

Elder Maltreatment

Risk Factors, Signs, and Taking Action



Elder maltreatment is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person. This type of violence constitutes a violation of human rights and includes physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect.

Risk Factors for Victims of Abuse

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), individual level characteristics which increase the risk of becoming a victim of abuse include:

- functional dependence/disability
- poor physical or mental health
- cognitive impairment
- low income

Type of Abuse

- **Physical abuse:** bodily harm
- **Emotional abuse:** psychological abuse
- **Neglect:** the caregiver does not respond to the older adult's needs.
- **Abandonment:** leaving an older adult who needs help alone without planning for their care
- **Sexual abuse** forcing an older adult to watch or be part of sexual acts.
- **Financial abuse:** when money or belongings are misused or stolen from an older adult.

Risk Factors for Becoming an Abuser

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), individual level characteristics which increase the risk of becoming a perpetrator of abuse include:

- mental illness,
- substance abuse
- financial dependency – often on the victim

Signs of Abuse

- Become withdrawn or act agitated or violent
- Display signs of trauma
- Have unexplained injuries
- Develop preventable conditions such as bedsores
- Hazardous, unsafe, or unclean living conditions
- Look messy, poor hygiene
- Lack personal health care items such as glasses, a walker, dentures, or hearing aid
- Have sudden and unexpected financial losses or unpaid bills despite having adequate resources

If you think someone you know is being abused — physically, emotionally, or financially — talk with them when the two of you are alone. You could say you think something is wrong and you're worried. Offer to take them to get help, for instance, at a local adult protective services agency.

If you suspect an older person is being abused, report what you see to an authority. Many older adults are too ashamed to report mistreatment. Or they're afraid if they make a report, it will get back to the abuser and make the situation worse. Therefore, family and friends must step in to address any problems. Most states also require that doctors and lawyers report elder mistreatment.

Reach out to the EAP for support in helping others.