults become vulnerable to financial abuse when their spouse, partner or close friend dies. They now have many new decisions to make, but they are grieving the person's death. Older adults may also become more vulnerable to abuse during a major change in health.

### **What are the health effects of financial abuse on older adults?**

Financial abuse hurts older adults in many ways. Financial abuse seldom stops by itself and can occur with emotional abuse. Many financial abuse situations involve lies, threats or intimidation, which are forms of emotional abuse. These situations can lead to ongoing stress and financial strain for the older person.

A parent may feel very hurt by the person's behaviour, but they may not ask for the money or talk about the situation. Things can become worse over time and sometimes lead to physical abuse.

Financial abuse can use the older person's finances and reduce their ability to take care of themselves. It can negatively affect their health by reducing the resources available for proper housing, good nutrition, medication, and healthy activities.

### **How to prevent financial abuse**

If you depend on someone to do the banking, especially if your health is changing or you need to go to the hospital or into a care facility, consider alternatives such as having the bank automatically pay your bills.

If lending money, write down the amount, the person's name and the date you loaned it. This can help you remember what was given, what was promised, and whether it was a loan or a gift. It is important for both parents and children to recognize always that this is the parent's money. For any major decision involving property, consider using a notary, lawyer, or community advocate.

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