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**Chapter Two:**

# **An Overview of Elder Abuse<sup>1</sup>**

**What's In This Chapter:**

- **Definition of Elder Abuse and Neglect**
- **Types of Elder Abuse**
- **Who Is Being Abused?**
- **Who Are the Abusers?**

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## DEFINITION OF ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Abuse is any act or failure to act, within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, that jeopardizes the health or well-being of an older person.

Neglect is any inaction, either intended or unintended, within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, that causes harm to an older person.

## TYPES OF ELDER ABUSE<sup>2</sup>

There are several different types of elder abuse:

**Physical Abuse:** Any act of violence or rough treatment causing injury or physical discomfort. Physical abuse also includes sexual abuse and medication abuse.

Physical abuse may include:

- ¥ Any kind of physical assault such as slapping, pushing, pinching, choking, kicking, punching, burning, or injuring with an object or a weapon
- ¥ It also includes deliberate exposure to severe weather and unnecessary physical restraint
- ¥ Force feeding
- ¥ Rough handling
- ¥ Sexual abuse such as sexual assault or harassment
- ¥ Medication abuse such as withholding prescriptions or over-medication

**Psychological or Emotional Abuse:** Any act that may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, or self-worth of an individual.

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Psychological abuse may include:

- ¥ Name calling, yelling, insulting, ridiculing, swearing
- ¥ Threatening abandonment, poverty, withdrawal of love, or institutionalization
- ¥ Intimidating, frightening, humiliating, infantilizing (treating like a child)
- ¥ Isolation, silent treatment
- ¥ Invasion of privacy
- ¥ Excluding from decision making or meaningful events

**Financial or Material Abuse:** Theft or misuse of a senior's money or property

Financial abuse may include:

- ¥ Theft of money or possession
- ¥ Forging a senior's signature on cheques or other documents
- ¥ Misusing power of attorney
- ¥ Use of a senior's money or possessions without authorization
- ¥ Unduly influencing a senior to change his/her will
- ¥ Sale of home or possessions without senior's consent or legal authority

**Neglect:** The failure to meet the needs of an older adult who cannot meet these needs on his/her own. Neglect may have physical, psychological, and/or financial components, and be:

Active: *Intentional* withholding of basic necessities and/or care;  
or

Passive: *Non-intentional*, non-malicious withholding of basic necessities and/or care because of lack of experience, information, or ability

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Neglect may include:

- ¥ Failure to provide necessary provisions such as food, water, heat, adequate housing, clothing
- ¥ Failure to provide recommended health aids or equipment
- ¥ Lack of attention to needed medical or social assessment treatments
- ¥ Inattention to safety precautions, including the need for supervision
- ¥ Abandonment

Note: A senior's neglect may also be **self-neglect** meaning the older person is living in an unsafe or unhealthy manner by choice or ignorance. While this may be distressing to see, it must be remembered that a competent person, of any age, has the right to make choices about their lifestyle and to live at risk if he/she is not a danger to others. However, if you have any concerns about a senior not having the means and supports to access basic necessities or if you feel a senior does not understand the implications and risks of his/her lifestyle, it is suggested that you contact your local Health and Community Services office (see Appendix 2 for more information).

## WHO IS BEING ABUSED?

The 1999 General Social Survey (GSS) on victimization shows that about 7% of seniors reported experiencing some form of emotional or financial abuse and 1% reported experiencing physical or sexual violence from an adult child, caregiver, or spouse in the five-year period preceding the survey.<sup>3</sup> However this survey did not include abuse from non-family members and relied on self-reporting by victims.

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**Today, it is estimated that approximately one in every ten seniors has experienced some form of abuse.**

While *any* senior may be abused, studies have shown that the majority of older persons **reporting** abuse are:

- ¥ Over 75
- ¥ Female and widowed or single
- ¥ Physically or mentally impaired
- ¥ Socially isolated
- ¥ Abused by a family member with mental health problems and/or substance abuse issues

## **WHO ARE THE ABUSERS?**

Most elder abuse is committed by a family member: a son or daughter, spouse, grand child, or other relative. However, elder abuse may also come from a neighbour, friend, paid caregiver, or a volunteer and can happen at home or in institutions.

Studies show that the majority of elder abusers tend to have several of the characteristics below:

- ¥ Emotional or mental problems
- ¥ History of alcohol or drug abuse
- ¥ Financial dependence on the senior
- ¥ History of abuse and relationship difficulties
- ¥ Other stresses in their lives, such as financial or relationship problems
- ¥ Low self-esteem

In a relatively low number of cases (approximately 5%), the abusing family member is also the senior's primary caregiver.

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While abuse is NEVER acceptable, it should be remembered that a caregiver's abusive actions may arise from the inability to deal with the demands of the situation. Caregiving for an elderly family member can be a demanding, stressful job. In addition, many caregivers do not have the education or training on how to take care of senior's physical and emotional needs. This lack of knowledge can lead to the unintentional neglect of a senior. Thus finding support for a caregiver who abuses may also result in the improvement of an abused senior's situation.

### **Footnotes:**

1. NOTE: This section relies heavily on material from:

Seniors Resource Centre of Newfoundland and Labrador.  
*Elder Abuse Awareness Project: Training Manual for The Speakers Bureau.* St. John's. 1997

Interhospital Domestic Violence Committee-Saskatchewan.  
*Institutional Abuse Prevention Project: A Learning Resource Manual.* Saskatchewan. 1995.

2. Note: definitions are working definitions for the purpose of this guide. They are not legal definitions.

3. Dauvergne, Mia. Family Violence Against Seniors , *Canadian Social Trends*, No. 68, Spring 2003 (Statistics Canada – Catalogue No. 11-008), p. 11