

Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Information for Family Caregivers

Eighty per cent of caregiving for older adults is provided by families, usually by a spouse, partner or adult children.

Families may help an aging parent or spouse with daily activities, finances such as banking or paying bills, or personal care such as bathing and dressing. They may take on these responsibilities out of love or a sense of personal or family duty. Every family is different. Some family relationships are very positive and supportive. Others experience mixed feelings, conflict and tension.

WHAT TYPES OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT CAN HAPPEN TO OLDER ADULTS?

Abuse and neglect in later life can affect a person's health, happiness and safety. Older adults can experience different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust. It can take many forms including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Abuse and neglect can include withholding medication or the necessities of life.

WHY DOES ABUSE OR NEGLECT HAPPEN?

Most people do not intend to become abusive or neglectful. They may feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed with the changing roles in their family, especially if the older adult now relies on them. Some family members may not know how to provide the care or help needed. They may not understand the nature of the health concern and how it affects the older adult's abilities or behaviour.

In some situations of abuse, people may use physical force or emotional control over the other person.

For some spouses in later life, both the person providing care and the person receiving care may have some difficulties with their health, memory or ability to make decisions. This can affect how people relate and react to each other.

Family caregivers often have other responsibilities at work or at home, such as their own families. Trying to handle these can lead to tensions and conflicts within the family. Family caregivers may have personal problems including financial, mental health or substance misuse. It may be hard for them to safely offer caregiving.

WHAT IS FINANCIAL ABUSE OF OLDER ADULTS?

A family member may not realize their legal responsibilities when assisting an older adult with finances, particularly as a power of attorney. They may take over the finances because this seems easier. Some may feel entitled to the money or property, or think they will get it anyway and believe they have the right to use it now. This may lead to financial abuse. For more information, see Resources.

HOW TO IDENTIFY STRESS THAT MAY LEAD TO ABUSE?

Most people giving care to someone may feel stressed at times. Fortunately, people can learn to recognize the signs of stress. To reduce stress and the possibility of abuse or neglect, pay attention to your own emotional and physical health.

Here are some signs of stress:

- + Changes in your feelings, such as becoming anxious or depressed.
- + Always feeling exhausted.
- + Needing medication to help you sleep or cope.
- + Making changes in your lifestyle, including the amount you eat, or the amount of tea, coffee or alcohol you drink.
- + Visiting your health care provider more often or developing health concerns.

Everyone has a limit and each person's limit is different. A person's needs and abilities can change over time. Be willing to ask for and accept help.

HOW CAN ABUSE AND NEGLECT BE PREVENTED?

There are many ways that families can prevent abuse or neglect happening to others or themselves in later life.

Good communication

Good communication and support within families, as well as between couples, are very important. Talk about the current situation and plan for future needs. What can a parent or family member do on their own? What can they do with some support? This can help set realistic expectations for families. Regular contact among family members can be very helpful and supportive. This can help everyone be aware of changes in a parent, spouse or partner's health. Some health concerns can be prevented or slowed down.

Couples can often make small changes in their home and support services as they grow older.

Work together

Good caregiving means having the time, right personality and resources to take on this responsibility. Try to share the caregiving responsibilities if possible. Family members often have different skills and can be supportive in various ways. Take time to learn about what community resources are available.

Strengthen relationships

Even if an older person's health or abilities change, many aspects of the relationship remain very rewarding. Some families strengthen relationships by keeping in touch, sharing old traditions and creating new ones.

Take care of yourself

Taking care of yourself and making sure you have regular time for yourself are important for providing care to family members or others. Even little breaks from caregiving, including short walks or a favourite hobby can help refresh you mentally and physically. Set aside part of the day to do these things. Give up some of the responsibilities you usually take on. Make use of local caregiver support groups, which can help you find resources or learn useful tips.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SEE A CRIME OR HARMFUL SITUATION?

Call the Seniors Abuse Info Line (SAIL) at 604 437-1940 in the Lower Mainland, or toll free at 1 866 437-1940.

If you see a crime or a situation that puts an older adult at immediate risk, call the police or 9-1-1 right away.

Advise that you want to report a situation of suspected elder abuse, neglect or self-neglect.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

For more information about elder abuse and neglect, or to get help, call or visit the following services:

- + Seniors Abuse and Information Line (SAIL), hosted by Seniors First BC, 604 437-1940 in Vancouver or toll-free at 1 866 437-1940, or visit <http://seniorsfirstbc.ca/>
- + Government of B.C. – Protection from Elder Abuse and Neglect visit www.gov.bc.ca/elderabuse
- + Public Guardian and Trustee at 604 660-4444 or visit www.trustee.bc.ca
- + Legal Services Society at 604 408-2172 or toll-free at 1 866 577-2525 or visit <https://lss.bc.ca/>.
- + Victim Link toll-free in B.C. at 1 800 563-0808 or visit www.victimlinkbc.ca for information for victims of family and sexual violence or crime
- + Family Caregivers of British Columbia supports caregivers. Call toll-free 1-877-520-3267 or visit www.familycaregiversbc.ca/ for help with burnout and stress from caregiving

For more information on abuse and older adults, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- + Preventing Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/prevent-abuse-older-adults>
- + Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Understanding Gender Differences: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/older-adult-abuse-gender>
- + Financial Abuse of Older Adults: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/financial-abuse-older-adults>

TO LEARN MORE ASK

- + Your family doctor.
- + HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to www.HealthLinkBC.ca

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW UP

- Follow up with your primary care provider in ___ days.

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Find this information sheet on the BC Emergency Medicine Network website:

www.bcemn.ca/clinical_resource/abuse-and-neglect-of-older-adults/