

## MODULE 3: RECOGNIZING ELDER ABUSE

### Module objectives:

1. Identify characteristics of the abused.
2. Identify characteristics of the abuser.
3. Identify signs and symptoms of different types of abuse.

### Understanding the Abused

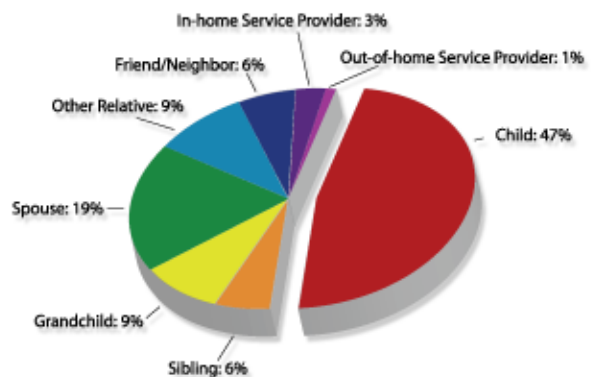
There are many factors that may leave some residents at risk for abuse and neglect:

- Cognitive impairment (confusion).
- Physical conditions and dependency on others for care.
- Inability to express wishes.
- Socially isolated
- Lack of choice.
- Economic vulnerability.

### Fast Fact

*“Seniors are the least likely demographic to suffer violent crime, but they are the most at risk of suffering violence at the hand of a family member. The biggest perpetrators of violence against seniors were adult children (15 per 100,000 cases) or a current or former spouse (13 per 100,000).”<sup>1</sup>*

**VICTIMS' RELATIONSHIP TO ABUSERS OF DOMESTIC ELDER ABUSE**



(Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration on Aging)

## Understanding the Abuser

Abusers will often display one or more of the following emotions/behaviour:

- Negative attitudes towards the elderly.
- Anger, frustration, resentment.
- Lack of self-confidence.
- Does not like job.
- Stress.
- Control, bullying.
- Addictions: gambling, drugs, alcohol, other compulsive behaviours.

## Possible Indicators of Physical Abuse

- Depression.
- Fear.
- Discomfort or anxiety in the presence of particular people.
- Visible scratches, bruises, cuts, swellings or burns.
- Vague or illogical explanations for injuries.

### ***Elder Abuse and Ageism***

*“Ageism is a social attitude, a way of looking at older people that stereotypes them. Ageism is also part of attitudes where people believe that older adults can be treated in demeaning ways. Older people are often stereotyped as weak, frail, and disabled. However, sometimes there are positive stereotypes of aging, such as when people assume all older people are wise or caring.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“A comprehensive study in the United States on 577 nursing home nurses and nursing aides found that those with negative attitudes to elderly people seemed more likely to behave inappropriately toward them.”<sup>3</sup>*



### Possible Indicators of Sexual Abuse

- Physical symptoms: pain, bruises, bleeding in the genital area.
- Disclosure of sexual encounters with other residents or staff.
- Strong reactions to changes or situations where the resident may have little or no control.

### Indicators of Emotional Abuse

- Low self-esteem
- Extreme fatigue
- Nervousness and being uncomfortable around a particular individual
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Increased isolation
- Fear
- Withdrawal

### *Ageism and the negative attitudes towards older adults*

*“Ageist attitudes have a very negative effect on the health and psychological well-being of older people and can encourage abuse and neglect. Ageist attitudes and a general acceptance of the use of violence to punish and control family members can weaken inhibitions against abuse and neglect. Moreover, the abuse and neglect of older adults may be wrongly regarded as less serious than when it happens to children or young wives.*

*Our society is obsessed with being young, attractive, and active. Many people do not acknowledge their own aging and this is reflected in the way they deal with older adults. To some extent we all reflect society’s attitudes, including negative attitudes towards old age. People must come to terms with their personal fear of aging if stereotypes of older adults are to change.”<sup>4</sup>*

### Examples of Financial Abuse

- Resident confides in staff about family pressure to change will.
- Resident unable to take part in activities that require money.
- Resident unable to pay for haircuts.
- Family member says that the resident does not need a new dress.

### Indicators of Neglect

- Malnourishment, dehydration.
- Dentures not put in the resident's mouth.
- Glasses not put on the resident's face
- Hearing aids not put into the resident's ear.
- Resident left unattended for long periods of time.
- Dirty or inappropriate clothing.

### Food for Thought

There's a fine line between ageism and elder abuse; the distinction being that the former is an attitude and the latter is an action. Note that Ageism is not necessarily abusive, but the aforementioned attitude, combined with additional stressors, makes an individual more apt to resort to abusive behavior.

- Can you think of any instances where you or someone you know may have had an ageist attitude towards an older adult (positive or negative)?
- What are your preconceptions and attitudes towards the elderly?

*Refer to **APPENDIX F** for a list of questions pertaining to negative and positive attitudes towards the elderly.*

- What can you do to promote a positive attitude towards the elderly in your workplace and in your community?

***APPENDIX G** will give you some useful information on how to get past ageist behavior and attitudes.*

### Indicators of Violation of Rights

- Prevented from having visitors, phone calls or contact with others.
- Being placed away from others intentionally with wheelchair brakes on.
- Being left in bed for staff convenience.



**Key module points:**

1. The abused individual is often one who is in a vulnerable position which can be physical, psychological, emotional, social, and financial.
2. An abuser will hold one or more characteristics (social, financial, psychological) that will lead him to take advantage of his power over the patient.
3. There are many different signs and/or symptoms of abuse; the key is to remain aware of potential indicators.

*References:*

- 1- *CBC News (2012, March 1) Elder abuse: A growing dilemma in an aging population*  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/03/01/f-elder-abuse-trends.html>
- 2- *Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, December 2011* <http://www.cnpea.ca/ageism.htm>
- 3- *Shinan-Altman, Shiri, & Cohen, Miri, (2009, July 2) Nursein Adies' Attitudes to Elder Abuse in Nursing Homess: The Effect of Work Stressors and Burnout, The Gerontologist.*