

# Standing strong and speaking out

Identifying the signs of elder abuse



## Elder abuse is defined as:

'A single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person.

Elder abuse is a violation of human rights that can cause serious loss of dignity and self-respect.'

World Health Organization



## Understanding the abuse of older people

'Abuse' is a confronting word, but we need to talk about it. Abuse can happen at any time of life, to anyone.

Sometimes it goes unnoticed because 'that's the way my family's always done this', or bad practices have crept in over time and suddenly, bad behaviour becomes normal. Often it's ignored or we're in denial it's happening. Some people continue to live with it - in fear.

Abuse has many names - domestic, family or child abuse to name a few.

**Whatever it's called, violence against or abuse of another person is not okay.**

Abusive behaviour experienced by an older person is known as '**elder abuse**'.

It refers to people over the age of 65 (or 50+ years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).

**Statistics show 1 in 6 older people experience it.**

Did you know trusted people like family members can account for 75% of this unacceptable behaviour? Sometimes abusive behaviours can occur by accident as well-intentioned actions that turn into unhealthy outcomes for the older person.

Information here should assist you to:

- know the different forms of elder abuse
- identify the signs of elder abuse
- find support from others to put a stop to the abuse.

Confronting and challenging abuse of any kind is daunting.

Whether it's for yourself, a loved one, friend, client, or resident, this information might make the difference in leaving the fear behind and allowing healing to begin.

**Wise up, rise up against elder abuse.**

## Financial abuse



This is the illegal or improper use of an older person's property or finances.

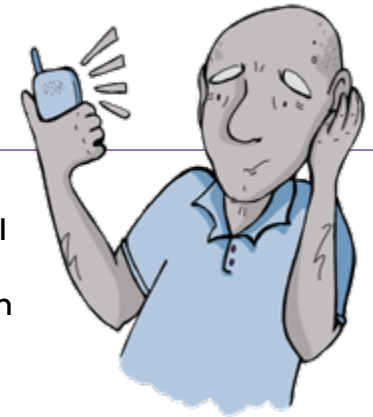
### What are the signs to look for?

- Unexplained disappearance of belongings
- Unexplained bills or the inability to pay bills
- Significant bank withdrawals and/or changes to wills
- Inability of an older person to access bank accounts or statements
- Stockpiling of unpaid bills or, an empty fridge
- Disparity between living conditions and money
- No money to pay for essentials for the home including food, clothing, and utilities.

### Perpetrator behaviours include:

- Threatening, coercing in relation to assets or wills
- Taking control of the older person's finances against their wishes and denying access to their own money
- Abusing Powers of Attorney
- Stealing goods e.g. jewellery, credit cards, cash, food, and other possessions
- Unauthorised use of banking and financial documents
- The recent addition of a signature on a bank account.

## Psychological abuse



This form of abuse is the infliction of mental stress involving actions and threats that cause isolation, fear of violence, deprivation and feelings of shame and powerlessness.

### What are the signs to look for?

- Resignation, shame
- Depression, tearfulness
- Confusion, agitation and social isolation
- Feelings of helplessness
- Unexplained paranoia or excessive fear
- Disrupted appetite or sleep patterns, such as insomnia
- Unusual passivity or anger
- Sadness or grief at the loss of interactions with others
- Withdrawal or listlessness due to people not visiting
- Changes in levels of self-esteem
- Worry or anxiety after a visit by specific person/people.

### Perpetrator behaviours include:

- Pressuring, intimidating or bullying
- Name-calling, and verbal abuse
- Treating an older person like a child
- Threatening to harm the person, other people or pets
- Engaging in emotional blackmail such as threatening to withdraw access to grandchildren, family, friends, services, telephone or placement in an aged care facility.

**If any of these points raise questions or concerns for you, call Advocare on 1300 724 679**

## Physical abuse

This form involves the infliction of physical pain or injury to, or physical coercion of, an older person.

### What are the signs to look for?

- Internal or external injuries (like sprains, dislocations and fractures, pressure sores, unexplained bruises or marks on different areas of the body, pain on touching)
- Broken or healing bones
- Discrepancies between injury and explanation of how it happened
- Unexplained broken or healing bones
- Lacerations to mouth, lips, gums, eyes or ears, missing teeth, eye injuries
- Evidence of hitting, punching, shaking, pulling i.e. bruises, lacerations, choke marks, hair loss, skin welts
- Burns e.g. by rope, cigarettes, matches, iron, hot water
- Visiting different doctors and hospitals.



## Abuse by neglect

This abuse (either intentional or unintentional) is the failure of a carer or responsible person to provide the necessities of life to an older person.



### What are the signs to look for?

- Inadequate clothing, complaints of being cold or too hot
- Poor personal hygiene, unkempt appearance
- Lack of medical or dental care, or injuries that have not been properly cared for
- Absence of required aids
- Exposure to unsafe, unhealthy, and/or unsanitary conditions
- Unexplained weight loss, dehydration, poor skin integrity, malnutrition.

### Perpetrator behaviours include:

- Failure to provide basic needs, i.e. food, adequate or clean clothing, heating, medicines
- Under- or over-medicating
- Exposure to danger or lack of supervision, such as leaving the older person in an unsafe place or in isolation
- An overly attentive carer in the company of others
- Refusal to permit others to provide appropriate care.

**If any of these points raise questions or concerns for you, call Advocare on 1300 724 679**

## Abuse by social isolation

This form of abuse is the prevention of an older person from having contact with relatives, friends, service providers and other people, or restricting the person's activities, thereby increasing their sense of isolation.

### What are the signs to look for?

- Sadness or grief at loss of important relationships
- Lack of self-esteem
- Appearing ashamed.

### Perpetrator behaviours include:

- The constant or close presence of the abuser gatekeeping
- Preventing contact with family and friends, or denying access to the phone or computer
- Withholding mail
- Preventing an older person from engaging in their usual religious or cultural practices
- Moving an older person far away from family or friends.



## Sexual abuse

This is a broad term used to describe a range of sexual acts where the older person's consent has not been obtained or has been obtained through coercion.



### What are the signs to look for?

- Unexplained sexually transmitted infection (STI), urinary tract infection (UTI) or incontinence (of bladder or bowel)
- Injury and trauma e.g. scratches, bruises or human bite marks to face, neck, chest, abdomen, thighs or buttocks
- Trauma including bleeding around the genitals, chest, rectum or mouth
- Torn or bloody underclothing or bedding
- Anxiety around the perpetrator and other psychological symptoms.

### Perpetrator behaviours include:

- Non-consensual sexual contact, language or exploitative behaviour
- Rape and sexual assault
- Cleaning or treating the older person's genital area roughly or inappropriately
- Enforced nudity of an older person against their consent
- Exposing the older person to unwelcome pornographic material.

**If any of these points raise questions or concerns for you, call Advocare on 1300 724 679**

## Helpful resources

**The agencies listed are committed to supporting victims or survivors of abuse.**

### **WA Elder Abuse Helpline**

This is a free and confidential information and referral service for those at risk of, or who are experiencing, elder abuse.

**1300 724 679**

[www.advocare.org.au/elder-abuse-helpline](http://www.advocare.org.au/elder-abuse-helpline)

### **Blue Knot Foundation**

Provides phone and email-based support for adult survivors of childhood trauma and abuse, as well as for their supporters and the professionals who work with them.

**1300 657 380**

[www.blueknot.org.au](http://www.blueknot.org.au)

### **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)**

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) is a free service located in Perth providing crisis services to people who have experienced a recent sexual assault (rape) in the last two weeks; and counselling for sexual assault or sexual abuse experienced recently or in the past.

**(08) 6458 1828 or  
1800 199 888**

[www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/Other-Services/SARC](http://www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/Other-Services/SARC)

### **WA Police Assistance**

To serve and protect the Western Australian community.

**131 444**

(police attendance required)  
or

**000**

(emergency or life-threatening situations)

### **1800 FULL STOP**

Full Stop Australia aims to put a full stop to sexual, domestic or family violence. They offer confidential counselling for people who have experienced sexual assault and for family members.

**1800 385 578**

[www.fullstop.org.au](http://www.fullstop.org.au)

### **1800 RESPECT**

This national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service provides a 24-hour hotline.

**1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)**

and ask for the details of your closest sexual assault service.

[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)




# Who is Advocare?

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Advocare is a leader in addressing the rights of older people and elder abuse.

For more than 25 years, we have proudly helped older Western Australians access the right supports, information and protections available to them.

We are a not-for-profit organisation, completely independent from aged care providers.

 **Phone: 08 9479 7566**  
**Country Callers: 1800 655 566**  
**WA Elder Abuse Helpline: 1300 724 679**

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**Advocare**  
Empowering older people in WA

