

# DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

There is no excuse for  
elder abuse



Media reports of home invasions and bag snatching can give the impression that older people are at greatest risk from strangers. The sad truth is, like child abuse and family violence, abuse of older people is more likely to come from family or friends.

## What is elder abuse?

In Western Australia elder abuse is defined as: 'Any act which causes harm to an older person and occurs within an informal relationship of trust, such as family or friends'.

Abuse can take many forms. This includes:

- **Financial or material** – such as using an older person's money or property without their permission.
- **Emotional or psychological** – such as verbal or physical threats, threats of abandonment and intimidation, threats to harm others or pets, withdrawal of love and support.
- **Social** – such as restricting the older person's social freedom and isolating her or him from family and friends.
- **Neglect** – not providing life's necessities such as adequate food, shelter, care and emotional support. Neglect can be intentional or unintentional.
- **Physical** – any deliberate act resulting in physical pain or injury, including physical coercion and physical restraint.
- **Sexual** – sexually abusive or exploitative behaviour, including sexual assault, such as making obscene phone calls, or watching obscene videos in the presence of an older adult.



# Preventing elder abuse

## Shirley's story

Shirley is a 68-year-old widow living with her separated son Tony and Tony's adult son James. About a month ago, Shirley came home to find Tony watching pornographic DVDs.

She told him clearly she did not approve and would not allow it in her house. Tony made light of the situation and continued watching the DVDs several times a week.

Now James has started watching the DVDs with his father. Shirley gets so upset she locks herself in her room.

Shirley's doctor noticed she looked upset and had symptoms of depression. Shirley told her doctor about the situation and said she did not know what to do.

Shirley is a victim of elder abuse.



### STAY ACTIVE

If you are an older person, reducing the two most common factors in elder abuse – dependency and isolation – can reduce your risk of elder abuse. You can do this by:

- **Staying socially connected** – join a club or group, stay in touch with friends and meet regularly.
- **Enjoying and maintaining independence** – continue experiencing new activities, take up new challenges, meet new people.
- **Staying physically healthy** – exercise daily and eat a well balanced diet, visit your GP and health care professionals regularly.
- **Staying mentally active** – start a course of study, join a book club.
- **Staying emotionally healthy** – ask for help if you are feeling down or anxious, talk with your GP.



### PLAN FOR YOUR FUTURE SECURITY

While everyone hopes to live without ill health, frailty, forgetfulness or dependency, it is not always possible. It is wise to plan ahead for a time when you may need help to stay independent. Here are some suggestions to help you plan:

- Get independent advice before signing any documents including:
  - the sale of your property
  - your Power of Attorney
  - Enduring Power of Attorney
  - your Will.

(The back page lists agencies that can advise on these matters.)

- Stay aware of your financial position. Keep information about your finances and investments, property and assets in a secure place.
- Make decisions about what you want for your future if you become frail or incapacitated, for example, your future accommodation or health-care options.
- Appoint one or two people you trust as Enduring Attorneys to act on your behalf in financial matters now or in the event you lose capacity to make decisions yourself.



### TELL THE PEOPLE YOU TRUST THE MOST ABOUT THE DECISIONS YOU HAVE MADE ABOUT YOUR FUTURE

## Recognising the signs

Protecting older people protects an important community asset.

If you suspect or know an older person is being abused and do nothing, the harm continues.

Signs to watch for include:

- acting fearfully or withdrawing
- signs of stress or depression
- bruising or other physical injuries
- unable to pay normal bills or having unpaid bills
- marked weight loss
- changes in sleeping patterns.

Signs that someone might be abusing an older person include:

- seeing the person verbally or physically abuse the person
- a person speaking on behalf of the older person without consent
- conflicting stories about injuries.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU SUSPECT AN OLDER PERSON IS BEING ABUSED**

If you feel uncomfortable talking directly with the person, contact Advocare or the Office of the Public Advocate if you think the person has a decision-making disability (see back page for contact details).

## Don't accept abuse

No-one deserves to be abused, exploited or to live in fear.

There are many reasons why victims of elder abuse might feel unable to report or act to stop unacceptable behaviour, including:

- believing it's their fault
- shame that their children are harming them
- the possibility of having to rebuild their finances if they leave the abuse
- their dependence on the abuser for income and social networks and fear of losing them
- being estranged from their adult children and losing their family.

**If you are being mistreated, don't accept that you deserve it. No matter what has happened in the past, it is not acceptable if your children or others harm you.**

## What you can do

It is not easy to tell someone you love and depend on that some of the things they do are upsetting you and you would like them to stop. You may feel scared, ashamed or embarrassed to speak to them directly.

If you feel your rights are being abused, you can contact Advocare to speak with someone who can help you resolve the problem.

If you are housebound or worried about the abuser causing you further harm, contact Advocare when he or she is out of the house.

If you get home care, tell the support worker you are concerned for your wellbeing and would like help.

You do not have to sort it out on your own. There is nothing so terrible you can't tell someone about it.

### Gwen's story

Gwen is 78 years old and lives at a residential caravan park. She was recently physically abused (held by the arms and shaken) and threatened by her 45-year-old son asking for more money to feed his drug addiction. Gwen feels afraid to report her son to the police because she does not want him to go to prison. She also depends on him for transport to the shops and appointments because her son is using her car. Gwen told her friend she knows her son has a problem but is reluctant to take out a restraining order on him because she loves him. Gwen is a victim of elder abuse.

## Making decisions

Whether you are 15 or 50, you need to treat older people with respect.

This means when older people have the capacity to make their own choices people who hold a position of trust in their lives should **NOT**:

- **make decisions for them**
- **coerce or bully them into making decisions not in their own best interest**
- **ignore their decisions.**

It also means that when an older person loses the capacity to make an informed decision, others must make decisions in the older person's best interests. Family dynamics can be positive or negative and it is important that an older person does not inadvertently fall victim because of sibling rivalry, greed or malice.

The Office of the Public Advocate can provide more information and advice about older people with reduced decision-making capacity.

## A last word - Wills

Many of us work hard to give our children a better life. We may at times tell them they will inherit the house, or boat or share portfolio. This may lead them to think that because they may have the assets in the future, perhaps they should have them now. This can be the start of elder abuse – the thin end of the wedge.

Make sure your children and grandchildren know that any Will you make is a 'Last Will and Testament' at the **end** of, not during, your life.

### Do you have a Will?

Everyone over the age of 18 is encouraged to have a current and valid Will. A Will is one of the most important documents you will ever sign. Rather than writing your own Will, consider using a lawyer or the Public Trustee.

For further information contact a Public Trustee Wills & Deceased Estate Administration Customer Service Officer on **1300 746 116**.

## Harold's story

Harold is an 82-year-old pensioner living with his 51-year-old daughter Nancy and her family. Nancy persuaded him to transfer his \$60 000 in savings into her account to help pay bills and Harold's medical expenses. When Harold needed money to visit his son overseas, Nancy told him there wasn't enough to pay for his ticket. Nancy said the money was used to pay for the children's school fees and car repairs. When Harold protested, Nancy said he should be grateful for living with them and thankful he wasn't in a nursing home. Harold is a victim of elder abuse.



## Elder abuse in Western Australia

Although elder abuse is under-reported, it is estimated that between two and five per cent of older people experience abuse. This means approximately 6 000 to 15 000 older Western Australians could be affected.

Research shows:

- Women are most likely to experience elder abuse.
- Elder abuse is most likely to happen to people aged 75 years or more.
- Older people with reduced decision-making capacity or physical disability are more likely to be at risk of elder abuse.
- The most common risk factors are dependency and isolation.
- Financial/material abuse is most common and usually accompanied by psychological abuse.
- Victims can experience multiple types of abuse simultaneously.
- Adult sons and daughters are most likely to abuse an older person. Others include spouse/de facto partner, grandchildren, step-children, nieces and nephews.

## There is no excuse for abusing

No-one has the right to abuse, exploit or harm another person.

If you suspect you may be abusing an older person, you have to admit what you are doing before you can change your behaviour. If you don't act to change your behaviour, your victim may get help to make you stop.

It can be difficult dealing with a parent becoming frail or losing capacity. It is easy to get frustrated. One of the risk factors associated with elder abuse is the health of the person responsible for the older person's care. Maintaining your own health and wellbeing makes it easier for you to look after someone you love without resorting to inappropriate or harmful behaviour.

If you are having difficulty managing the care of an older person by yourself, get help.

You may need financial support, respite or travel assistance to and from appointments. These services are available from different support agencies. Don't give up if the first agency you contact cannot provide help that very minute.

### YOU CAN GET HELP FROM:

**Alzheimer's Association:**  
1800 100 500

**Carer's Counselling Line:**  
1800 007 332

**Carers WA:**  
1300 227 377

**Centrelink:**  
13 27 17

**Commonwealth Carelink  
and Respite Centres:**  
1800 052 222

**Your GP**



## Support services

### ADVOCARE

Advocare's Elder Abuse Prevention Program supports people to assert their rights and to look after their own best interests, in order to ensure their safety and well-being.

Abuse is about a power imbalance. Advocare works with the older adult to make everyone equal using a people power model. People participate in the decision-making process after being given relevant information and decide for themselves what strategies to take to address the abuse.

Advocare does not impose actions. Unless the older person is in danger, Advocare respects their right to make decisions in their own time.

**Telephone: (08) 9479 7566**

**Country callers: 1800 655 566**

### PUBLIC ADVOCATE

In Western Australia the Public Advocate is the independent statutory officer appointed under the *Guardianship and Administration Act 1990* to promote and protect the rights, dignity and autonomy of people with decision-making disabilities and to reduce their risk of neglect, exploitation and abuse.

The Public Advocate helps protect the rights of people who are not able to make reasoned decisions because of dementia, intellectual disability, mental illness or acquired brain injury.

**Telephone Advisory Service: 1300 858 455**

## References

Boldy, D, Webb, M, Horner, B, Davey, M and Kingsley, B 2002 *Elder Abuse in Western Australia*, Perth, Centre for Research into Aged Care Services, Curtin University of Technology.

Faye, B and Sellick, M 2003 *Advocare's Speak Out Survey 'S.O.S.' on Elder Abuse*, Perth, Advocare

Alliance for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: Western Australia (APEA:WA) 2006 *Elder Abuse Protocol: Guidelines for Action*

Department for Communities 2007 *Research into Community Attitudes to Elder Abuse in Western Australia*

Ottley, S 'Health as a Risk Factor for Elder Abuse', *Victimisation of the Elderly and Disabled*, vol. 11, no. 5 Jan/Feb 2009

Kurrie, S and Naughtin, G (2008) 'An Overview of Elder Abuse and Neglect in Australia', *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 20:2, pp108-125

Shilling, D, 'Abuse Prevention: Two Approaches', *Victimisation of the Elderly and Disabled*, vol. 11, no. 6 Mar/April 2009

Ellison, S, Schetzer, L, Mullins, J, Perry, J & Wong, K 2004 *The legal needs of older people in NSW*, Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Sydney

### OLDER PEOPLE'S RIGHTS SERVICE

Provides legal advice, information and legal advocacy; short-term counselling and referral for older people who are experiencing elder abuse, or are at risk of being abused.

**Telephone: (08) 9440 1663**

### PUBLIC TRUSTEE

The Public Trustee provides trustee and asset management services to all Western Australians and offers a range of free and fee-based services, including preparing and storing Wills and Enduring Powers of Attorney, administering deceased estates and managing the financial and legal affairs of people with decision-making disabilities.

**Telephone: 1300 746 212**

### CRISIS CARE

A free telephone information and counselling service for people in crisis needing urgent help or crisis accommodation.

**Telephone: (08) 9223 1111**

**Country callers: 1800 199 008**