

Protecting Older People

How to recognise and address elder abuse

Elder abuse

If you work in an aged care service you may see signs of older people being abused. Fortunately this doesn't happen very often but it is important that you know what abuse is, how to recognise if someone is being abused and know what to do about it.

What is elder abuse?

Abuse can be any harm to someone caused by another person in a position of trust or authority. The abuser could be a spouse or family member, a carer, friend, co-resident or a worker.

Examples include:

- o Physical - hitting, slapping, pushing or burning
- o Psychological/Emotional - verbal intimidation, humiliation and harassment, shouting and threats
- o Financial - misuse of the person's money, valuables or property, forced changes to legal documents and denying access to or control of personal funds
- o Sexual - indecent exposure or assault, sexual harassment or rape
- o Neglect - the intentional failure to provide basic life necessities

How would I know if someone is being abused?

Apart from obvious signs of physical abuse, a person experiencing abuse may be:

- o Afraid of a particular person or people
- o Worried and anxious for no obvious reason
- o Irritable and overly emotional
- o Appearing helpless, hopeless and sad
- o Using contradictory statements, not as a result of mental confusion
- o Reluctant to talk openly
- o Avoiding physical, eye or verbal contact

What should I do if I think someone is being abused?

Don't jump to conclusions but if any of these signs are present there is cause for concern which you should report to your supervisor.

Report a potentially abusive situation if:

- o There is a change in behaviour or mood or any of the signs mentioned
- o You observe someone behaving towards an older person in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable
- o An older person tells you that they are being abused
- o An older person, staff member or visitor tells you that they have observed abusive acts
- o You observe an action or inaction that may be considered abusive

Note: Don't dismiss what a person with dementia tells you as mere 'dementia talk'

How to respond to an abusive situation

If there is an immediate threat to someone:

- o Remain calm
- o Consider whether you can safely take immediate action to stop the abuse occurring, without endangering the older person, yourself or other people
- o Alert other staff
- o Report to, or get someone else to contact your supervisor immediately
- o Reassure and comfort the person

After taking the necessary immediate action:

- o If a sexual assault has taken place ensure the older person does not wash or shower before medical or police officers attend the scene
- o Do not disturb the area or remove any items involved in the incident
- o Record your observations or discussions with (or about) the older person that might indicate abuse has occurred, or complete an incident form
- o Don't ask extra questions or investigate in any way - that's not your job
- o Tell your supervisor any additional changes or concerns that you think of later

