

Elder abuse

INFORMATION SHEET



Elder abuse occurs when a person in a position of trust exploits or mistreats an older person, causing them harm or distress. It can involve a single incident or ongoing abuse, and may be part of a history of family violence.

Elder abuse can involve people within the same or different generations, and the reasons for elder abuse can range from a lack of understanding of an older person's needs, to an intentional, aggressive act. Elder abuse is most often committed by a family member, especially by an older person's adult children.

Note: this resource relates to elder abuse in community, not aged care settings.

Types of elder abuse

Elder abuse can take many different forms. The most common forms of elder abuse are financial and psychological/emotional abuse.

Financial abuse

This is the illegal, mismanagement or improper use of the older person's finances. This includes stealing money or possessions, taking or spending funds held in an older person's bank account, threats or coercion to gain Power of Attorney or pressuring them for early inheritances.

Psychological/emotional abuse

Psychological or emotional abuse involves any action or threat that causes fear of violence, isolation, deprivation, humiliation or powerlessness.

For example, treating the person like a child, preventing access to services, making threats (such as preventing them from seeing loved ones) or telling them they have dementia.

Social abuse

Social abuse is forced isolation that prevents or restricts the older person's contact with friends, family or the community.

This could involve withholding or controlling mail or phone calls, preventing them from attending religious or cultural events, or taking over their home without consent. Social isolation often allows other forms of abuse to take place.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse describes any deliberate act that causes pain for, injury to, or intimidation of, an older person. This includes all forms of physical assault, along with the use of restraint by physical or chemical methods.

Sexual abuse

Any sexual contact, language or display of pornography without the older person's consent, or through coercion.

For example, making obscene phone calls in the person's presence, inappropriate handling when undertaking personal care activities, or making the person perform a sexual act they don't want to.

Neglect

Neglect involves the failure of a carer to provide basic necessities such as food, shelter, or medical care, or preventing someone else from providing them.

What elder abuse is not

Age discrimination, or an estranged relationship with a relative are not examples of elder abuse.

Elder abuse is also not a crime committed by a stranger. It does not involve self-neglect or self-mistreatment – rather, the abuse happens at the hands of a trusted person.

While elder abuse is now receiving increased attention and research, there are no easy solutions to identify and address this heartbreaking problem.

“Elder abuse can involve a single incident or ongoing abuse, and may be part of a history of family violence.”

INFORMATION SHEET

When is elder abuse likely to occur?

Some of the possible risk factors for elder abuse include situations where:

- the person in a position of trust is experiencing financial pressures, addiction, gambling or mental health issues
- the older person is unable to stop or report abuse due to cognitive impairment or physical limitations
- there is isolation as a result of location, cultural or language barriers, or health complications
- an adult child has moved back into their parent's home
- there is a history of family conflict or ageist attitudes towards older generations.

What should I do if I'm being exploited or mistreated?

The first priority is your safety. If you feel threatened or unsafe, call 000. The police may assist you in a number of ways, by removing an abusive person from your home, applying for an Intervention Order, or help you to find support services.

If you decide to stay in the situation, having a safety plan can help you know what to do in an emergency. Organisations detailed in the *Where to get help* section on the following page can help you with this.

If someone close to you is placing unwelcome restrictions on you, is emotionally mistreating you, or taking advantage of you financially, you may want to try to resolve things with them informally. Mediation services such as those provided by Relationships

Australia Victoria could help to improve your situation. See *Where to get help* for more details.

You may be protective of the person mistreating or exploiting you, particularly if they are your adult children. It is important to remember that you have a right to feel at ease and safe in your own home, and that people, including adult children, can get help for their problems. They may not be aware of the impact of their behaviour.

Finding someone to talk to and share your concerns with can be very helpful. This could be a trusted friend, family member or a trained person from a professional organisation.

What should I do if I suspect elder abuse?

Elder abuse is distressing, and finding someone who understands the sensitive and confidential nature of the issue can help you in deciding what to do if you suspect an older person is being mistreated or exploited.

- If someone is in immediate danger, call 000. Police can conduct a welfare check on an older person about whom you have concerns.
- Remember that abuse of any kind is illegal.
- Where it's appropriate, ask general questions about the person's wellbeing and their relationships.
- Blame and judgement are never helpful. Listen to what the older person says and be understanding.
- Understand that older people are often hesitant to cause trouble, as they may feel ashamed or worried about possible consequences.

- Often, an older person feels protective of their adult children who may be mistreating or exploiting them. The adult child may have drug or alcohol dependency, mental health issues or difficult circumstances or challenges that are contributing to the abusive situation. An older person is more likely to accept help if they think their adult child's needs will be considered and addressed.
- Keep a record of events. Taking note of signs and symptoms may help those who investigate, to effectively address the abuse.
- It is generally not advisable to confront the abuser without careful thought.
- Reassure the older person that there is help available.
- If the older person is willing to get support, help them contact a relevant organisation. See *Where to get help*.
- If they are unwilling to get help, provide them with emotional support and offer contact details of support services should they want them later. Keep checking in on them where possible.
- It's important that an older person feels in control of the help seeking process.

“ Finding someone to talk to and share your concerns with can be very helpful. This could be a trusted friend, family member or a trained person from a professional organisation.

Relationships Australia Victoria

A valued provider of specialist family and relationship services
1300 364 277 | enquiries@rav.org.au | www.rav.org.au

INFORMATION SHEET

Where to get help

The following organisations provide information and support for older people and concerned family and friends.

If you have concerns that an older person is being harmed, controlled or isolated by a family member or carer, contact the Family Violence Liaison Officer at your local **Victoria Police** station. www.police.vic.gov.au

Lifeline provides support and referrals for those in crisis 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call 13 11 14 or visit www.lifeline.org.au

Seniors Rights Victoria provides a free helpline for people who are experiencing, or know someone who is experiencing elder abuse. Call 1300 368 821 or visit www.seniorsrights.org.au

Eastern Community Legal Centre provides free legal assistance for family law and Family Violence matters to people living in the local government areas of Boroondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Whitehorse and the Yarra Ranges. To find your nearest centre, visit www.eclc.org.au/contact-us

My Aged Care is the Australian Government's online and phone service with information about aged care services. Call 1800 200 422 or visit www.myagedcare.gov.au

Elder Rights Advocacy (ERA) provides advocacy and support to older people receiving subsidised aged care services in Victoria. Call 1800 700 600 or visit <http://era.asn.au>

Relationships Australia Victoria provides Senior Relationship Services, including elder mediation and counselling for families who are experiencing conflict. For more information, visit www.rav.org.au/elder-mediation-and-counselling for more information.

About us

Relationships Australia Victoria is a valued provider of specialist family and relationship services. A community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations, our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Visit www.rav.org.au or call 1300 364 277 for more information on our programs, locations and how to access our services.



“ If the older person is willing to get support, help them contact a relevant organisation. It's important that an older person feels in control of the help seeking process.