

Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse

“When I was abused, my spirit was dying. I needed help.”

“Wherever clergy are trained, abuse should be at the top of the list.”

*--Survivors of Elder Abuse
Lynn, Massachusetts
December 15, 2009*

Through the ages, faith communities have valued older adults, relied on their wisdom, and respected the breadth of their life experiences. Faith communities have often led the way in supporting and advocating for older adults.

Many older Americans turn to their faith communities for help when they are faced with the crisis of elder abuse. They know and trust faith community leaders and members.

If you are a faith community leader or member, you have a critical role to play because victims may turn to you for help. Be alert for signs of elder abuse. Learn to respond safely and effectively.

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse occurs when an older adult is willfully neglected or abused. The abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual, or financial.

Elder abuse affects women and men of all faiths, ethnic backgrounds, and social status. Social isolation, some illnesses, and disabilities that result from aging may make an older adult more vulnerable to abuse.¹

Elder abuse occurs most frequently in private homes, but can also occur in nursing homes or long-term and assisted living facilities.

Who are the abusers?

Abusers include family members, intimate partners, caretakers (paid or volunteer), friends, neighbors, bankers, lawyers, a person in a position of authority, or a person with whom there is an expectation of trust. The majority of abusers are intimate partners and family members.²

¹ Adapted with permission from “Break the Silence: What every faith community needs to know about elder abuse,” Illinois Department of Aging, August 2006.

² Acierno, Ron, Melba Hernandez-Tejada, Wendy Muzzy, and Kenneth Steve, “National Elder Mistreatment Study,” March 2009, pp. 4 ff.

What are possible “red flags” to look for?

Victims of elder abuse may exhibit some of these signs. However, absence of these signs does not mean that abuse is not taking place.

- Has unexplained or frequent physical injuries
- Speaks of being afraid or “walking on eggshells”
- Makes veiled disclosures, such as “my son has a temper,” or “my husband makes me do things I don’t want to do”
- Is isolated or unable to meet with you alone
- Is living in unsafe, unsanitary, or hazardous conditions
- Has sudden or unexplained changes in lifestyle, choices, or behavior including unexpectedly missing religious services
- Makes unusual financial transactions

I’m part of a faith community. How can I help?

Because so many victims turn to faith community leaders and members for help, you can make a difference in the life of an elder abuse victim or survivor. Here are some guidelines for response.

- Listen with compassion.
- Affirm that the abuse is not the victim’s fault.
- Prioritize the victim’s safety.
- Provide spiritual care and resources.
- Honor the victim’s decisions, even if he changes his mind.
- Couple’s or family counseling can be dangerous and is not recommended. If the victim insists, please contact your local domestic violence service provider for more information.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Be familiar with your state’s laws about faith leaders and abuse reporting requirements.
- Help the victim connect to a domestic violence, sexual assault, or elder abuse advocate or service agency that can provide safety planning and support.
- Follow up with continuing support.

Hotlines and Referrals

For immediate help, call:

- **911** or your local police: _____
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233)
800-787-3224 (TTY)
www.thehotline.org
- National Sexual Assault Hotline
800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673) www.rainn.org

For more information:

National Center on Elder Abuse: 302-831-3525, www.ncea.aoa.gov

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life: 608-255-0539, www.ncall.us

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence: 617-654-1820,
www.interfaithpartners.org.

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