

How Faith Leaders Can Support Congregants Who Experience Elder Abuse

Elder abuse or mistreatment is a widespread problem that affects 1 in 10 older adults each year.¹ It is widely believed that this statistic underestimates the actual number of older adults affected because elder abuse is largely undetected and significantly underreported.² Since many older adults (up to 90%³) are active in their faith communities, it is likely that someone in your congregation may be suffering some form of elder abuse right now. They may need your help.

Your congregants trust you, so they may reach out to you for support. Or, you may notice something that concerns you during a visit with an older adult at their home or in a care facility. In fact, there may be older adults in your congregation who are at higher risk for abuse because they are physically, financially, or emotionally dependent; have experienced cognitive changes; have had an unhealthy relationship with their caregiver; or are socially isolated. In any of these scenarios, you could be the first person an older adult reaches out to for help. Knowing more about elder abuse can be really helpful when this happens.

What Is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse occurs when someone does something or neglects to do something that results in harm or a risk of harm to an older person. Elder abuse includes physical abuse, neglect, psychological or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and financial exploitation. Importantly, elder abuse also includes [spiritual abuse](#), which occurs when faith, traditions, liturgies, sacred objects, and/or scriptures are misappropriated or misused to prolong or justify abuse. Often, several [forms of abuse](#) are happening at the same time.

Consult your state's civil and criminal statutes for definitions of elder abuse.

Perpetrators of elder abuse could be an intimate partner or family member, but could also be a caregiver, a friend, a neighbor, or anyone with whom there is an expectation of trust. There can also be multiple perpetrators of abuse (a grandchild and their partner, for example). Elder abuse cases may also encompass substance abuse, mental health concerns, homelessness, and cognitive changes. For older victims of abuse, the consequences can be severe, life-altering, and even life-threatening.

How You Can Help

If an older adult in your congregation is experiencing abuse, your support can make all the difference. You can listen compassionately and reassure them that you will support them. Let them know that they deserve to be safe and well, and that abuse is never acceptable. Abuse can precipitate many faith-related questions, so your spiritual guidance and care is also important. This support and empathy can make it easier for survivors of abuse to seek safety and embrace services.



Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse and the National Center on Elder Abuse have developed [resources](#) that can help you think about how to respond with compassion and resources when someone reaches out for help. For example, [our brochure](#) includes information to help you “break the ice” on this topic with your congregation. Breaking the silence and actually talking about elder abuse can make it easier for people who are experiencing abuse to reach out for help.

These are complicated situations and knowing how to make sure that older adults get the help they need can be critical. Different situations call for different kinds of responses. We have provided some additional guidance below.

Where to Turn When You Suspect Abuse May be Happening

When you believe that an older person may be experiencing abuse in the community (that is, not in a care facility), you may report the abuse to [Adult Protective Services \(APS\)](#). In fact, as a faith leader, you may be mandated to report abuse of an older adult to APS.

APS investigates allegations of abuse, neglect, and exploitation and facilitates a range of possible responses that are designed to uphold the safety, dignity, and agency of your older congregant. APS caseworkers can find out what the older adult needs, develop and implement a care plan, provide services, and offer referrals.

The [Department of Justice Elder Justice Initiative Statutes Database](#) will help you learn more about whether you are mandated to report elder abuse to APS and, if you are, how to report.

If you suspect that abuse is occurring in a long-term care facility (a nursing home, assisted living center, or board and care facility, for example), you can report your concern to your [state licensing agency](#). In some states, reports of abuse in facilities can be made to APS. There are also [Long-Term Care Ombudsmen](#), who serve as advocates for residents in long-term care facilities. With resident consent, they investigate allegations of abuse, help resolve complaints, protect resident rights, and work to improve the quality of life for long-term care residents.



If you know or suspect that a congregant is experiencing abuse and is in imminent harm, contact law enforcement.

It is also appropriate and important to make sure that older adults know about and can [access services in the community](#), such as helplines for family caregiving. In addition, make sure that the older adult knows about the local [domestic and sexual violence services agency](#) and the services they can provide (for example, safety planning or lethality assessment). Offer to allow an older adult to use your phone, or offer to provide a ride for an appointment.

Elder Abuse Multidisciplinary Teams

When a case of elder abuse is complicated, APS may refer the case to an elder abuse multidisciplinary team (MDT). MDTs bring together experts from many disciplines who meet regularly to collaboratively offer guidance in complex cases of elder abuse. These teams have been developed because elder abuse can be multifaceted. The MDT's mission is to coordinate collaborative solutions and to prevent harm. MDTs may include physicians and medical professionals (including mental health services), domestic and sexual violence services, elder advocates, civil legal aid, law enforcement, prosecutors, APS, long-term care ombudsmen, and forensic accountants. A robust MDT will make sure that the older person has access to resources, including insurance and benefits, home and community-based services, case management, and caregiver supports. You could help your older congregant by explaining what an MDT is and how it could be helpful. You could also help to reassure your congregant that MDTs are intended to better promote their safety and wellbeing.

The Department of Justice [Elder Justice Network Map](#) can help you find and contact your local MDT.

All these community partnerships are critical to making sure that older adults experiencing abuse, including those in your congregation, get the comprehensive care and protection that they need and deserve. Most importantly, teamwork can help facilitate, when possible, the provision of resources that are guided by and centered on the wishes of the older adult themselves. However, the older adult will not be at the MDT meeting when their situation is discussed. This is where you may be able to provide support. If an older adult shares their preferences for a specific outcome, or their long-term wishes for a solution, you could provide needed support and, with their permission, communicate their wishes to the MDT.



Working Together to Keep Older Adults Safer

Elder abuse can be a complicated problem, but here's the bottom line: there is a team in your community to help you! Your congregants don't have to stand alone, and neither do you. Your ability to break the silence about abuse in your congregation can help survivors come forward for help. Your ability to build bridges of trust between your congregation and community services (including APS, domestic and sexual violence services, and MDTs) can help older adults reach safety. Your spiritual care can help survivors of abuse stay connected to their faith community while they achieve safety, justice, and healing. As a trusted first responder and gate keeper, your compassionate support of older adults who are experiencing abuse can make an important and even life-saving difference.

Other members of your community, such as APS, domestic and sexual violence service providers, health care workers, law enforcement, and others, also have their roles to play.



Please, learn more, reach out to your community services, and help to guide this critical conversation about elder abuse and community services. Older adults and their families need you!

Access resources mentioned in this publication by scanning the QR code below.

RELATED RESOURCES

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse

[Elder Abuse](#) | www.interfaithpartners.org | 617-951-3980

National Center on Elder Abuse

[Suspect Abuse?](#) | ncea.acl.gov | 1-855-500-3537

Eldercare Locator

[Elder Rights](#) | eldercare.acl.gov | 1-800-677-1116



Endnotes

1 Acierno, R., Hernandez, M. A., Amstadter, A. B., Resnick, H. S., Steve, K., Muzzy, W., & Kilpatrick, D. G. (2010). Prevalence and correlates of emotional, physical, sexual, and financial abuse and potential neglect in the United States: The National Elder Mistreatment Study. *American journal of public health*, 100(2), 292-297.

2 Lifespan of Greater Rochester, Inc. Weill Cornell Medical Center of Cornell University, New York City Department for the Aging. *Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study*; 2011. Accessed February 2, 2017.

3 Kaplan, Daniel. "Religion and Spirituality in Older Adults." Merck Manual Professional Version, 2023.

