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alz.org/CaCentral

Our Duty to Protect

By Marcy Maler, MMFT, Art Therapy Education & Care Specialist

It may be your neighbor, friend, grandparent, aunt, or perhaps even your sibling or spouse—good people—now living in the grip of becoming a victim to some form of abuse. It is a shocking fact that approximately one in ten Americans over the age of 60 have experienced some form of elder abuse. Estimates range as high as 5 million elders experiencing abuse each year and only one in 14 cases of abuse are estimated to be reported to authorities. Abuse can occur anywhere— at home or in a professional residential setting.

There is no single profile that defines an abuser. In almost 60% of elder abuse and neglect incidents, the perpetrator is a family member. It may be hard to believe that two thirds of perpetrators are adult children or spouses.

There are many different types of abuse:

Physical: causing physical pain or injury

Emotional: verbal assaults, threats of abuse, harassment, and intimidation

Neglect: failure to provide necessities, including food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or a safe environment

Confinement: restraint or isolation of a person

Financial: misuse or withholding of a person's financial resources (money, property) to his or her disadvantage or to the advantage of someone else

Sexual abuse: touching, fondling or any sexual activity when a person is unable to understand, unwilling to consent, is threatened, or physically forced

Willful deprivation: denying a person medication, medical care, food, shelter, or



physical assistance, and thereby exposing an individual with Alzheimer's to the risk of physical, mental, or emotional harm

Self-neglect: Due to lack of insight and cognitive challenges, a person with Alzheimer's may be unable to safely or adequately provide for day-to-day needs, and may be at risk for harm, falls, wandering, and/or malnutrition

There are people who will prey upon or take advantage of others that live with cognitive impairment and it becomes more important that we, as caregivers, look for signs of these occurrences. Those with cognitive impairment of any kind are especially vulnerable to abuse and social isolation and the compromised cognition in itself may prevent them from recognizing, let alone reporting, what is happening to them.

Signs of Abuse

- Bruises, pressure marks, broken bones, abrasions and burns are signs of physical abuse.
- Unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, a sudden change in either alertness or unexpected depression may signal something is amiss.

Tips 

If you are a senior, or caring for an older adult, you can protect yourself by:

- * Taking care of health needs.
- * Attending support groups for spouses and learning about domestic violence services.
- * Staying active in the community and connected with friends and family. This will decrease social isolation, which can be connected to elder abuse.
- * Posting and opening your own mail.
- * Not giving personal information over the phone.
- * Using direct deposit for all checks.
- * Having your own phone.
- * Reviewing your will periodically.

- Bruises around the breasts or genital area may be a sign of sexual abuse.
- Unexpected changes in financial situations may be the result of exploitation.
- Bedsores, unattended medical needs, poor hygiene, and unusual weight loss may indicate neglect.
- Belittling, threats, or other uses of power by spouses, family members, or professional caregivers may indicate verbal or emotional abuse.
- Strained or tense relationships and frequent arguments between caregiver and charge. Abuse may originate from either. A person with dementia may exhibit more aggressive behaviors as the disease progresses and his cognitive function and ability to reason decline.

Social isolation and compromised cognition may prevent a person from recognizing, let alone reporting what is happening to them.

Increasingly, law enforcement officers and prosecutors are trained on elder abuse and the possible ways to use criminal and civil laws to bring abusers to justice.

Elders who have been abused have a 300% greater risk of death compared to those who have not. While likely underreported, elder financial abuse and fraud costs older Americans \$36.5 billion per year. It stands to reason that financial exploitation is self-reported at rates higher than emotional, physical, and sexual abuse or neglect. Most states have penalties for those who victimize older adults.

Collaboratively protecting these citizens who suffer from dementia (and the elderly whose physical disabilities make them vulnerable) must be made a priority, particularly because of the victims' inability to understand, let alone explain, what they are experiencing.

Compounding this, they may also be afraid of their tormentors or wary of the world at large, including first responders. Or, to make matters worse, some medical conditions may cause them to become uncooperative, disruptive, or even violent.

If you are witness to abuse, knowing and understanding one's rights and who to contact is key. If your loved one is at home, call Adult Protective Services. And

if your loved one lives in a nursing home, call your Long Term Care Ombudsman. These agencies are advocates for the elderly and have the power to intervene. As the population ages, and with it the numbers of persons afflicted by dementia, understanding and recognizing elder mistreatment becomes an important factor in maintaining quality of life for older adults.

Support Is Available

Caregivers, both family and professional, are most often the abusers of older people. In many cases, stress and frustration may provoke unintentional violent feelings. If you're feeling overwhelmed, talk to someone for support.

**Call our 24/7 Helpline to speak with a Care Consultant:
800.272.3900**

Find a support group in your area. Contact a professional counselor or your clergy. Join our online community to receive support from other caregivers. www.alz.org



Tools: Reporting Abuse

To report an incident or concern of abuse or neglect, call the **Alzheimer's Association 800.272.3900** or **Eldercare Locator 800.677.1116**. You'll be connected to your state or local adult protective services division or to a long-term care ombudsman. You do not need to prove that abuse is occurring; it is up to the professionals to investigate suspicions.