

Do You Know How to Recognize Elder Abuse? **By: Sarah Cook, Public Education Coordinator**

The World Health Organization defines Elder Abuse 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.” In many cases, elder abuse occurs when there is an imbalance of control, where the abuser either restricts or takes control over the rights and freedoms of the senior. The senior is made to feel powerless through acts of intimidation, humiliation, coercion, or fear.

Financial abuse is the most common form of elder abuse. It can be defined as “any improper conduct, done with or without the informed consent of the senior that results in a monetary or personal gain to the abuser and/or monetary or personal loss for the older adult”, according to Elder Abuse Ontario. In many cases, financial abuse is committed by family members and it can include the misuse of a senior’s property or funds, misuse of the Power of Attorney, theft or forgery, and various other examples of abuse involving exploitation of the senior’s banking or legal property, or sudden changes/threats involving their living status.

Psychological abuse, also commonly referred to as Emotional Abuse, includes any verbal or non-verbal action that diminishes a senior’s sense of identity, dignity and self-worth. Elder Abuse Ontario states that psychological abuse can be demonstrated through such acts as using words that are hurtful or belittling, denying respect to the person’s possessions, making threats, ignoring or showing lack of acknowledgment, verbal intimidation, withholding affection, as well as limiting the senior’s contact with family, friends and neighbours who provide social support.

Physical abuse is defined by Elder Abuse Ontario as “any act of violence or rough handling that may or may not result in physical injury but causes physical discomfort or pain.” Examples of physical abuse can include pushing, kicking, shoving, hitting, slapping, arm twisting, pulling hair, spitting at someone, as well as the act of either confining or restraining a person in an inappropriate manner.

Sexual abuse is described as “any sexual behaviour directed toward an older adult without that person’s full knowledge and consent.” Elder Abuse Ontario further explains that examples of sexual abuse can involve coercing an older person using force, trickery, threats or other means into unwanted sexual activity. Sexual abuse can often take place when there is unwanted sexual contact between service providers and their elderly clients or patients where the senior is no longer able to provide consent. This form of abuse may be much harder to identify as those experiencing sexual abuse may not report it or talk about it because they feel shame or embarrassment. Sexual abuse can take many forms including unwanted touching or

kissing, making sexual remarks or suggestions, forcing a person to engage in a sexual act, fondling a senior who may exhibit confusion and forced intercourse or rape.

Neglect can be active or passive and it refers to not meeting the basic needs of the older person. Elder Abuse Ontario defines active (or intentional) neglect as the deliberate withholding of care or the basic necessities of life to an older adult that they are caring for. Passive (or unintentional) neglect reflects a failure to provide appropriate care to an older adult due to a lack of knowledge, experience or ability. Examples of neglect can include withholding care, necessary services or medical attention, leaving a senior in an unsafe environment, over or under-medicating the person, not providing the basic necessities of life, abandonment or denial of the person's most basic rights.

As we acknowledge World Elder Abuse Day, Elder Abuse Ontario encourages us to be aware that the abuse of older adults is everyone's business. Seniors and community members need to be informed about elder abuse, be able to recognize the signs and be engaged in taking steps to prevent it. It's important to remember that EVERYONE can help and has a role to play to prevent elder abuse. To learn more about recognizing the forms of Elder Abuse and how to take steps toward preventing it, please visit Elder Abuse Ontario:

<http://www.elderabuseontario.com/> or call 416-916-6728 for more information.