

---

**Chapter Two:**

# **An Overview of Elder Abuse<sup>1</sup>**

**What's in this Chapter:**

- **Definition of Elder Abuse and Neglect**
- **Types of Elder Abuse**
- **Who Is Being Abused?**
- **Who Are the Abusers?**

---

## DEFINITION OF ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Abuse is any act or failure to act, within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, that jeopardizes the health or well-being of an older person.

Neglect is any inaction, either intended or unintended, within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, that causes harm to an older person.

## TYPES OF ELDER ABUSE<sup>2</sup>

There are several different types of elder abuse:

***Physical Abuse:*** Any act of violence or rough treatment causing injury or physical discomfort. Physical abuse also includes sexual abuse and medication abuse.

Physical abuse may include:

- Any kind of physical assault such as slapping, pushing, pinching, choking, kicking, punching, burning, or injuring with an object or a weapon
- It also includes deliberate exposure to severe weather and unnecessary physical restraint
- Force feeding or withholding of food
- Rough handling
- Sexual abuse such as sexual assault or harassment
- Medication abuse such as withholding prescriptions or over-medicating

***Psychological or Emotional Abuse:*** Any act that may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, or self-worth of an individual.

---

Psychological abuse may include:

- Name calling, yelling, insulting, ridiculing, swearing
- Threatening abandonment, poverty, withdrawal of love, or institutionalization
- Intimidating, frightening, humiliating, infantilizing (treating like a child)
- Isolation, silent treatment
- Invasion of privacy
- Excluding from decision making or meaningful events
- Spiritual abuse, such as preventing an older adult from engaging in spiritual or religious practices or forcing religious practices upon them

***Financial or Material Abuse:*** Theft or misuse of a senior's money or property.

Financial abuse may include:

- Theft of money or possessions
- Forging a senior's signature on cheques or other documents
- Misusing power of attorney
- Use of a senior's money or possessions without authorization
- Unduly influencing a senior to change his/her will and/or executor
- Sale of home or possessions without senior's consent or legal authority

***Neglect:*** The failure to meet the needs of an older adult who cannot meet these needs on his/her own. Neglect may have physical, psychological, and/or financial components, and be either active or passive:

---

Active: *Intentional* withholding of basic necessities and/or care.

Passive: *Non-intentional*, non-malicious withholding of basic necessities and/or care because of lack of experience, information, or ability.

Neglect may include:

- Failure to provide necessary provisions of life such as food, water, heat, adequate housing, clothing
- Failure to provide recommended health aids or equipment
- Lack of attention to needed medical or social assessment treatments
- Inattention to safety precautions, including the need for supervision
- Abandonment

Note: A senior's neglect may also be *self-neglect* — meaning the older person is living in an unsafe or unhealthy manner by choice or ignorance. While this may be distressing to see, it must be remembered that a competent person, of any age, has the right to make choices about their lifestyle and to live at risk if he/she is not a danger to others. However, if you have any concerns about a senior not having the means and supports to access basic necessities or if you feel a senior does not understand the implications and risks of his/her lifestyle, it is suggested that you contact the community support services of your local health authority (see Appendix 2 for more information).

## **WHO IS BEING ABUSED?**

**Today, it is estimated that somewhere between four and ten percent of seniors in Canada experience some form of abuse.**

---

If we apply that percentage to Newfoundland and Labrador's senior population, that means there may be 8000 seniors in our province who are experiencing abuse.

Looking at **police-reported** cases, Statistics Canada's *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2010*, states nearly 2800 seniors aged 65 years and older were the victims of family violence in 2010. Two-thirds (67%) of these cases involved physical assaults, a larger proportion than the share of non-family violence incidents against seniors (45%).

While *any* senior may be abused, studies have shown that the majority of older persons **reporting** abuse are:

- Over 75
- Female<sup>3</sup> and widowed or single
- Physically or mentally impaired
- Socially isolated
- Abused by a family member with mental health problems and/or substance abuse issues

## WHO ARE THE ABUSERS?

Most elder abuse is committed by a family member: a son<sup>4</sup> or daughter, spouse, grandchild, or other relative. However, elder abuse may also come from a neighbour, friend, paid caregiver, or a volunteer and can happen at home or in institutions.

Studies show that the majority of people who commit elder abuse tend to have several of the following characteristics:

- Emotional or mental problems
- History of alcohol or drug abuse

- 
- Financial dependence on the senior
  - History of abuse and relationship difficulties
  - Other stresses in their lives, such as financial or relationship problems
  - Low self-esteem

In a relatively low number of cases, the abusing family member is also the senior's primary caregiver.

While abuse is NEVER acceptable, it should be remembered that a caregiver's abusive actions may arise from the inability to deal with the demands of the situation. Caregiving for an elderly family member can be a demanding, stressful job. Some caregivers do not have adequate supports in place, such as money to pay for the additional costs of providing care or respite opportunities. There are also times when a caregiver may find himself or herself at the receiving end of an act of aggression from the senior in their care. (This could be the result of changes in personality due to dementia or a brain injury or there may be a history of family violence.)

In addition, many caregivers do not have the education or training on how to take care of a senior's physical and emotional needs. This lack of knowledge can lead to the unintentional neglect of a senior. Thus finding support for a caregiver who abuses may also result in the improvement of an abused senior's situation. (See A3-3 for a resource for caregivers.)

---

**Footnotes:**

1. NOTE: This section relies heavily on material from:

Seniors Resource Centre of Newfoundland and Labrador. (1997) *Elder Abuse Awareness Project: Training Manual for The Speakers Bureau*. St. John's.

Interhospital Domestic Violence Committee-Saskatchewan. (1995) *Institutional Abuse Prevention Project: A Learning Resource Manual*. Saskatchewan. 1995.

2. Note: definitions are working definitions for the purpose of this guide. They are not legal definitions.

3. According to Statistics Canada's *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2010*, the rate of spousal violence for senior women in 2010 was more than double the male rate (22 versus 10 per 100,000 population). Senior women were also slightly more likely than senior men to be victimized by their children in 2010 (27 per 100,000 versus 24 per 100,000 population).

4. According to Statistics Canada's *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2010*, grown children were the most common perpetrators of family violence (39% of women and 46% of men) in 2010. This was particularly the case when the violence escalated to the killing of seniors. Over the past decade, half (50%) of all family homicides against seniors were committed by grown children.

