

Why You Should Care About Elder Abuse

Cynthia L. Miller—Editor—Brodhead Independent Register: February 2015

Elder abuse. It's a topic that pops up every now and then in the news, and when it does, it's usually associated with neglect or abuse reported in a nursing home or long-term care facility. After meeting with Maria Johnson, Adult Protective Services of Green County's Aging & Disability Resource Center (ADRC), I have learned this is only a portion of the story.

In reality, most often times elder abuse occurs at the hands of trusted individuals – spouses, family members, close relatives or friends, professionals in positions of trust, such as lawyers, financial advisors, or health care workers, and of course, opportunistic strangers who prey on the vulnerable. What can be done? According to Johnson, awareness is the key.

According to information published by the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), research indicates that more than one in 10 elders may experience some type of abuse, but only one in 23 cases are reported. So what is elder abuse? Types of elder abuse include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation, neglect, abandonment, and self-neglect.

To further understand each of these categories, let's look at them more closely:

- **Physical abuse** is the use of force to threaten or physically injure an elder.
- **Emotional abuse** includes verbal attacks or threats, rejection, isolation or belittling acts that cause or could cause mental anguish, pain, or distress to a senior.
- **Sexual abuse** is any type of sexual contact that is forced, tricked, threatened, or otherwise coerced upon an elder. This includes anyone who is not able to grant consent.



- **Exploitation** of elders includes theft, fraud, misuse or neglect of authority, and the use of undue influence to gain control over an older person's money or property.
- **Neglect** is a caregiver's failure or refusal to provide for a vulnerable elder's safety, physical, or emotional needs. Abandonment is the desertion of a frail or vulnerable elder by anyone with a duty of care.
- **Self-neglect** is the elder's inability to understand the consequences of their own actions, or inaction, which leads to, or may lead to harm or endangerment.



Elders most at risk for abuse are frail elderly and those with Alzheimer's or a related dementia.

What are the warning signs we should look for in suspected cases of elder abuse?

For physical abuse the NCEA advises to look for signs of slap marks, unexplained bruises or pressure

marks, burns or blisters, such as cigarette burns. In cases of suspected neglect pressure ulcers, filth, lack of medical care and malnutrition or dehydration can be signs.

Withdrawal from normal activities, unexplained changes in alertness or other unusual behavioral changes can be signs of emotional abuse.

Bruises around the breasts or genital area and unexplained sexually transmitted diseases are indications of suspected sexual abuse.

A sudden change in finances and accounts, altered wills and trusts, unusual bank withdrawals, or checks written as 'loans' or 'gifts' and loss or property can be signs of financial abuse or exploitation.

Who are the abused and who are the abusers?

According to statistics compiled by Johnson, in Green County elders most at risk for abuse are those who are considered frail elderly and those with Alzheimer's or a related dementia. These two categories make up over 85% of the cases of reported elder abuse in the county in the year 2012, and 82% of the reported cases in 2013. Statistics for 2014 are not yet available.



Females are more likely to be abused rather than males, and the highest numbers of abuse cases reported have occurred to persons in the age category of 80-89 years. Most of the county's abused elders live alone in their own home or apartment. Abusers are most often relatives, a spouse, or adult child, or those who are financially dependent upon an elder.

You may ask yourself why the issue of elder abuse has not been in the forefront of the public eye. One of the reasons NCEA gives is that many victims are reluctant to report abuse because they may feel ashamed and embarrassed, particularly if the abuser is a family member. They may also be afraid that the abuser will get into trouble, or they worry they will be forced to move to a nursing home or other type of care facility. Some elders may be in denial that the abuse is occurring; they may be unaware that what they are experiencing is indeed abuse or neglect. Or, they may be afraid that if they report it, the abuse will just get worse. Some victims are not able to speak, or have difficulty making themselves understood because of dementia or other impairments. Sadly, they may not be believed when they do speak out.

In this growing culture of ageism, the fear of getting old may keep older people marginalized and undervalued in our society. Their problems may remain invisible or deemed unimportant. So what can be done about this issue?

As Johnson stated, awareness is the first step. The public needs to be aware and get involved in identifying and reporting abuse. Keep in contact and talk with older friends, neighbors and relatives frequently. If you suspect mistreatment, reporting can be done through the ADRC office, located at N3152 State Road 81, Monroe or call 608-328-9499.

Finally, but clearly not the end of this discussion – **Why should you care about elder abuse?** The older population in America is continuing to grow. Statistics show that by the year 2030 (just 15 years from now) there will be almost 72.1 million older Americans, making up nearly 20 percent of the total population. That is almost twice as many older Americans as there were just eight years ago, in 2007. Baby boomers have been a generation of activists, with the ability to create social change.

Now is the time to get involved.