Domestic Violence: Older Women Can Be Victims Too

“Many forms of verbal and psychological abuse appear relatively harmless at first, but expand and grow more menacing over time, sometimes gradually and subtly. As victims adapt to abusive behavior, the verbal or psychological tactics can gain a strong ‘foothold’ in victims’ minds, making it difficult for them to recognize the severity of the abuse over time.”

— Witness Justice, Maryland

Domestic violence, regrettably, knows no age limits. Every hour of every day, some woman somewhere faces the horror of physical, emotional, financial, or sexual abuse by someone they know well and with whom they have an ongoing relationship—a spouse or companion, son, daughter, or other family member.

Education and support are vital to older women’s safety—Secrecy is an abuser’s best protection.

Facts on Late Life Domestic Violence

- Domestic elder abuse is primarily family abuse. Studies repeatedly show that the overwhelming majority of confirmed cases occur in domestic settings.¹
- A significant portion of elder abuse cases reported in the United States involve spouse/partner violence.²
- Older women are likelier than younger women to experience violence for a longer time, to be in current violent relationships, and to have health and mental health problems.³

Signs That Something May Be Wrong

What follows is a chart listing some of the warning signs of domestic abuse in later life. All of the signs need not be present for abuse to be occurring. Answering yes to one or several may be the cue to further questioning.
Recognizing Domestic Violence in Later Life

### A Victim May . . .
- Have injuries that do not match explanation of how they occurred.
- Have repeated “accidental” injuries.
- Appear isolated.
- Say or hint that she is afraid.
- Give coded communications about what is occurring.
- Attempt or think about suicide.
- Have a history of alcohol or drug abuse (including prescription drugs).
- Be “difficult” or hard to get along with.
- Have vague, chronic, non-specific complaints.
- Be emotionally and/or financially dependent on her abuser.
- Miss appointments.
- Delay seeking medical help.
- Show signs of depression, stress, or trauma.

### A Perpetrator May . . .
- Minimize or deny the victim’s injuries or complaints.
- Attempt to convince others that she is incompetent or crazy.
- Blame the victim for being clumsy or difficult.
- Physically assault or threaten violence against the victim or victim’s family, friends, pets, or others.
- Forbid the victim from contacting family, friends, service providers.
- Threaten or harass the victim.
- Stalk the victim.
- Act overly attentive toward the victim.
- Act loving, kind, compassionate to the victim, especially in presence of others.
- Attempt or think about suicide.
- Have a history of alcohol or drug abuse.
- Speak on behalf of the victim, insist on being present during every interaction.
- Say the victim is incompetent, unhealthy, or crazy.
- Be emotionally and/or financially dependent on the victim.
- Cancel the victim’s appointments or refuse her the use of a car or other transportation.
- Cover up the abuse by taking victim to different doctors, hospitals, or pharmacies.
- Refuse to purchase needed prescription drugs, medical supplies, and/or assistive devices.
- Turn family members against the victim.
- Talk about her as if she is not there or not a person (de-humanize victim).

Excerpted and adapted with permission from Elder Abuse: A Multidisciplinary Approach (in press), by Bonnie Brandl, Carmel Dyer, Candice Heisler, Joanne Otto, Lori Stiegel, and Randy Thomas.
Domestic Violence Knows No Age Limits

Why Do Women Stay? Why Do Women Return?

- *Fear that disclosure* will lead to something far worse—mental or physical anguish, deprivation, or even death.
- *Fear of the unknown* or of going it alone.
- *Economic dependence* — Who will take care of her? Where will she live? What will she do if she has no health insurance?
- *Fear of institutionalization* — If she is frail, ill, or disabled, will she be forced to move to a nursing home?
- *Values/culture* — Separation, divorce, and legal orders of protection are not an option.
- *Shame and guilt* — Victims often blame themselves for any crime perpetrated against them. She may feel she is responsible.
- *Denial and minimization* — She may feel she needs to protect her abuser by refusing to press charges or by changing her story of what really happened.
- *Lack of information* about alternatives.

What Every Woman Should Know

- Domestic violence is a crime. Abusers are apt to play the blame game, make excuses, or deny wrongdoing. But their behavior can never be justified.
- From belittling and bullying to isolation, threats, and coercion, abusing others is a way to exert power and control. Abusers choose to act this way. It is not about loss of control, it is about *getting* control.
- Older women have both a right and a need to protect themselves.

Help Is Available

If you or someone you know is being abused, *tell someone*. You are not alone.

If you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police department right away.
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For emergency safety services, support, or shelter, call your local hotline or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233). Some local domestic violence programs have specialized services for older women. You don’t have to stay in a shelter to get help.

If you suspect elder abuse and are concerned about your well-being or another woman’s safety, call your state or local Adult Protective Services hotline.

To find help in your area, call the national Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or go to the National Center on Elder Abuse Web site at www.elderabusecenter.org and then click “Where to Report Abuse.”

What Others Can Do

- Familiarize yourself with the signs of elder abuse and the dynamics of late life domestic violence.
- Share this information with older women.
- Learn about services for domestic violence in the community. Make referrals and offer to advocate.
- Post literature about late life domestic violence in places where women are likely to visit and not be under the influence of the suspected abuser — doctors’ offices, senior centers, restrooms, and other safe places.
- Ask and listen. Open the lines of communication. Ask her if there is something wrong, if she feels isolated, or if she is worried about something, and then listen to her story.
- Offer friendship and support. Women who have experienced domestic violence often cite as most helpful the person who took the time to listen, or who said, “You do not deserve to be treated like this.”
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Sources


The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) serves as a national resource for elder rights advocates, adult protective services, law enforcement and legal professionals, medical and mental health providers, public policy leaders, educators, researchers, and concerned citizens. It is the mission of NCEA to promote understanding, knowledge sharing, and action on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

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