

# COVID-19

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## Preventing and Responding to Elder Abuse

Family members and caretakers are at the forefront of identifying and mitigating risks of elder abuse. This can be accomplished by developing a deeper understanding of the issue, reducing loved ones' isolation, and monitoring your own stress level as a caregiver.

Building Healthy  
Jewish Communities



SACRED SPACES

# מִפְּנֵי שִׂיבָה תִּקְוִים, 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.

Even under the best of circumstances, caregiving can be difficult. COVID-19's physical distancing restrictions add further stress. There is now limited ability to ensure that elders are safe and healthy and have access to food, medications, and other basic needs. Family members and caretakers can take the following actions to safeguard their loved ones from elder abuse, regardless of where the elder resides.

## LEARN

Educate yourself about the signs and types of [elder abuse](#) and available state resources. Understand how to [report](#) suspected abuse in your [state](#) and who has the [duty](#) to report. Become knowledgeable about elder rights, and take advantage of available information, including assistance with support services, housing, transportation, and insurance through the [Eldercare Locator](#).

## CHECK-IN REGULARLY

Connect with your loved one as much as possible, and establish a schedule for speaking, which can provide structure, give the elder something to look forward to, and assist in early detection of abuse or maltreatment.

## BE CURIOUS

Ask questions and listen. Pay attention if your loved one is talking about new friends whom they met online or over the phone. Watch for unusual spending habits. Monitor credit reports, and set up alerts for atypical activity. Find out if they are in need of medications, food, or other necessities, and link them to trusted sources so that they do not become vulnerable to exploitation. Don't be afraid to ask them if they are being treated well or if they feel disrespected. Let your loved one know



that you are there to help if they ever need anything. Ask others in your circle to also speak with the elder, and agree to notify each other about concerns for the elder's health or well-being.

## PROVIDE MECHANISMS FOR COMMUNICATION

Ensure that elders have at least one reliable way to connect with family and friends. At a minimum, elders should have a phone, preferably one with video calling capability. Offer lessons on how to use the technology and allow plenty of time for practice. Show them how they can continue some of their prior activities, like book clubs or classes, using the technology.

## SCREEN AIDES

Hiring someone to assist with the care of a loved one can be a big decision, especially during a public health crisis. Under any circumstance, if you seek the assistance of an aide, interview the prospective caregiver, call references, and conduct background checks to screen for a record of abuse, neglect or exploitation. If you plan to hire someone through an agency, make sure that they properly screen the individuals they place. Ask the agency for a copy of their hiring protocols, and determine if they are adhered to. You can ask placement agencies for references and call others who have used the agency to hear about their experiences.



If you have a loved one living in a long-term care facility, one of the best ways to safeguard them from elder abuse is to maintain consistent contact. To assist in that endeavor:

## BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH STAFF

Many families are seeking information about their loved ones, and the demand for communication from staff is high. Find out when it would be best to contact the facility, and arrange a schedule for updates.

## SEEK ADVICE

Every state and many cities have an Ombudsman office that advocates on behalf of residents in long-term care facilities. [Ombudsmen](#) are a good source of information about facility procedures and can help resolve complaints about issues of care.

## COMMUNICATE

Speak with your loved one frequently. Determine the best times to have conversations based on activity and meal schedules. If the facility does not have technology available for residents to use to make video calls, provide it to your loved one. Ask staff to assist in connecting the technology to facility WiFi.



## PARTICIPATE

Explore opportunities for friends and family to see their loved ones. Some long-term care facilities host car parades where families can wave and hold up signs. Others allow family members to arrange times to see each other through windows and in outdoor spaces.

## INVOLVE OTHERS

Seek ways for others to spend time with your loved one. For example, establish a relationship with a rabbi who offers pastoral care at the facility and can serve as an additional source of social contact while also monitoring changes in physical or emotional health. Ask whether the facility is able to designate private aides for residents if the family has the means to hire someone.

## ADDITIONAL IDEAS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19



### Take Care of Yourself

As a caretaker, make sure you engage in [self-care](#). Watch for [signs](#) of depression or anxiety in yourself; and utilize COVID-19 [resources](#) and support. Access the [caregiver support](#) network to connect with others going through similar experiences. The site is filled with tips and resources.



### Offer Support

Ask management whether you can do anything to help. They might be in need of donations like masks, connection devices for residents, party supplies, or other materials for the safety and well-being of both residents and staff. If you do have the assistance of home health aides, also attend to their well-being. If someone is not feeling well, encourage them to stay home and if you have the resources, pay them if they do not have sick leave.



### Show Appreciation

Staff are working long hours and may even be residing away from their families due to risk of infection. Write thank you notes. Drop off treats. Find other ways to demonstrate that you appreciate their care for your loved one.

<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 maintain-](#)

[ing 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).