



SACRED SPACES

Fact Sheet on Elder Abuse



Seivah: Promoting Sacred Aging

Using this Fact Sheet



Elder abuse is a significant public health issue and one of the most under-reported types of abuse. Jewish institutions must be aware of elder abuse and equipped to respond when it is suspected. This fact sheet provides an overview of elder abuse, including its prevalence, forms, and associated indicators. We encourage Jewish organizations to use this fact sheet in conjunction with other Seivah resources to increase awareness and understanding of elder abuse.

A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old... the affection and care for the old... are the true gold mines of a culture.

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Photo: Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Introduction

In the United States, there are approximately 56 million people aged 65 and older.¹ The population of older adults continues to grow rapidly, and the Jewish population is disproportionately older compared to all U.S. older adults.²

Elders are one of the Jewish community's most valuable resources, connecting us to our past and holding stories and facts about our history. In the Jewish community, growing old is sacred and perceived as an important stage of life.³

In Hebrew the word for elders is *zaken*. *Zaken* is believed to be connected to the phrase *zeh kana chochmah* meaning "this person has acquired wisdom."⁴

And while the community aims to practice, *kibud zekaynim* the honoring of older adults, as a society we sometimes fall short. Research has shown us that:

- Globally, 1 in 6 older adults have experienced abuse.⁵
- Only 1 in 24 cases of elder abuse are reported to authorities.⁶
- Family members are most frequently responsible for elder abuse,⁷ with two-thirds of those perpetrating elder abuse being either an adult child or spouse.⁸
- For those experiencing elder abuse, 1 in 4 are simultaneously experiencing more than one form of abuse (polyvictimization).⁹
- 2 out of 3 staff members working in long-term care facilities report that they have committed abuse in the past year.¹⁰
- From 2002 to 2016, more than 643,000 older adults in the U.S. were treated in the emergency department for assault.¹¹





Overview of Elder Abuse

“Elder abuse” is an umbrella term that includes maltreatment, neglect, abuse, and exploitation of an older adult.¹² Elder abuse impacts all communities and happens in all settings (e.g., home, community, or facility). 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 risk.¹³

While laws and definitions vary among states, this fact sheet defines elder abuse as “any intentional act, or failure to act, by a caregiver or another person in a relationship involving an expectation of trust that causes harm or loss to an older adult.”¹⁴

The chart appearing at the end of this resource provides more specific definitions, examples, and corresponding indicators (also known as signs) for each type of abuse.¹⁵

Indicators of Elder Abuse

Recognizing elder abuse is not always easy. Some aspects of aging -- for example, how easily an older person may bruise -- can both mask and/or mimic abuse. Additionally, one or all of these signs does not mean abuse is occurring, nor does absence of signs mean that it is not occurring.

The following are some common signs:¹⁶

EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL SIGNS



Isolation or withdrawal from family, friends, and activities; increased fear and anxiety; and/or increased confusion, shame, or anger.

PHYSICAL SIGNS




Bruises, unexplained injuries, unusual weight loss, missing daily living aids (e.g., glasses, walkers/canes, hearing aids, medication, dentures), unattended medical needs, being over or under medicated, sexually transmitted infections without explanation, torn or bloody underclothing, and/or unexpected living arrangements.

FINANCIAL SIGNS



Changes in spending patterns, unpaid bills, the emergence of new best friends or lost relatives, lacking basic necessities, fraudulent signatures on financial documents, and/or missing valuables.



Impact of Elder Abuse

There are short and long-term consequences for victim-survivors of elder abuse. Losses range from economic struggles (inability to pay for daily necessities or housing), declining health (onset or progression of depression or memory loss, or the start of chronic health conditions or deterioration of overall health) and lessening independence (no longer able to live alone).

According to the Elder Justice Initiative:¹⁷

- Elder abuse triples the risk of premature death.
- Elder abuse causes unnecessary illness, injury, and suffering.
- Victim-survivors are four times more likely to be admitted to a nursing home and three times more likely to be admitted to a hospital than those who do not face abuse.

The National Council of Aging estimates that the annual loss by victims of financial abuse and fraud to be at least \$36.5 billion.¹⁸



Take Action

Jewish organizations are part of the fabric of the community and have a role in prevention, intervention, and remediation of elder abuse. The first step is to gain a better understanding of elder abuse, identify who at the organization has a legal duty to report elder abuse (see resources for reporting at end of the document),¹⁹ and establish protocols for reporting both internally and to the authorities. In addition, sharing information about elder abuse can reduce the stigma surrounding this issue.

Organizations can also:

- Educate staff and volunteers on elder abuse and its warning signs.
- 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.
- Seek input from elders on how to engage their peers, especially those who may be at risk for maltreatment.
- Identify community resources for older adults.



Conclusion

Jewish organizations can lessen the prevalence of elder abuse by raising awareness and having a clear course of action when elder abuse is suspected. Thank you for your interest and attention to this important issue.

For additional resources or more information about Seivah, contact us at info@JewishSacredSpaces.org.

עֲטָרַת תְּפָאֳרֶת
שִׁיבָה בְּדֶרֶךְ צְדָקָה
תִּמְצָא

*Gray hair is a
crown of glory;
It is attained by
the way of
righteousness.*

Proverbs 16:31

Additional Resources

- To report suspected abuse in a community: Adult Protective Services
 - www.napsa-now.org/help-in-your-area
- To report suspected abuse in a long-term care facility: Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program
 - https://theconsumervoice.org/get_help
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
 - 800-799-7233 (800-799-SAFE)
 - www.thehotline.org
- National Sexual Assault Hotline
 - 800-656-4673 (800-656-HOPE)
 - www.rainn.org
- National Elder Fraud Hotline
 - 833-372-8311
 - <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/stop-elder-fraud/providing-help-restoring-hope>
- Locate services for older adults: Eldercare Locator
 - 1-800-677-1116.
 - <https://eldercare.acl.gov>



| Type of Abuse | Definition | Examples | Indicators |
|---|--|---|---|
| <p>Physical</p> | <p>Physical force that may cause pain, harm, physical injury, functional impairment, distress, or even death. Physical abuse can also include use of physical or medical restraints.</p> | <p>Hitting, pushing, burning, slapping, pinching, shoving, kicking, choking, biting, use of physical or medical restraints, or physical punishment.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained injuries. • Multiple visits to doctors or healthcare “shopping.” • Broken bones, dislocations, sprains. • Bruises, scratches, cuts, lacerations, punctures, burns, missing hair. • Multiple injuries in various stages of healing. • Aspiration/choking from forced feeding. |
| <p>Psychological</p> <p><i>Also referred to as emotional or verbal abuse.</i></p> | <p>Verbal or nonverbal behaviors that cause anguish, fear, and distress. These behaviors can be as traumatizing as physical abuse.</p> | <p>Yelling, swearing, threatening, shaming, harassment, making insulting or disrespectful comments, ignoring, isolating, name-calling, and infantilizing.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden change in behavior. • Fear, agitation, anxiety. • Withdrawal, depression, resignation. • Confusion or disorientation. • Shame. • Anger. • Biting, rocking, or unusual behavior. • Decreased grooming. |
| <p>Sexual</p> <p><i>Also referred to as sexual assault, sexual misconduct, or sexual violence</i></p> | <p>Any unwanted sexual contact without the older person’s consent.</p> | <p>Unwanted touching, photographing the older adult in suggestive poses, masturbating in front of an older person, forcing the person to undress or watch sexually explicit images or activity, and any unwanted sexualized behavior.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing. • Injuries that impact walking/sitting or those sustained in the pelvic area. • Sexually transmitted infections. • Bruises of the genitals or inner thigh. • Bleeding from the anus or genitalia. • Social and emotional withdrawal. • Panic attacks, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideations/attempts. |

| Type of Abuse | Definition | Examples | Indicators |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Financial</p> <p><i>Also referred to as financial exploitation or economic abuse.</i></p> | <p>Exploitation, mismanagement, or misuse of assets, property, or belongings. This includes using an older adult's assets without consent, under false pretense, or through intimidation and/or manipulation.</p> | <p>This can include transferring names on property titles or wills, using credit cards or identifying information without permission, stealing belongings or money, or forcing an older person to give or sell items.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to pay bills. • Not buying necessities. • Changes in spending patterns. • New or updated legal documents – wills, powers of attorney, healthcare directives. • Fraudulent signature on documents. • Complaints of missing valuables. • New “best friends” or involvement of lost relatives. • Large or frequent withdrawal of money. |
| <p>Spiritual</p> | <p>Coercion, control, or exploitation by another person in a spiritual context. Spiritual abuse occurs when someone misuses faith, spirituality, traditions, or cultural norms to assert control over an older person. It can come from a faith leader or an intimate partner who uses spiritual or religious beliefs or doctrine to exert power over another.</p> | <p>This can include using text or traditions to control someone's choices, intimidation into conformity, ridiculing or insulting religious or spiritual belief systems, preventing someone from practicing their spiritual beliefs, censorship from asking questions or disagreeing with the organization or leader, isolation or rejection from a spiritual community, public shaming or humiliation, forcing children or grandchildren to practice spiritually in way that goes against the individual's desires, or sexual or physical abuse within a spiritual community.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal from regular spiritual activities • Unexplained changes in behavior previously associated with religious or spiritual beliefs. • Fear, agitation, anxiety, depression, or resignation. |

| Type of Abuse | Definition | Examples | Indicators |
|---------------|--|---|---|
| Neglect | The failure of an individual responsible to provide care to meet the physical, social, or emotional needs of the older adult. Neglect can be intentional or unintentional. | Neglect can include the withholding of essential medical care, food, water, shelter, and hygiene, or failure to provide assistance with daily activities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bed sores/pressure ulcers. • Changes in living conditions (cleanliness of home, poor hygiene, torn or dirty clothes, flea bites). • Malnutrition/dehydration (weight loss, change in vital signs, cracked lips, sunken eyes, lethargy). • Lack of medical aids (glasses, walker, dentures, hearing aid, medications). • Failure to keep appointments. |

Self-Neglect: Any failure of an older adult to take care of themselves that causes or is reasonably likely to cause serious physical, mental, or emotional damage or loss of assets.

Endnotes

1. Administration for Community Living, Administration of Aging. 2021 Profile of Older Americans (November, 2022).
2. Thirty-five percent (35%) of Jewish adults are aged 55 to 74 years old. Brandies University, American Jewish Population Project, American Jewish Population Estimates 2020 (March 2021) Accessed July 2023 at https://ajpp.brandeis.edu/us_jewish_population_2020; and Jewish Americans in 2020, Pew Research Center (May 11, 2021). Accessed July 2023 at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.
3. Brodsky, J., et al. The Elderly in Israel: Statistical Abstracts 2014. Jerusalem: JDC, Brookdale Institute and Eshel (2014) [in Hebrew].
4. Rabbi Menachem Nissel, Step by Step, Mishpacha Jewish Family Weekly (May 6, 2020). Accessed July 2023 at <https://mishpacha.com/step-by-step-3/>. James L. Kugle, His Father's Face, Weekly Torah Reading, Vayyeshev, December 12, 2020, Genesis 37:1-40:23, and PJ Library, Honoring Elders. Accessed July 2023 at <https://pjlibrary.org/jewish-values/honoring-elders>.
5. World Health Organization, Abuse of Older People, Fact Sheet, (June 2022). Accessed July 2023 at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abuse-of-older-people>; and Rosay, A. B., & Mulford, C. F.. Prevalence estimates and correlates of elder abuse in the United States: The national intimate partner and sexual violence survey. Journal of elder abuse & neglect (January 2017) (estimating 1 in 10 older adults in the United States have experienced elder abuse).
6. Storey, J. E. (2020). Risk factors for elder abuse and neglect: A review of the literature. Aggression and Violent Behavior v.50 (2020).
7. National Council on Aging, Get the Facts on Elder Abuse (February 23, 2021). Accessed July 2023 at <https://ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-elder-abuse> and Weissberger, G. H., et al. Elder abuse characteristics based on calls to the National Center on elder abuse resource line. Journal of Applied Gerontology (October 2020).
8. The National Center on Elder Abuse, American Public Human Services Association. The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study: Final Report, Administration for Children and Families & Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (September 1998).
9. Nuccio, A. G., & Stripling, A. M., Resilience and post-traumatic growth following late life polyvictimization: A scoping review. Aggression and Violent Behavior, 57, Article 101481 (2021).
10. World Health Organization and supra note 5.

Endnotes

11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Fast Facts Preventing Elder Abuse. Accessed July 2023 at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/elderabuse/fastfact.html>.

12. 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.”

13. Lachs, Mark S. & Pillemer, Karl A. Elder Abuse, *New England Journal of Medicine* 373:1947-1956 (Nov. 12, 2015).

14. World Health Organization and supra note 5. Another common definition is from the U.S. Department of Justice: “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, either in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability.” U.S. Department of Justice, *Elder Justice Roadmap* (2014).

15. The information contained in the chart came from many sources, but significantly from Stanford Medicine, *Elder Abuse*. Accessed July 2023 at Chart: <https://elderabuse.stanford.edu/>.

16. National Institute of Aging (2020). *Elder Abuse*. Accessed July 2023 at <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/elder-abuse>, Vancouver Coastal Health. What is adult abuse & neglect? Accessed July 2023 at <https://www.vch.ca/en/what-adult-abuse-neglect>; and National Council of Aging at supra note 7.

17. U.S. Department of Justice, *Elder Justice Initiative*. Accessed July 2023 at <http://tiny.cc/izr9vz>.

18. National Council on Aging at supra note 7.

19. All states have set up reporting systems. Adult Protective Services is designated as the public agency to receive, investigate, and respond to allegations of elder abuse and neglect and. Long-Term Care Ombudsmen investigate and resolve complaints about long-term care facilities.