



Is everything really OK?

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**SENIOR
CROSSROADS ...**

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In today's world, many families live miles, states and sometimes countries apart. And with that distance comes concern - are Mom and Dad (Grandma, Grandpa, etc.) really OK?

Although we hear the words, "We're just fine dear," the worry factor continues to tear at our heartstrings. How do we really know whether all is truly well with our aging loved one? Even when we are lucky enough to live within reasonable driving distance, often our loved ones can "perform" during visits so as not to worry us.

So how do we find out if everything is OK or if there is cause for concern? By looking a little harder and deeper, by listening with sharper ears, and by gaining knowledge and awareness regarding elder abuse.

Elder abuse: what an ugly, heart-wrenching term. Many of you might stop reading these words at this point thinking "not in my family." But elder abuse is a growing problem and the effects of it may not be immediately visible. But by opening your mind to the possibility or potential possibility for harm, you have the opportunity to react - hopefully in time to help. Most importantly - be alert. The suffering is often in silence. If you notice changes in personality, behavior or lifestyle choices, you should start to question what is going on.

What is elder abuse?

It is a term that refers to any knowing, intentional or negligent act by a person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. Elder abuse can affect people of all ethnic backgrounds and social status and can affect both men and women. Broadly defined, the major types of elder abuse may be:

- Physical abuse - Inflicting or threatening to inflict physical pain or injury of any type on vulnerable elders or depriving them of a basic need. The inappropriate use of drugs and physical restraints, force-feeding and physical punishment of any kind are other examples of physical abuse.
- Emotional abuse - Inflicting mental pain, anguish or distress on an elder person through verbal or nonverbal acts such as verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation and harassment. In addition, treating an older person like an infant; isolating an elderly person from his/her family, friends or regular activities; giving an older person the "silent treatment" and enforced social isolation.
- Sexual abuse - Non-consensual sexual contact of any kind, including unwanted touching, sexual assault or battery, and sexually explicit photographing.
- Exploitation - Illegal taking, misuse or concealment of funds, property or assets of a vulnerable elder such as forging an older person's signature; misusing or stealing an older person's money or possessions; coercing or deceiving an older person into signing any document (e.g., contracts or will); and the improper use of conservatorship, guardianship or power of attorney.
- Neglect - Refusal or failure by those responsible to provide necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, personal hygiene, medicine, personal safety, health care or protection for a vulnerable elder.

Neglect also may include failure of a person who has fiduciary responsibilities to provide care for an elder (e.g., pay for necessary home care services).

- Abandonment - Desertion of a vulnerable elder by anyone who has assumed the responsibility for care or custody of that person.

- Self-neglect - The behavior of an elderly person that threatens their own health or safety, usually manifesting as a refusal or failure to provide themselves with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medication (when indicated) and safety precautions.

Other signs include hoarding, wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather, inability to attend to household chores and confusion.

Self-neglect accounts for the majority of cases reported to adult protective services. Oftentimes the problem is paired with declining health, isolation, Alzheimer's disease or dementia, or drug or alcohol dependency.

Elder abuse knows no gender as both women and men can be victims. Abusers of older adults are typically adult relatives of both genders.

Neglect and self-neglect are the most common type of abuse reported.

There are criminal penalties for those who victimize older adults, but without a police report, there is no investigation, no criminal proceedings and therefore, no penalty. We all have a responsibility to protect those who can't protect themselves.

How do I report suspected abuse?

Each one of us has a responsibility to keep vulnerable elders safe from harm.

The laws in most states require helping professions in the front lines - such as doctors and home health providers - to report suspected abuse or neglect. These professionals are called mandated reporters.

Under the law "any person" is required to report a suspicion of mistreatment.

Call the police or 9-1-1 immediately if someone you know is in immediate, life-threatening danger.

If the danger is not immediate but you suspect that abuse has occurred or is occurring, relay your concerns to the local adult protective services, long-term care ombudsman or police.

If you have been the victim of abuse, exploitation or neglect, you are not alone. Many people care and can help. Please tell your doctor, a friend or a family member you trust, or call the police for assistance.

To report suspected elder abuse, neglect or exploitation in Clallam and Jefferson counties, call the Hotline at 1-877-734-6277.

The number of elder abuse reports keeps climbing every year. In 2009, Clallam County had 315 reports of elder abuse with the majority being self-neglect or neglect. Jefferson County had 76 reports with self-neglect and neglect accounting for 60 percent of the cases. Kitsap County had a whopping 714 elder abuse reports with self-neglect and neglect again leading the numbers.

While we don't know all of the details about why abuse occurs or how to stop its spread, we do know that help is available for victims.

Concerned people, like you, can spot the warning signs of a possible problem and make a call for help if an elder is in need of assistance.

For more information and resource assistance, e-mail Pam Scott at info@discovery-mc.com or call 683-7047. Scott is the community relations director for Discovery Memory Care in Sequim.