

# COVID-19

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## Preventing and Responding to Elder Abuse

Organizations such as Jewish community centers and synagogues are trusted and critical resources for elders. They provide a variety of services and activities to promote physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Thus, community organizations are well-positioned to decrease the prevalence of elder abuse by: 1) demonstrating a commitment to its prevention; and 2) serving as a point of connection for elders.

Building Healthy  
Jewish Communities



SACRED SPACES

# מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקּוּם, וְהִדַּרְתָּ פְּנֵי זָקֵן

*“You shall rise before the aged  
and show deference to the old...”*

(Leviticus 19:32)

COVID-19 has highlighted both the strengths and vulnerabilities of our communities and institutions. Quickly and collectively, we have changed our daily lives to protect each other from exposure to a potentially deadly virus, to provide basic necessities for those unable to access them, and to strive for connection amidst physical distancing. As we remain vigilant in that effort, we must also understand how acts of protection in one area of public health can lead to an increase of risk in another, specifically the abuse, neglect, and maltreatment of older adults.



**It is estimated that each year,  
1 in 10 older adults experience  
at least one form of abuse.<sup>4</sup>**

**64.2% of staff working in  
long-term care facilities  
report that they have  
committed abuse.<sup>5</sup>**

**Isolation and loneliness  
are the greatest risk factors  
for elder abuse<sup>6</sup> and other  
health-related issues.<sup>7</sup>**

## INTERSECTION OF ELDER ABUSE & COVID-19

While abuse, neglect and exploitation can occur at any age, vulnerability factors such as social isolation, lack of community support, cognitive decline, and disability are more prevalent in adults over age 60, increasing the risk.<sup>1</sup> Harm experienced by this age group is commonly referred to as ‘elder abuse.’<sup>2</sup> It “includes physical, sexual or psychological abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment, and financial exploitation of an older person by another person or entity, that occurs in any setting (e.g., home, community, or facility), either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an

older person is targeted based on age or disability.”<sup>3</sup>

Older adults are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. They are more likely than the general population to contract the virus and have statistically more severe outcomes from infection. Given this reality, older adults have been strongly advised to isolate, remain indoors, and stop accepting visitors.

Elder abuse advocates report that abuse rates have increased as much as tenfold during the pandemic, in part due to social isolation.<sup>8</sup> As family members and

caretakers seek ways to safeguard against abuse, it is imperative that elders are empowered to act with autonomy, self-determination, and self-efficacy.

Out of respect and concern for our elders, Sacred Spaces developed this resource. It outlines practical techniques to:

- Counter the risk of elder abuse caused by isolation; and
- Implement protocols to create safe, healthy, and respectful environments to minimize the opportunity for harm.





Acknowledging that elder abuse is a public health issue is an important step that involves acquiring knowledge, being comfortable discussing the issue, learning how to ask those at risk about their own safety, and becoming familiar with available community resources. Additionally, community organizations must establish their own internal safeguards for elders who interact with their staff and enter into their spaces.

### LEARN

Educate staff and volunteers on elder abuse and its warning [signs](#). Identify who at the organization has a [legal duty](#) to report elder abuse and establish protocols for [reporting](#) both internally and to the [authorities](#).

### SCREEN

Require interviews, check references, and conduct background checks on staff and volunteers who have regular contact with elders to identify potentially abusive individuals who could pose a threat to elders. During interviews, provide copies of your elder abuse policies and pose scenarios to discuss with applicants. Have organization representatives sign policies that they will not engage in behaviors that are disrespectful to or compromise the safety of community members of any age.

### MONITOR

Require individuals communicating with elders on behalf of the organization to use email addresses, phone numbers, and platforms identified with and registered to the organization. The organization should know when any staff member or volunteer is interacting with an elder to ensure transparency around contact and communication.

### RAISE AWARENESS

Integrate information about elder abuse into community programming. Post information about elder abuse in public places, place articles in newsletters, participate in [World Elder Abuse Awareness Day](#), host online training and virtual senior health fairs, and talk about elder abuse in classes and Shabbat sermons. Sharing information about elder abuse can reduce stigma and increase reporting.

### SEEK INPUT

Request feedback from elders about their interactions with your organization's staff and volunteers. If someone has regular contact with a representative of your organization, periodically ask about that relationship. Let elders know about the organization's commitment to safety and respect, and whom to contact if any interaction makes them uncomfortable or feels hurtful.







## POINT OF CONNECTION

The task of reaching community members can seem enormous, especially in a pandemic. Many organizations have swiftly adjusted how they operate and continue to seek ways to improve their ability to meet the needs of community members. While the goal may be to serve all, a place to focus first is on those most at risk, with the aim of reducing their social isolation and maintaining their emotional and physical well-being.

Many elders are active members of the community but are currently isolated due to COVID-19. Mental stimulation and a feeling of belonging help counteract loneliness and depression while reducing vulnerability to abuse. Engagement creates more opportunities for people to interact with elders and become aware of indicators of maltreatment. Below are some suggestions for reducing social isolation and assessing emotional and physical well-being:

- **Maintain recreation and gatherings virtually.**<sup>9</sup> Continue to engage elders in their favorite activities online, such as classes, lectures, or exercise sessions. Reach out directly to individuals who previously attended activities but have yet to participate since COVID-19. Encourage involvement and ensure they can properly access the content virtually.
- **Include elders in projects.** For instance, have them assist with sewing masks, writing thank you notes to first responders, mentoring teens, or participating in calling trees to check on neighbors.
- **Seek input from elders** on how to engage their peers, especially those who may be at risk for maltreatment.
- **Connect elders to reading materials and entertainment.** With public libraries and community centers closed, there is limited opportunity to acquire new reading materials. Start a book drive, help organize a virtual book club, or send interesting articles through email. Help elders link their library cards to free services that provide online books, music apps, and even access to television shows or movies.





- **Ensure that elders have at least one mechanism through which to communicate** with others and that they know how to use the device. Help acquire and distribute computers and WiFi enabled devices with cameras to elders who live alone or at long-term care facilities so that they can make visual contact with friends and family.
- **Check in regularly.** This establishes consistency, and changes in the elder's physical or mental health are more easily recognizable.
- **Establish a phone bank** to keep elders updated on important news and to maintain regular contact with someone who can note their well-being. For example, one shul divided their congregation into [Emunah Groups](#), each comprised of seven families who talk at least once a week. While this program was not



created specifically to mitigate elder abuse, regular communication also helps to prevent or stop abuse.

- **Train elders on how to use technology, apps, and platforms.** Involving young people in accomplishing this task has been successful<sup>10</sup> and also builds intergenerational relationships, benefitting teens who may themselves be socially isolated.
- **Get creative!** Even without entering an elder's home or care facility, you can still "see" them. Stand on their sidewalk, lawn, porch, or speak to them through a screen door. Encourage neighbors to step outside and wave at each other or listen to music while maintaining physical distancing. These are opportunities for people to "see" each other and note who is absent and may need a more intensive outreach effort.



Community organizations are often at the center of coordinating drives and linking individuals to needed resources. Many elders face barriers to accessing food, medication, healthcare and support services. This make elders more vulnerable to abuse, maltreatment, and exploitation. Here are some ideas for how you can support elders and those taking care of them.

- Create and maintain list of community resources related to abuse, neglect, and exploitation. One comprehensive example, [It Takes a Community to Age Safely](#),<sup>11</sup> was developed by ElderSafe. It also contains detailed information about elder abuse and its impact.
- Deliver masks and gloves to elders' homes and care facilities where there may be shortages.
- Build relationships with the elder's family, caregivers, and friends. Find out how they are managing in this stressful period and how your organization can offer some relief.
- Disseminate the Sacred Spaces' resource developed for family members. It contains relevant information for those caring for or facing concerns about the safety of a loved one.

## SUPPORT FOR BASIC NEEDS



### Food

Provide gift cards or arrange for grocery/ and or meal delivery. If they are facing food insecurity, link elders with someone who can guide them through access to benefits and food.



### Pet Supplies

Pets are a key source of companionship. If someone has a pet, make sure they have pet food and other necessities. Also, ask about the pet's health. Threatening to harm or dispose of a pet is a common tactic of abusers.



### Transportation

Maintain a list of people available to drive an elder in case of an emergency. These individuals should be self-isolating and free of any symptoms of COVID-19. Emergencies could include an elder wanting to leave an unsafe situation.



### Cash

Elders may have no access to cash for a multitude of reasons. They also may not use online shopping or banking platforms or apps that transfer money directly for delivery of goods. Providing cash allows people to have autonomy over their purchases and the ability to reimburse others for essential items.







## COMMUNICATION TIPS

To facilitate communication with an elder about their safety:

### Consider Accessibility

Ask about the preferred method of communication and the best day and time to touch base. Take into account if the elder has any impairments and adjust your communication accordingly.

### Actively Listen

Provide time for people to share what is going on in their life. Listen for feelings and sentiments being expressed.

### Be Proactive

Know who to contact if you suspect abuse and neglect. Remember your role is to support the elder, not to investigate or to prove that abuse occurred.

## CONSIDER PRIVACY

Consider the privacy afforded by the mode of communication. If you are not speaking in person, you may not be able to tell if the elder is alone or can speak freely.

## PERSONAL FREEDOM

Recognize the elder's autonomy to make decisions about their own life, even if they differ from the ones that you would make. However, watch for signs that someone is being coerced into decisions, especially around their finances or health.

## BE INQUISITIVE

Ask about how they are managing during the pandemic and if they are concerned about anything.

*"How are things going at home?"*

*"How do you spend your time?"*

*"How is your family/caregiver managing?"*

*"What brings you joy right now?"*

*"Is anything making you feel disrespected?"*

*"Are you being asked to make any confusing or uncomfortable decisions?"*

*"What can I do to help?"*

## BE SUPPORTIVE

If someone does disclose abuse, validate their experience, offer reassurance, and provide information and resources. You can say things like:

*"I'm glad you chose to talk to me."*

*"That sounds scary/hurtful."*

*"Do you feel safe to stay here tonight?"*

*"I will make sure that you are not alone in this process."*

<sup>1</sup> Lachs, Mark S. & Pillemer, Karl A. [Elder Abuse](#), New England Journal of Medicine 373:1947-1956 (Nov. 12, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> We recognize that this terminology does not accurately reflect the vitality of many, nor does a single number define the age when a person becomes "elderly."

<sup>3</sup> See, U.S. Department of Justice, [Elder Justice Roadmap](#) (2014) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Fact Sheet](#) (2016) (for definitions and signs of different forms of elder abuse).

<sup>4</sup> See, National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life [An Overview of Elder Abuse: A Growing Problem and National Center on Elder Abuse, Prevalence](#).

<sup>5</sup> Researchers published findings in 2017 after looking at rates of

abuse for one calendar year. See, World Health Organization, [Elder Abuse, Fact Sheet](#) (June 8, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> [Elder abuse concerns heightened amid COVID-19 isolation](#), LocalSYR.com (April 7, 2020) and Aten, Jamie D., [How to Help Older Adults Fight Loneliness During COVID-19](#), Psychology Today (April 2, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See, Newman, Michelle G. & Zainal, Nur Hani, [The value of maintaining social connections for mental health in older people](#), The Lancet Public Health Vol. 5:1 (Jan. 2020); and Armitage, Richard & Nellums, Laura B., [COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly](#), The Lancet, (March 19, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Levy, Sue-Ann, [Pandemic creates 'breeding ground' for elder abuse](#), Toronto Sun (April 25, 2020); Ghermezian, Shiryn, [Homebound seniors in Israel battle 'isolation and loneliness' during pandemic](#),

[Cleveland Jewish News](#) (March 23, 2020); and Rosenfeld, Arno, [Social distancing makes seniors vulnerable to abuse, Jewish groups say](#), Washington Jewish Week (May 6, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Dhaliwal, Naveen, [Coronavirus News: NYC senior center is taking meetings virtual during COVID-19 crisis](#), Eyewitness ABC7 (May 2, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Shirvell, Bridget, [Teens Are Helping Seniors Stay Connected During the Coronavirus](#), Teen Vogue, Pandemic (April 1, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> ElderSafe, a program of Charles E. Smith Life Communities, created to deliver quality care and meaningful life experiences to older adults, with dignity and compassion rooted in Jewish values (May 2020).