

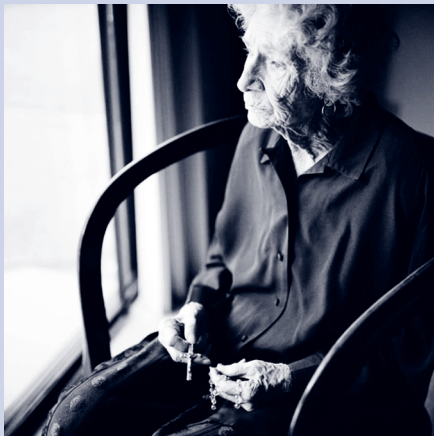
What Every
**Faith
Congregation**
Needs to Know About
Elder Abuse



National Center on Elder Abuse
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What Every Faith Congregation Needs to Know About Elder Abuse



More than any other demographic group, the elderly are actively involved in or contacted regularly by religious congregations. Clergy and others from one's faith community are among the few, and in many cases, the only people who visit an elderly person's home or care facility. As a faith leader, you may be in a unique position to observe signs of abuse and neglect by family, paid caregivers, or facility staff. Protecting the elderly from further loss or pain is a mitzvah, a good deed, a spiritual duty. In addition, reporting elder abuse is an ethical, as well, in many states, a legal responsibility.

The healing of the trauma of abuse is facilitated by a healing of the spirit. Bringing hope, forgiveness, and grace is a part of the ministry of religious groups.

Q. What is elder abuse?

A. Elder abuse is a term referring to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to an older adult. Many states have laws that cover *both* seniors and adults with disabilities. Laws vary from state to state, but the National Center on Elder Abuse has developed the following descriptions of the general forms of elder abuse:

- **Physical Abuse** — Inflicting, or threatening to inflict, physical pain or injury on a vulnerable elder, or depriving them of a basic need.
- **Emotional Abuse** — Inflicting mental pain, anguish, or distress on an elder person through verbal or nonverbal acts.
- **Sexual Abuse** — Non-consensual sexual contact of any kind.
- **Exploitation** — Illegal taking, misuse, or concealment of funds, property, or assets of a vulnerable elder.
- **Neglect** — Refusal or failure by those responsible to provide food, shelter, health care or protection for a vulnerable elder.
- **Abandonment** — The desertion of a vulnerable elder by anyone who has assumed the responsibility for care or custody of that person.

- **Self-neglect:** — Self-neglect is characterized as the behavior of an elderly person that threatens his/her own health or safety. Self-neglect generally manifests itself in an older person as a refusal or failure to provide himself/herself with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medication (when indicated), and safety precautions. Some factors that may contribute to self-neglect include: dementia, depression, and/or abuse of alcohol.

In this brochure, the words “elder abuse” will be taken to mean “elder and disabled adult abuse, neglect, and self-neglect.” State laws vary. Please check with your state or local Adult Protective Services program to determine your state’s law.

Q. How large a problem is elder abuse?

- A. The number of elder abuse cases is extremely hard to verify. Studies show that between 2 percent and 10 percent of the elderly population have been abused. The Senate Special

Committee on Aging estimates that there may be as many as 5 million victims in the United States every year. Further, data indicates that only one out of every fourteen abuse cases are ever reported to authorities. Older people, themselves, are often extremely reluctant to report abuse to the authorities because of fear, shame or dependence on the abuser.

Q. Who are the abusers?

- A. The majority of abusers are family members, i.e., spouses/partners, children, grandchildren, and others. Some factors that may be red flags for abuse include the abuser having problems with alcohol and/or drugs, mental health issues, or being financially dependent on the older person. Other abusers include caregivers (paid and volunteer), “friends,” neighbors, fiduciaries, bankers, lawyers, and others.

Q. Who are the abused?

- A. Men and women of all ethnic backgrounds and social status can be victimized by elder abuse. Social isolation and mental impairment (such as dementia or Alzheimer’s disease) are two factors that may make an older person more vulnerable to abuse. Women are victims in two-thirds of all elder abuse reports; and the older one is, the greater the chance of becoming a victim of abuse. Studies show that, in some situations, living with someone else (a family member, caregiver or friend) may increase the chances for abuse to occur. A history of domestic violence may also make a senior more susceptible to abuse.



Q. How can I know what abuse looks like?

A. There is no magic way to tell whether or not abuse or neglect is happening. In many cases, your intuition will be telling you that something is amiss. While the following scenarios do not insure that abuse is taking place, they will give you a sense of situations that may warrant a second look.

Perhaps an elder seems depressed, scared or anxious when in the presence of her caregiver. Perhaps a congregant tells you that he has just given \$10,000 in cash to his much younger “girlfriend” and now he doesn’t have enough money for his rent payment. Perhaps a son has just gotten out of jail and has moved in with his mother who now suddenly has stopped regularly attending services or participating in other activities.

While risk factors do not necessarily indicate abuse, some signs that there could be a problem are:

- The person reports being afraid or hurt.
- Unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, a sudden change in alertness, and unusual depression may be indicators of emotional abuse.
- Bruises, pressure marks, broken bones, abrasions, and burns may be an indication of physical abuse, neglect, or mistreatment.
- Bedsores, unattended medical needs, poor hygiene, and unusual weight loss are indicators of possible neglect.
- Behavior such as belittling remarks, threats, and other uses of power and control by spouses are indicators of verbal or emotional abuse.



- Strained or tense relationships, frequent arguments between the caregiver and elderly person are also signs.
- Sudden changes in financial situations may be the result of exploitation.

It is most important to be alert. The suffering of elder abuse victims is often borne in silence.

Q. What should I do if I think someone in my congregation may be the victim of elder abuse?

A. You could play an important role as a “sentinel” or “gatekeeper” for an abused person in your community. It is not your responsibility to investigate abuse; however, if you suspect that something is amiss, call your local Adult Protective Services (APS) Program. In all states, the APS program receives and investigates reports of abuse that occur in the community. In some states, APS may also investigate reports of abuse in long-term care facilities. Again, your state’s law will determine this. It may be called something else in

your area. Check in the local government pages under Department of Human Services, Department of Social Services, Department of Aging and Adult Services. Check the National Center for Elder Abuse's Website:

www.elderabusecenter.org for the referral number in your state. The Eldercare Locator, **1-800-677-1116**, can also be used to locate APS.

Q. Am I required to report my suspicions of abuse or neglect?

- A. In some states, clergy are required to report reasonable suspicions of abuse or neglect of elderly to Adult Protective Services. In some states, all people who believe elder/dependent adult abuse is happening must report it.

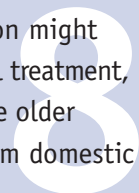
Q. I am afraid that reporting my suspicions of abuse will harm my relationship with my congregation member.

- A. When you report your suspicions of abuse or neglect to APS, they will ask for your name. This enables them to follow-up with you about the case, if appropriate. In some states you may report abuse anonymously. Most states protect the confidentiality of the reporter; however there may be circumstances in which the reporters name is revealed, if necessary.

Even if you think the older person or the abuser will know it was you who made the report, consider that often abused persons will tell someone about the abuse because they know they need help. If, having learned about the abuse, you do not report it, you are sending a message to the older person that what is happening to them is not serious. In addition, in most states where you are mandated to report, not reporting is a crime and may result in legal consequences.

Q. I am worried that a member of my congregation is at risk of abuse, but nothing has happened yet. Is there anything I can do to help prevent the abuse?

- A. Preventing abuse before it begins is always the preferred course of action. Find some time to meet alone with the older person. Tell him or her what you know about some of the risk factors of elder abuse (e.g., adult child who is financially dependent), and of your concerns. Emphasize that elder abuse is against the law. Talk about and provide referrals to services the possibly abusive person might need (such as housing, drug/alcohol treatment, employment), and resources that the older person might need (counseling from domestic



violence program, in-home support services).

Don't judge the person if he/she does not take your counsel and the situation at home does become abusive. Let him/her know that you are always there to be of support.

Q. What if the abused person wants help but doesn't want to get the alleged abuser in trouble?

- A.** Each case of elder abuse must be considered individually. In serious cases of abuse or neglect, law enforcement may become involved and charges may be brought against an alleged abuser.

Whether or not you are required by law to report your suspicions of abuse or neglect in your state, you serve the older person better by referring the case to APS. They are the experts and they have the resources to assist.

The primary role of APS is to help the senior to be safe. There are a variety of services that may be offered to victims, however, APS cannot impose services on a competent person who refuses them.

APS may also be able to refer the alleged abuser to services (e.g., drug or alcohol treatment, anger management); however, these are also voluntary and may be rejected by the abuser.

Q. The abused person seems very confused to me. I'm not sure he understands the consequences of his actions. What can Adult Protective Services do?

- A.** Sometimes dementia, mental illness, or other factors may hamper an older person's cognition. In the event that an assessment indicates that the elder abuse victim does not



have the capacity to make informed judgments about his or her care, APS, may, on an emergency basis, or with court approval, act on behalf of that person's best interest, even without his or her consent. The procedure for such actions varies from state to state.

Q. What about my faith's tradition of forgiveness? Shouldn't the abusers be forgiven for their transgressions?

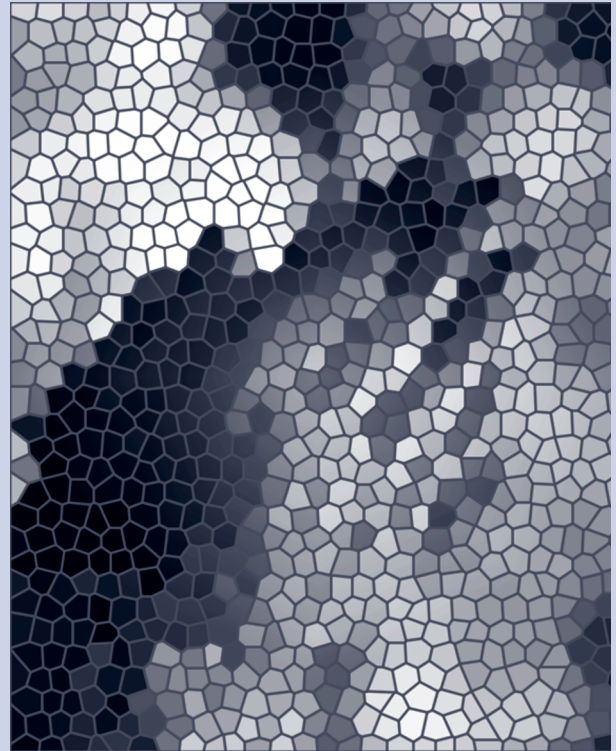
- A.** Forgiveness does not mean putting up with abuse or returning to an abusive situation. Forgiveness should not be used to aid and abet continuing abuse. An abused person may one day find that forgiveness is possible. However, abusers must be held accountable for their actions.

Q. How can my congregation help with elder abuse prevention?

A. There are many ways that faith congregations can assist with elder abuse prevention:

- **Create a safe place for abuse victims** by making your place of worship a space where victims can come forward for help. Display brochures and posters that include the telephone numbers of the Adult Protective Services and domestic violence services in your area.
- **Educate the congregation** on the warning signs of abuse of elders. Routinely include information in newsletters, on bulletin boards and in community meetings. Ask someone from an aging services agency to come to speak to your congregation on elder abuse.
- **Speak Out Against Elder Abuse.** Give a sermon on family violence, including elder and disabled adult abuse. The pulpit is a useful and appropriate platform from which to instruct others on treating elders and all people with dignity and respect. As a faith leader you can have a powerful impact on other people's attitudes and beliefs.
- **Partner with Community Agencies.** Offer meeting space for educational seminars on abuse prevention, or for domestic violence support groups. Focus community service projects on elder abuse prevention. Adopt a local group for which your synagogue, church, temple or mosque provides support to abused elders and their families.

- **Intervene. Do not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the clues of elder abuse that are before you.** If you suspect that someone in your congregation is a victim of abuse or neglect, speak to that person.



NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

This publication was made possible through a contract between the Institute on Aging (San Francisco, CA) and the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA). The NCEA is a national resource for elder rights advocates, law enforcement and legal professionals, public policy leaders, researchers, and the public. Its mission is to promote understanding, knowledge sharing, and action on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The NCEA is administered by the National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA). Partner organizations are: American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging, Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly, National Adult Protective Services Association, and the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse.

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Special Appreciation

INSTITUTE ON AGING

Offering the most comprehensive array of services for seniors in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Institute on Aging (IOA) specializes in helping seniors stay safe and independent at home. Providing adult day care, home care, dementia care, money management, elder abuse prevention, counseling services, caregiver support, graphic and performing arts, and much more. The IOA's highly skilled and compassionate staff work with the senior and family to offer care that honors the whole person.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **FAITH BASED RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**
National Center for Victims of Crime
www.ncvc.org/ncvc/AGP.Net/ComponentsdocumentViewerDownload.aspxnz?DocumentID=38392
Victims of Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, Elder Abuse, Rape, Robbery, Assault, and Violent Death
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/infores/clergy/welcome.html
Section IV, Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/infores/clergy/elder.htm
- **CLERGY AGAINST SENIOR EXPLOITATION**
PARTNERSHIP DIRECTOR, CONSUMER SERVICES
DENVER DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
Lisa Curtin, Project Director
Email: LLC@denverda.org
Phone: 720/913-9178
- **ONTARIO NETWORK FOR THE PREVENTION OF ELDER ABUSE**
Dr. Elizabeth Podnieks
222 College St., Suite 106
Toronto, Ontario CANADA M5T 3J1
Email: onpea.info@utoronto.ca
Phone: 416/978-1716
www.onpea.org
- **KYROS MINISTRY — CREATING SAFER STRONGER WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES**
225 Tilton Avenue, San Mateo, CA 94401
Phone (650) 343-3377; (888) 343-3377
FAX (650) 343-3387
Email: info@kyros.org
www.kyros.org
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- **NATIONAL LONG TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN RESOURCE CENTER**
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www.ltcombudsman.org