



NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

Bringing Together Faith and Safety for Older Adults

A Resource for Faith Communities and Faith Leaders

“When I was abused, my spirit was dying. I needed help.”

“Wherever clergy are trained, abuse should be at the top of the list.”

– Survivors of Elder Abuse

Through the generations, faith communities have valued older adults, relied on their wisdom, and respected the breadth of their life experiences. Faith communities have often led the way in supporting and advocating for older adults.

Many older adults turn to trusted friends and leaders in their faith communities for help when they are experiencing abuse.

If you are a faith community leader or a member of a faith community, you can play an important role in helping older adults who are experiencing abuse find help.

This resource can help you stay alert for signs of abuse and learn how to respond safely and effectively.

What Is Elder Abuse?¹

Elder abuse occurs when an older adult is willfully neglected or abused. The abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual, or financial. Abuse often involves manipulation, coercion, exploitation, and control.

Elder abuse affects individuals of all faiths, ethnic backgrounds, and social settings. Social isolation, some illnesses, and disabilities that may be associated with aging can increase one's risk of experiencing abuse.

Elder abuse occurs most frequently in private homes, but can also occur in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Those who abuse can be family members, intimate partners (current or former), caregivers (paid or volunteer), neighbors or fellow residents, and trusted others.

1 Elder abuse definitions adapted from from "Break the Silence: What every faith community needs to know about elder abuse," from Illinois Department of Aging, August 2006

Faith is important to faith-affiliated survivors of abuse. It affects how they interpret what's happening to them, see their options, and make decisions. It is central to the way many people operate in the world. It is particularly important during a crisis, as both a helpful resource and a roadblock to safety.

What is Spiritual Abuse?²

Spiritual or religious abuse occurs when faith, traditions, liturgies, and/or scriptures are misinterpreted, misappropriated, and weaponized as instruments of abuse. It can even be a mechanism of abuse within relationships. For example, partners may ridicule their significant other's religious beliefs, prevent them from practicing their faith, or use scripture to justify abusive behaviors. Spiritual abuse is not limited to any particular religion or denomination.

Like all forms of abuse, spiritual abuse may be difficult to detect, because many survivors may not recognize that they are being mistreated.

2 Spiritual abuse definitions developed by Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership

What Should I Look Out For?

Members of faith communities frequently check on each other, and that is already helpful in preventing elder abuse. In addition, survivors of elder abuse may exhibit some of these signs. However, absence of these signs does not mean that abuse is not taking place.

- Exhibits unexplained or frequent physical injuries
- Speaks of being afraid or “walking on eggshells”
- Makes veiled disclosures, such as “my ex has a temper,” or “my grandchild makes me do things I don’t want to do”
- Appears isolated and may be unable to meet with you alone
- Lives in unsafe, unsanitary, or hazardous conditions
- Experiences sudden or unexplained changes in lifestyle, choices, or behavior, including unexpectedly missing religious services or meetings
- Makes unusual financial transactions
- Family member, partner or caregiver who refuses to allow visitors to see or speak with an older adult alone
- Sudden appearance of previously uninvolved relatives or friends taking control of an older adult’s finances

If you detect any of these signs, or something else that makes you suspect abuse, speak to the older adult confidentially, voice your concern, and let them know that you are willing to be a resource.

When trust has been broken, faith communities can be a bridge to services, compassion, and healing.

I’m Part of a Faith Community – How Can I Help?

Because so many older survivors of abuse turn to faith community leaders and members for help, you can make a difference in the life of an older adult who is experiencing abuse. Here are some guidelines for response.

- Listen with compassion.
- Affirm that the abuse is not the older adult’s fault.
- Prioritize the older adult’s safety.
- Provide spiritual care and resources.
- Honor the older adult’s decisions, even if they change their mind.
- Couple’s or family counseling when abuse is present can be dangerous and is not recommended. If the older adult insists, please contact your local domestic violence service provider for more information.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Help the older adult connect to a domestic violence, sexual assault, or elder abuse advocate or service agency that can provide safety planning and support.
- Learn more about Adult Protective Services and the Ombudsman Program in your area.
- Be familiar with your state’s abuse reporting requirements, and make sure everyone in your faith community knows if you are a mandated reporter of abuse of an older or disabled adult.
- For more on mandatory reporting, please see [“Where Faith and Safety Meet/ Mandatory Reporting”](#)
- Follow up with continuing support and, if necessary, additional resources.

For immediate help **call 911** or your local police

Hotlines

Connect with someone confidentially for support and resources:

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800-799-7233 (800-799-SAFE), 800-787-3224 (TTY) | www.thehotline.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline

800-656-4673 (800-656-HOPE) | www.rainn.org

For More Information and Additional Resources

To report suspected abuse in the community setting, contact **Adult Protective Services** in your area:
www.napsa-now.org/help-in-your-area

To report suspected abuse in a long-term care setting (such as a nursing home or assisted living facility), contact the **Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program** in your area:

theconsumervoicework.org/get_help

National Center on Elder Abuse warm line

855-500-3537 | ncea.acl.gov

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life

ncall@ncall.us | www.ncall.us

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse

info@interfaithpartners.org | www.interfaithpartners.org

“Where Faith and Safety Meet” Toolkit for Faith Leaders and Faith Communities by Safe Havens

www.interfaithpartners.org/elder-abuse

