

Project HAVEN



Domestic Elder Abuse

Institute for Disability Studies, The University of Southern Mississippi

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is the infliction of physical, emotional, or psychological harm on an older adult. Elder abuse can also take the form of financial exploitation or intentional or unintentional neglect of an older adult by the caregiver.

Definitions of Domestic Elder Abuse, Exploitation, and Neglect

(The definitions of different forms of domestic abuse of the elderly are derived from the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study conducted in 1996 by the National Center on Elder Abuse at the American Public Human Services Association. This research was jointly funded by the Administration for Children and Families and the Administration on Aging.)

The following definitions of domestic elder abuse, exploitation, and neglect pertain to elders living in domestic settings. The perpetrator of this abuse may be the caregiver of an elderly person, but recent elder abuse surveys show that a member of the elderly person's family is the abuser 90 percent of the time. Furthermore, some signs and symptoms are characteristic of several kinds of maltreatment and should be regarded as indicators of maltreatment. The most important are

- an elder's frequent unexplained crying
- an elder's unexplained fear or suspicion of person(s) in the home

Physical abuse can range from slapping or shoving to severe beatings and restraining with ropes or chains. When a caregiver or other person uses enough force to cause unnecessary pain or injury, even if the reason is to help the older person, the behavior can be regarded as abusive. Physical abuse can include hitting, beating, pushing, kicking, pinching, burning, or biting. It can also include such acts against the older person as over- or under-medicating, depriving the

elder of food, or exposing the person to severe weather—deliberately or inadvertently.

Signs and symptoms of physical abuse include:

- bruises, black eyes, welts, lacerations, and rope marks;
- bone fractures, broken bones, and skull fractures;
- open wounds, cuts, punctures, untreated injuries, and injuries in various stages of healing;
- sprains, dislocations, and internal injuries/bleeding;
- broken eye glasses/frames, physical signs of being subjected to punishment, and signs of being restrained;
- laboratory findings of medication overdose or underutilization of prescribed drugs;
- an elder's report of being hit, slapped, kicked, or mistreated;
- an elder's sudden change in behavior; or
- the caregiver's refusal to allow visitors to see an elder alone.

Emotional or psychological abuse can range from name-calling or giving the "silent treatment" to intimidating and threatening the individual. When a family member, a caregiver, or other person behaves in a way that causes fear, mental anguish, and emotional pain or distress, the behavior can be regarded as abusive. Emotional and psychological abuse can include insults and threats. It can also include treating the older person like a child and isolating the person from family, friends, and regular activities—either by force or threats or through manipulation.

Signs and symptoms of emotional/psychological abuse may manifest themselves in the following behaviors of an elderly person:

- being emotionally upset or agitated,
- being extremely withdrawn and noncommunicative or nonresponsive,

- exhibiting unusual behavior attributed to dementia such as sucking, biting, rocking, or
- reporting verbal or emotional mistreatment.

Caregiver neglect can range from caregiving strategies that withhold appropriate attention from the individual to intentionally failing to meet the physical, social, or emotional needs of the older person.

Neglect can include failure to provide food, water, clothing, medication, and assistance with the activities of daily living or help with personal hygiene. If the caregiver has responsibility for paying bills for the older person, neglect can also include failure to pay the bills or to manage the elder person's money responsibly.

Signs and symptoms of caregiver neglect include:

- dehydration, malnutrition, untreated bedsores, and poor personal hygiene;
- unattended or untreated health problems;
- hazardous or unsafe living conditions/arrangements such as no heat or no running water; or
- unsanitary and unclean living conditions such as dirt, fleas, lice, soiled bedding, inadequate clothing.

Sexual abuse can range from sexual exhibition to rape. Sexual abuse can include inappropriate touching, photographing the person in suggestive poses, forcing the person to look at pornography, forcing sexual contact with a third party, or any unwanted sexualized behavior. It also includes rape, sodomy, or coerced nudity. Sexual abuse is not often reported as a type of elder abuse.

Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse include:

- bruises around the breasts or genital area,
- unexplained venereal disease or genital infections,
- unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding,
- torn, stained, or bloody underclothing, or
- an elder's report of being sexually assaulted or raped.

Financial exploitation can range from misuse of an elder's funds to embezzlement. Financial exploitation includes fraud, taking money under false pretenses, forgery, forced property transfers, purchasing expensive items with the older person's money without the older person's knowledge or permission, or denying the older person access to his or her own funds or home. It includes the improper use of legal guardianship arrangements, powers of attorney, or conservatorships. It also includes a variety of scams perpetrated by sales people for health-related services, mortgage companies, and financial managers—or even by so-called friends.

Signs and symptoms of financial or material exploitation include:

- sudden changes in bank account or banking practices, including unexplained withdrawals of large sums of money by a person accompanying the elder,
- the inclusion of additional names on an elder's bank signature card,
- unauthorized withdrawal of the elder's funds using the elder's ATM card,
- abrupt changes in a will or other financial documents,
- unexplained disappearance of funds or valuable possessions,
- substandard care or unpaid bills despite the availability of adequate financial resources,
- the forging of an elder's signature for financial transactions and for the titles of his or her possessions,
- sudden appearance of previously uninvolved relatives claiming their rights to an elder's affairs and possessions,
- unexplained sudden transfer of assets to a family member or someone outside the family,
- the provision of services that are not necessary, or
- an elder's report of financial exploitation.



This document was adapted from materials on elder abuse from the 2002 National Victim Assistance Academy. This information is not itself legal advice. For legal advice about a particular situation, contact an attorney. The Institute for Disability Studies at The University of Southern Mississippi is a public nonprofit organization that provides support, encouragement and assistance to those seeking information on violence against women with disabilities and older adults. This information is available in alternate formats upon request.

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