

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ABUSE IN LATER LIFE

## *Abuse in Later Life*

### **1. What is abuse in later life?**

Abuse in later life occurs when an older person is subjected to a pattern of coercive behaviors used to gain & maintain [power and control](#) perpetrated by a family member or someone with whom the elder has an ongoing relationship. It is the [intersection between elder abuse and domestic violence](#).

### **2. Why do victims stay with an abuser or return after they have left?**

There are numerous reasons why victims maintain contact with abusers or feel they cannot leave an abusive relationship. Older victims of abuse often love or care about the people who harm them. Keeping the family together may be very important to the victim for many reasons, including religious and cultural beliefs. Some victims fear that they will be seriously hurt or killed if they leave their abusers. Others do not have the financial resources and/or housing they need to leave. Medical conditions and disabilities may make living on their own difficult or impossible or the abusive individual may need the victims care.

### **3. If a person is not hit, can she/he still experience abuse in later life?**

Abuse in later life occurs when a person uses methods or tactics of power and control over another individual. It does not always include physical abuse, but the threat of violence is present. Emotional abuse and financial exploitation are examples of non-physical means of controlling a victim.

### **4. Everyone fights sometimes. How can I tell a fight from abuse?**

Disagreements occur in most relationships. Sometimes those arguments are loud and people say things that hurt each other's feelings. However, in most relationships, adults say they are sorry and make up. No one gets physically hurt. When there is abuse, one person uses [power and control](#) to get what they want out of the relationship. There may or may not be physical abuse in the relationship, but the threat of harm is present. The person with the power uses many tactics to maintain their control in the relationship, including emotional and psychological abuse, threats of physical violence or abandonment, isolating the individual from family

and friends, limiting the victim's use of phone, breaking assistive devices and denying health care. Individuals who use power and control tactics in a relationship can be very persuasive, often trying to convince family, friends and professionals that they are only trying to help. Abusive individuals rarely take any responsibility for their inappropriate behavior.

### ***Why Does Abuse Occur?***

#### **5. Does anger cause abuse?**

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion and does not cause abuse. Even though abusers can be angry at times, abuse happens when an individual chooses manipulative, threatening or physically violent behavior to gain power and control over another individual. Abusive tactics may occur without any anger evident in the abuser.

#### **6. Does mental illness cause abuse?**

Some mental illnesses may have challenging or violent behaviors as one of their symptoms. Contact a mental health expert or doctor to find out more information about specific mental illnesses and combinations of medications to learn if violent behavior is likely or possible. Keep in mind that some abusers have used mental illness as an excuse to continue with their abusive behavior.

#### **7. Is abuse caused by stress?**

While stress is a commonly used rationale for abuse, stress does not cause abuse. Everyone experiences stress. Most stressed people do not hurt others. Most abusers under stress do not hit their bosses or law enforcement officers. They choose victims (such as family members) who have less power.

At times providing care for an ill or frail elderly person can be stressful. Some abusers suggest that their negative behavior is due to caregiver stress because they are overwhelmed by the demands of providing care. Research does not support caregiver stress as a primary cause of elder abuse but rather an excuse used by abusers so they can continue their behavior without consequences such as intervention by social services or law enforcement.

#### **8. Is abuse caused by a medical condition or combination of medications?**

Some medical conditions or combinations of medications may cause a normally gentle person to become violent. Contact a doctor or health care

provider to determine if the person has a medical condition and if aggressive behavior is related to the condition. Keep in mind that abusers may use a medical condition as an excuse for their behavior, so a medical opinion is important.

**9. Does abuse occur because a victim of child abuse grows up and then abusers his/her parent(s)?**

Abusive parents can unknowingly teach children that abuse is an effective way to control another individual. Abusive behavior is a choice. Individuals who grew up with abuse can choose to behave abusively or they can choose to stop the pattern of violence that may be all too familiar for them. Many adults who were victims of child abuse or witnessed domestic violence growing up, have healthy, happy adult relationships and do not hurt their children, spouse/partners or parents.

Some individuals who are abused as children experience emotional problems and/or mental illness as adults. This may require specific treatment to deal with the effects of their victimization; however, this is not an excuse for someone to continue abusive behavior.

**10. Does drug and/or alcohol abuse cause the violence and abuse?**

Many people use drugs and/or alcohol and are never abusive. Drugs and alcohol do not cause abuse or violence, however, the violence may intensify when using drugs or alcohol. Sometimes abusers will use drugs and/or alcohol as an excuse for their behavior. Abusers who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol have two separate problems – abusive behavior and substance abuse. Drug and alcohol treatment programs are designed to help an individual stay sober, not to eliminate the abusive behavior.

**Options: What Can I Do?**

**11. What should I do if I see or hear abuse/violence?**

If you see someone being physically hurt or threatened with a weapon, call a law enforcement emergency line such as 911.

**12. What can I do if I suspect someone I know is being abused?**

Talk to them. Tell them you are concerned for their safety and that you are there to help. Let them know that domestic violence and elder abuse do not stop without some sort of outside intervention.

Offer to accompany them to speak with an advocate at a domestic violence program or a social worker at an elder abuse agency.

Be part of their "[safety plan](#)". A safety plan is created by the victim with the help of a professional. The intent is to plan for a victim's safety needs before another violent episode erupts. If you believe they are in immediate danger, call 911.

### **13. Should I talk to the abuser?**

Be careful. The abuser may feel like he or she is losing control and therefore try to harm the victim. Consider your own safety as well. Ask the victim what could happen if you talk to the abuser.

### **14. Should I talk to the victim's friends or family?**

Be careful. Well-intended family members may tell the abuser that the victim has told you about the abuse. Others may confront the abuser. Either way, the victim could be at greater risk of harm. Ask the victim what could happen if you talk to family members or friends.

### **15. What can I do if I think I might be a victim of abuse?**

Keep in mind that you are not alone. Many other older individuals are harmed by spouses, partners, family or caregivers; many experience sexual assault and/or abuse by someone they know or a stranger.

Help is available. Talk with someone you trust and/or an advocate at a domestic abuse or sexual abuse program. You can also talk to a social worker at your local Adult Protective Services agency. You can usually call your local domestic/sexual abuse hotline and talk with someone without having to give your name or location. Talk to them about what is going on in your relationship and they will help you identify abusive behaviors that may be present. For the nearest domestic abuse hotline in your area, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE/ 800-799-7233, 800-787-3224 (TTY), or go to [www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org). For the nearest sexual assault hotline in your area, contact the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) at 800-656-HOPE/800-656-4673 or go to [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org). Contact the National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA) at (217) 523-4431 or go to [www.apsnetwork.org](http://www.apsnetwork.org) to find the local Adult Protective Agency for your area.

You can also contact your local elder abuse agency or adult protective services. A social worker can meet with you to provide information and let you know about services in your community.

You can learn more about elder abuse and domestic violence by looking on the Internet at sites such as [National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life \(NCALL\)](#) [National Center on Elder Abuse \(NCEA\)](#) or [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence \(NCADV\)](#).

You can also ask for support and information from other professionals such as law enforcement, health care providers or faith community members. Be aware, that certain professionals may be mandatory reporters, meaning they would have to report to an investigative/enforcement agency any kind of physical or sexual abuse that you might share.

## **What happens if...**

### **16. What happens if I call the police?**

When the police are called, an investigation will immediately begin. If the police feel a victim is in immediate danger of harm, they will go to the residence to investigate the situation. They will interview the alleged abuser, victim and any witnesses. They will take pictures of any bruising or injuries. They will collect any physical evidence, including statements made by the alleged victim, abuser or the neighbors. If you live in a state where "mandatory arrest" is required in a domestic abuse incident and law enforcement has reason to believe abuse has occurred, the abuser may be arrested. The reports from the law enforcement officers will then go to the prosecuting attorney who will determine whether there is enough evidence to press charges on the abusive party.

### **17. What happens if I call a domestic violence or sexual assault program?**

Domestic violence and sexual assault programs have advocates available for a victim or the victim's family. Usually callers do not have to give their name. Advocates can help with identifying options that may be available in your community to help a victim stay safe. Some advocates may be required to report to the authorities if you report physical abuse and/or neglect. It is important to ask the advocate if they will be making a report to anyone before you discuss the abuse. Advocates assist with legal issues, either criminal or civil, emergency housing and safety planning. They will accompany a victim to court, medical appointments, and other necessary appointments to provide emotional support. They also offer counseling and often have a support group for victims. They may be able to help with finding permanent housing, finding an attorney and referrals for food and other assistance. Advocates can also assist if an individual is having difficulty accessing services with other agencies

and/or businesses because of the abuse. Most advocates are trained to help identify what a victim's options are and support them as they sort through the difficult decisions in front of them.

If sexual abuse or assault has occurred, sexual assault programs also exist in many communities and offer helplines, peer support, counseling, legal advocacy and other information and assistance. Some domestic violence programs also offer sexual assault services.

### **18. What happens if I call social services or adult protective services (APS) agency in my area?**

Social service agencies (often adult protective services) investigate allegations of abuse against vulnerable adults and/or older victims. States vary in terms of types of cases that are investigated and services that are offered. For more information about how to contact an elder abuse or social services agency, go to the [National Center on Elder Abuse \(NCEA\)](http://www.ncea.org) or the National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA) at [www.apsnetwork.org](http://www.apsnetwork.org)

#### ***Counseling: Is it Helpful?***

### **19. Is counseling helpful for victims?**

Most victims of abuse are not mentally ill. However, some victims experience depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other mental health issues because of the abuse. In addition, persons with mental illness are often targeted as easy victims who will not be believed. Many victims find counseling, peer support, and support groups helpful. Many domestic abuse or rape crisis centers have support groups and counseling available for victims at no charge. These programs can also provide referral information for mental health counselors who are skilled in working with victims of abuse.

### **20. Is counseling helpful for abusers?**

Abusers are responsible for their own actions. Educational programs done in a group setting have been shown to be the most effective way to help abusers change their behavior. The most effective programs usually have at least a 26-week program, and many of the participants are court mandated into the program. Please note, one on one counseling and/or counseling the victim and abuser together is not recommended and has proven to be harmful to victims. For information about educational programs for abusers, contact your local domestic violence program.



Visit NCALL's [NCALL website links page](#) for additional information on organizations and agencies working on abuse in later life issues.