

### Elder Abuse by Families

Most families care deeply about older relatives. In many cases, families who place an older adult in a facility wish they could perform caregiving themselves. Sometimes family members have too many responsibilities or don't have the right skills to meet the person's needs. Others cannot afford to provide care. Sometimes, the person who needs care chooses to enter a facility because he or she does not want to be a burden.

While many families are very loving, not all families are well-meaning. Some family relationships are unhealthy and even dangerous. Abusive family members of residents can cause major harm. Abusive behaviors might include:

- ⇒ Yelling at, insulting, or threatening (emotional abuse);
- ⇒ Hitting, shoving, or throwing things at the older adult (physical abuse);
- ⇒ Stealing money and valuables (financial abuse);
- ⇒ Unwelcome touching or molestation (sexual abuse).

#### Why Some Families Abuse Older Adults

There are many reasons some family members abuse older adults and every family situation is different. Below are some of the main reasons experts think family caregivers commit elder abuse.

- ⇒ Families teach children how to treat other people. In families where people hit or threaten others when they are angry, children grow up thinking this is normal, and it can lead to abuse.
- ⇒ Certain practices within families are harmless when older adults are younger. However, these

same actions may later be a problem. For example, it might have been normal for a parent to give money to their children in the past. But, if this parent gets dementia, they often cannot make informed financial decisions. Accepting money from this parent who does not understand what is happening or if he or she can still afford to make these gifts could be a form of financial abuse.

- ⇒ Family members may not understand certain behaviors caused by dementia. People with dementia can become violent or say or do things that can be annoying or upsetting. Families who do not understand dementia might think the older adult has control of their actions. They might react in anger or frustration fight back instead of calling for help or support to deal with the situation.



Most family members care deeply about the older adults in their lives. Nursing home placement is a hard decision to make.

There are a many other reasons why abuse happens in families. Mental illness and addiction to drugs and alcohol can lead to family violence and caregivers with an addiction might steal medications, money, or property. Among older spouses, it might not be understood that a partner can no longer consent to sex. People with anger issues

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or those who want power and control might find older adults to be the easiest targets.

Some people think stress from caregiving leads to abuse. This is tricky. Family caregivers might be stressed, but most caregivers find healthy ways to cope. They will take a break, talk to a friend, seek a support group, or do an activity they enjoy. Even in stressful situations, advocates for older adults say, "There's no excuse for elder abuse." But some family caregivers do take out stress on the person they care for which can result in physical and emotional abuse.

## To Report Elder Abuse

Of a Nursing Home Resident by a staff member:  
State of Michigan (LARA): 1-800-882-6006

Of an older adult living at home, in assisted living, adult foster care, home for the aged, or a Nursing Home Resident being abused by a visitor:

DHHS/Adult Protective Services: 1-855-444-3911

If you think a crime has occurred:  
Your local police/sheriff department (and LARA)

If the danger is immediate: 911

The *Michigan Elder Justice Initiative (MEJI)*'s **Excellence in Caring Newsletter** is published every other month with grant funds from Tri-County Office on Aging.

Written by: **Kylie Meyer, MSc**  
*Michigan Elder Justice Initiative*  
15851 South US 27; Suite 73  
Lansing, MI 48906  
517-827-8010

This newsletter is available electronically. Contact **Susan Steinke** at: [ssteinke@meji.org](mailto:ssteinke@meji.org) to subscribe or for additional hard copies.

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## Recognizing Abuse by Families and Reporting It

Luckily, you do not have to determine why abuse happens. But if you are a nursing assistant in Michigan, you do have to report suspicions. Reports are made to Adult Protective Services (APS) by calling 855-444-3911. APS will work with other agencies to determine whether abuse occurred.

Some signs to look for include:

- ⇒ **A new visitor.** A family member who previously never visited starts spending a lot of time with the older adult. Other family members are often not aware of this person's visits.
- ⇒ **Missing items.** You might notice items missing from the resident's room. The resident might complain about valuables going missing.
- ⇒ **Strange behaviors.** You see behaviors, like touching, that do not fit the relationship. The family member may close the door when visiting, or never visit in public spaces.
- ⇒ **Marks and bruises.** You notice marks on the older adult's face and body. Stories explaining these marks may change or not make sense.
- ⇒ **Fear expressed by the older adult.** Older people with dementia may not know be able to explain why they are fearful. Still, they sense there is danger. They may tell other residents or staff. These concerns should be considered seriously even for people with advanced dementia.

You should not feel guilty about reporting suspected abuse by a family member. You have a duty to do so. By reporting your concerns, you could help to change an unhealthy relationship and safeguard an older adult. That one report could mean the difference between an older adult living in fear and being harmed or having a safe, secure, happy quality of life.

## For More Information

Adult Protective Services: 1-855-444-3911

Long Term Care Ombudsman: 1-517-394-3027

Tri-County Office on Aging: 1-800-405-9141