

Elder Abuse: What You Need to Know Part I

Stacy Donnelly RN, BSN: Exigent Forensic Consulting
Nurse and Nursing Home Expert

Elder Abuse is defined as an intentional or knowing act, or failure to act by a caregiver or another person that causes harm or serious risk to a vulnerable elder adult.¹ An elder adult is generally defined as someone age 60 or older. According to the National Council on Aging, approximately 1 in 10 Americans aged 60+ have experienced some form of elder abuse. However, it is estimated that only 1 in 14 cases of abuse ever get reported to the authorities. Elder adults who have been abused are at a much greater risk of death than those who have not been a victim of abuse.² Elder abuse can happen to anyone regardless of ethnic background, gender, and socioeconomic status. Abusers or perpetrators are typically known to the victim such as a relative, caregiver, or “trusted other” and have various backgrounds, gender, and socioeconomic statuses.

Types of Elder Abuse

According to National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, elder abuse can be categorized into five categories:

- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Emotional/psychological abuse
- Financial exploitation
- Neglect

Sexual Abuse is defined as nonconsensual touching, fondling, intercourse, non-contact acts such as sexual harassment, or any other sexual activity with an elder person. With sexual abuse, the person is unable to understand, unwilling to consent, threatened, coerced or physically forced into performing or witnessing such abuse.

Physical Abuse is defined as inflicting or threatening to inflict physical pain or injury to an elder person. Victims may also experience illness, pain, injury, functional impairment, distress, or death as a result of the physical abuse. Examples of physical abuse include hitting, biting, beating, choking, suffocating, pushing, shoving, shaking, slapping, kicking, pinching, and burning.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse is defined as inflicting mental pain, verbal assaults, threats, harassment, humiliation or intimidation. Emotional/Psychological abuse can be both verbal and non-verbal acts which inflict anguish, mental pain, fear, or

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016, July 22). *What is Elder Abuse?* Retrieved September 30, 2016, from http://www.aoa.gov/aoa_programs/elder_rights/ea_prevention/whatisea.aspx

² National Council on Aging. *Elder Abuse Fact*. Retrieved September 30, 2016, from <https://www.ncoa.org/public-policy-action/elder-justice/elder-abuse-facts/>

distress. Emotional/Psychological abuse includes, calling names, insults, isolation and seclusion, prohibiting access to various resources and threatening. Threats can come in various forms such as telling the elder person that they will never be able to go home (from the nursing home) or that they cannot see friends or family if they do not do things or act in a certain way.

Financial Exploitation is defined as illegally without consent taking, misusing, and cancelling of funds, property or assets to benefit someone other than the elder person. Financial abuse includes forging of checks, use of victim's credit/ATM cards, coercing to surrender finances, use of victim's state funded resources, or improper use of guardianship or power of attorney.

Neglect is defined as a caregiver's failure to provide a person with basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and protection. Neglect includes but is not limited to not providing proper nutrition, hygiene, environment appropriate clothing, and failing to provide a safe environment. Neglect can pose a serious risk of compromising health and safety to an elder person.

Elder abuse may be difficult to identify. Depending on the type, there may or may not be outward signs and symptoms of abuse. An expert in nursing home care has the education, training and experience to assist in determining whether elder abuse occurred and if the facility staff followed the established standards of care and regulations. In part two of our series on elder abuse, we will go over the warning signs of elder abuse, properly reporting it, and preventing it.