



Caregiver Challenges

Do You Suspect Your Older Family Member Is Being Abused or Harmed?

When a family member is providing care to an older relative, such as a spouse or partner, parent or sibling, often they are perceived by others to be loving, caring, helpful individuals. They are generally praised for their thoughtfulness. Often older adults are reminded of how lucky they are to have such wonderful family caring for them.

Unfortunately, some older adults are not experiencing loving care but rather are being harmed or abused. This brochure provides guidance on how to monitor the care being provided and how to help if you suspect an older adult you know is being abused or neglected.

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse takes place when a person age sixty or older is the victim of physical abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, neglect or self-neglect. A significant portion of elder abuse is perpetrated by a spouse, partner, or other family member.

Often abusers try to win over others by using excuses to cover up their harmful behavior. They may say that they were angry or under stress. Others blame the abuse on medical conditions, mental health issues or substance abuse. An abusive caregiver will use a variety of tactics to maintain control over the older adult. These may include:

- ◆ Hitting, slapping, pinching
- ◆ Yelling, name calling
- ◆ Forcing sex

- ◆ Being rough with intimate body parts during caregiving
- ◆ Threatening to leave or put the elder person in a nursing home
- ◆ Denying access to phone or mail
- ◆ Denying or creating long waits for food, care, or medication
- ◆ Isolating the elder person from others
- ◆ Hurting or threatening to hurt pets
- ◆ Throwing things
- ◆ Destroying property
- ◆ Stealing money, titles or possessions
- ◆ Taking over accounts, bills and spending without permission

Abusers want to gain and maintain control over another person by setting the "rules" or expectations for the relationship. They believe they can engage in any behavior, including physical and emotional abuse or threats to get their way. Stress, anger, and substance abuse do not cause a person to become abusive.

What to Look For

Abusers try to hide evidence of abuse. An abuser may seek to isolate the victim from others so that the abuse is not discovered. An older victim who is being hurt may be ashamed or embarrassed to admit it is happening. Many older persons fear being forced to move from their homes or being placed in nursing homes if the caregiver is removed or arrested. Some signs of abuse are easy to recognize while others are subtle. Some signs of abuse include:



Older Adult

- ◆ Repeated, unexplained injuries
- ◆ Injuries in areas normally covered by clothing
- ◆ Bruising, cuts, burns, pressure marks, broken bones
- ◆ Broken eyeglasses, hearing aids or other assistive devices
- ◆ Poor skin condition, poor hygiene, weight loss, dehydration (neglect)
- ◆ Bruises around the breasts or genital area (sexual abuse)
- ◆ Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding or sexually transmitted infection (sexual abuse)
- ◆ Declining health (medication not being purchased or being withheld)
- ◆ Not as active as usual (isolation)
- ◆ Expressing fear or concern about caregiver
- ◆ Hesitant to talk openly, especially in the presence of the caregiver
- ◆ Unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, a sudden change in alertness, or unusual depression
- ◆ Money, property or other assets used, taken, sold or transferred without permission
- ◆ Signature forged on checks or other financial and legal documents

Caregiver

- ◆ Yells, threatens, belittles or calls the family member names
- ◆ Feels entitled to make all the decisions because of providing care and/or considers him or herself as the "most important member of the household"
- ◆ Creates long waits for food, medication or personal care
- ◆ Refuses to accept community services
- ◆ Unexplained disappearance of funds or valuable possessions

- ◆ Unpaid bills although there are adequate financial resources
- ◆ Sudden transfer of assets to caregiver
- ◆ Not allowing visitors to see the family member alone
- ◆ Flirtation, coyness, and touching—reflecting a possible inappropriate sexual relationship

Yourself

- ◆ Having limited access to the family member
- ◆ Not being allowed into the family member's home
- ◆ Not being allowed to talk by phone to your family member

Environment

- ◆ Spoiled, rotten or moldy food
- ◆ Medications in the home that are not given properly or not being given at all
- ◆ Unsafe living conditions that increase the risk for danger (excessive heat or cold temperatures, compromised utilities, fire hazards, lack of home medical equipment)

Common reactions to these signs of controlling behavior, abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation are feelings of being unreasonable in your expectations or just plain denial. However, trust your instincts. If you suspect something is wrong, ask the older person questions and gather more information about what is happening. Whether you live in the same community or are far away, there are steps you can take to enhance your family member's safety.

Who to Call

Call the police or 911 immediately if you feel someone is in immediate, serious or life-threatening danger.

To report suspected abuse, call the state where the older adult lives. There may be agencies in the community that specialize in providing services to older adults and their caregivers. Eldercare Locator is a national organization that can provide information on services that may be available in any given area. Contact them by calling (800) 677-1116 or visit them on the web at www.eldercare.gov.

In Wisconsin, a list of county elder abuse help lines is available at www.dhfs.state.wi.us/aging/elder-abuse/index.htm. For additional information, email StopAbuse@dhfs.state.wi.us or contact the Wisconsin Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources at (608) 266-2536.

In Wisconsin, adults-at-risk specialists are typically the first responders to reports of abuse, neglect and exploitation. Elder Abuse/Adults-at-Risk Service interventions include but are not limited to:

- ◆ Receiving reports of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and financial exploitation
- ◆ Responding to these reports
- ◆ Assessing the victim's risk
- ◆ Assessing the victim's capacity to understand the risk and ability to give informed consent
- ◆ Involving the victim in the development of the intervention/care plan
- ◆ Arranging for emergency shelter, medical care, legal assistance, and supportive services
- ◆ Monitoring services
- ◆ Evaluating progress

In Wisconsin, a competent older adult has the right to refuse services that have been offered or recommended. An elder adults-at-risk worker would only use an intervention such as the legal system to protect the older adult if their efforts for voluntary cooperation have failed, and the older adult remains at risk of substantial physical, sexual, or financial harm. Because competent adults are presumed to be independent, they are able to make decisions about their safety and living conditions. Any effort to provide services against the older adult's wishes must be based on the belief that the situation is so hazardous or harmful to the adult or others that it overrides the person's right to live life as they so choose. Although this may be frustrating, it is important to respect a competent older adults' right to make their own decisions.

What to Do

If you find yourself in a situation where a competent older adult has refused services, there are ways you can help.



- ◆ Maintain contact and stay as connected as possible to the older adult.
- ◆ Talk to the older adult privately about your concerns, out of hearing range of the caregiver.
- ◆ Use caution if confronting the caregiver; this may increase danger for the older adult.
- ◆ Help the older adult connect with others (family, friends, church members, minister).
- ◆ Encourage the older adult to get out to socialize if they are able. Offer transportation.
- ◆ Set up in-home services such as home health, meals on wheels, home chore services. The more outside contact the older adult has, the more support she/he has available if necessary.
- ◆ Encourage contact with domestic abuse or sexual assault service providers. Offer to accompany the older adult to the first appointment.
- ◆ Talk to the older adult about services that are available.

Some of the services that may be helpful include:

- ◆ For help with safety planning, counseling, support group or legal advocacy, contact a local domestic abuse or sexual assault program. Most programs provide a 24-hour help line that can be called anonymously. An advocate will listen to the individual's concerns, provide emotional support and discuss options that are available. Most services are provided at no cost. For information about the program in a specific area, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) Voice, or (800) 787-3224 TTY.

- ◆ If there is a concern for safety, there may be a local telephone reassurance program that can provide regular contact and safety checks by trained volunteers. Contact the local county/tribal aging unit or aging and disability resource center for information.
- ◆ Encourage the older family member to meet and socialize with others through a local senior center. Senior centers offer a variety of recreational and educational programs, seminars, events and activities for the active and less active older adult. A senior dining site can provide the opportunity for persons sixty and over to enjoy a meal and socialize with other seniors in the community.
- ◆ Any Wisconsin resident age sixty years of age or older who is having a problem in securing a public or private benefit is eligible for the benefit specialist program. Benefit specialists work for the county/tribal aging unit or aging and disability resource center. They are experts at helping older persons with the extensive and complicated paperwork that is often required in benefit programs. They help older persons figure out what benefits they are entitled to and assist the older person in obtaining them. Call your county/tribal aging unit or local aging and disability resource center or via the web at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/aging/information.htm> to identify the local benefit specialist.
- ◆ If caregiving services are needed, home health services that may include assistance with changing dressings, checking vital signs, cleaning catheters and providing tube feedings and other health specific tasks may be helpful. Adult day care centers can offer social, recreational and health-related services to individuals who cannot be left alone during the day because of health care needs, dementia or disability. Meals on Wheels programs provide home delivered meals.
- ◆ If transportation is needed, door-to-door transportation may be available for people who are elderly, do not have private transportation and are unable to utilize public transportation.

It is important to reassure your older family member that what they are experiencing is not their fault. No one should experience or endure abuse, physical, sexual or emotional. Let them know they are not alone, that there are others who understand, do not judge, are there to help them stay safe and will support them emotionally.

For more information contact:

- ◆ Wisconsin Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources at (608) 266-2568
<http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/aging/elderabuse/index.htm>
- ◆ Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence at (608) 255-0539 voice or (608) 255-3560 TTY
www.wcadv.org
- ◆ Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault at (608) 257-1516 voice/TTY
www.wcasa.org
- ◆ National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE (7233) or (800) 787-3224 TTY
www.ndvh.org
- ◆ Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network at (800) 656-HOPE
www.rainn.org
- ◆ National Center on Elder Abuse at (202) 898-2586
www.elderabusecenter.org
- ◆ National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life at (608) 255-0539
www.ncall.us

A publication of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Long Term Care
produced in collaboration with the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) – 2007

PDE-224 (9/07)