

Elder Abuse

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Elder Abuse & the Aging Process

By Dr. Ken Ford

Elder Abuse is one of the challenges of the aging process, aging being defined as: The accumulation of changes in a person over time. Aging is therefore a process that begins at birth and continues until death.

Why then do we think and speak of AGING as if it relates only to the latter part of life? Why do we assume that it represents deterioration and loss? We do so because there are, in fact, certain changes we all see in the older age person. These changes can be explained on a scientific basis. Cells in the body function less efficiently and the elastic tissue of the body becomes less functional. (We see this most dramatically in the development of wrinkles.)

These alterations in the body result in decreased physical activity and an increase in vulnerability of many sorts. We become sensitive to loss of physical as well as psychological energy. Among the psychological changes brought on by the aging process are: slower reaction time, short-term memory loss and longer learning ability. However, we learn to adapt to many of these changes and usually wish no pity or condescension. We wish to retain our dignity and self-respect.

It is perhaps the vulnerability of the older individual that poses the greatest challenge for both the individual and society. This vulnerability sometimes leads to purposeful as well as unplanned abuse. Sometimes society, often close and well-meaning relatives, unwittingly abuses the elders among us. We focus here on Elder Abuse because it has become such a strong factor in society's difficulty in coping with and managing problems of the aging individual.

As our population ages, the incidence of elder abuse is expected to increase. The church, in fulfillment of our baptismal covenant to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self" and to "respect the dignity of every human being", through its Older Adults Ministry, seeks to raise awareness of the compelling problem of Elder Abuse and to participate in ways to address it.

Introduction to Elder Abuse

With this section on elder abuse, we re-affirm our Baptismal Covenant, which asks, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

In 2011, a subgroup of the Older Adult Ministry of the Episcopal Church, the Elder Abuse Working Group, participated in an initiative by which the Episcopal Church recognizes and acts upon the issue and problem of elder abuse.

We recognize that most people do not abuse elders but rather love and respect them; however, some people do abuse elders and for a variety of reasons that usually involve the dependency of the abuser on the older adult, rather than stress experienced by the caregiver. The term elder abuse is typically regarded as an umbrella term for abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Addressing the problem of elder abuse is critically important for both older parishioners and their families. Findings from recent studies are instructive:

- By 2030, people 65 and older will comprise approximately 20 percent of the population in the United States.
- Most elder abuse takes place in the community and is perpetrated by family members or others involved in a trusted relationship with the elder. Examples are the caregiver who seeks to befriend an elder needing help for the true purpose of taking his or her money or the family member who threatens to put an elder in a nursing home if he or she won't designate the family member as power of attorney.
- According to the National Center on Elder Abuse, for every reported incident of elder abuse, five go unreported.
- In the recently released New York Study (NYS) (2011):
 - Incidence rates were 24 times greater than the number of cases referred to authorities.
 - Over 260,000 older residents were the victim of one form of elder mistreatment in a 12 month span.
 - Although psychological abuse was the abuse most commonly reported to agencies, older respondents self-identified financial exploitation as the most prevalent form, with physical abuse identified as the second most common.

We hope that you find the information contained in this section helpful and invite you to prayerfully participate in further thought, discussion, and action on the issue and problem of elder abuse.

Some Basics on Elder Abuse

...to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being ~ The Book of Common Prayer

These words from the Baptismal Covenant, particularly “respect” and “dignity” not only have significance for older adults, but for all of us, because we are all aging. All human beings, regardless of age, should be afforded every opportunity possible to live life in a safe and secure environment. Unfortunately, and all too often, this is not the case. The issue of elder abuse is a largely hidden problem. Too many elders are being mistreated, often by their family members or others responsible for their care.

This document is designed to increase your awareness of the issue and problem of elder abuse and to provide you with guidance as to what constitutes it, why it is a problem, and if you think that elder abuse may be happening to a member of your parish, how to address your concerns.

The seriousness of the problem has been demonstrated through some recent research that examines the prevalence and types of elder abuse. Though still largely a hidden problem, it is beginning to receive the attention of both those who study aging and the general public. The actor Mickey Rooney’s recent public disclosure of his abuse by family members has been instrumental in making the public more aware of the problem.

It is now time that the Episcopal Church becomes aware and actively address the problem of elder abuse.

Defining elder abuse has been a challenge to those who work in the field; however, a set of [standard definitions](#) exists that can be applied to any situation (National Center on Elder Abuse).

Physical abuse - Use of force to threaten or physically injure a vulnerable elder

Emotional abuse - Verbal attacks, threats, rejection, isolation, or belittling acts that cause or could cause mental anguish, pain, or distress to an older adult

Sexual abuse - Sexual contact that is forced, tricked, threatened, or otherwise coerced upon a vulnerable elder, including anyone who is unable to grant consent to have sex

Exploitation - Theft, fraud, misuse, or neglect of authority, and use of undue influence as a way to gain control over an older person’s money or property

Neglect -A caregiver’s failure or refusal to provide for a vulnerable elder’s safety, physical, or emotional needs

Abandonment - Desertion of a frail or vulnerable elder by anyone with a duty of care for an older adult

Self-neglect - An inability to understand the consequences of one's own actions or inaction, which leads to, or may lead to, harm or endangerment

What do I do if I think that someone is being abused, neglected or exploited?

Report suspected mistreatment to your rector and, depending on the laws in your state, make a report to your local Adult Protective Services agency or law enforcement if you perceive that the person's health or safety is at immediate risk. Although a situation may have already been investigated, if you believe circumstances are getting worse, continue to speak out.

Keep in contact – Talk with your older friends, neighbors, and relatives. Maintaining communication helps decrease isolation, a risk factor for mistreatment. It will also give the elder a chance to talk about any problems that he or she may be experiencing.

Excellent sources for further information:

National Center on Elder Abuse

c/o University of California – Irvine

Program in Geriatric Medicine

101 The City Drive South

200 Building

Orange, CA 92868

Telephone: 1-855-500-3537

Website: http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/ncearoot/Main_Site/index.aspx

Email: ncea-info@aoa.hhs.gov

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

151 First Avenue, #93

New York, NY 10003

Phone: 1-646-462-3603

Website: <http://preventelderabuse.org/>

Email: info@preventelderabuse.org

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life

307 South Paterson, Suite #1

Madison, WI 53703

Phone: 1-608-255-0539

Website: <http://www.ncall.us/>

Email: wcadv@inxpress.net

Key Factoids

- By 2030, people 65 and older will comprise approximately 20% of the population in the United States.
- Most elder abuse takes place in the community and is perpetrated by family members or others involved in a trusted relationship with the elder. Examples are the caregiver who seeks to befriend an elder needing help for the true purpose of taking his or her money or the family member who threatens to put an elder in a nursing home if he or she won't designate the family member as power of attorney.
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Why the Episcopal Church should pay attention to this issue

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These words from the Baptismal Covenant, in particular, “respect” and “dignity” not only have significance for older adults, but for all of us, because we are all aging. All human beings, regardless of age, should be afforded every opportunity possible to live life in a safe and secure environment. Unfortunately, and all too often, this is not the case. The issue of elder abuse is a largely hidden problem. Too many elders are being mistreated, most typically by their family members or others responsible for their care.

The seriousness of the problem has been demonstrated through recent research that examines the prevalence and types of elder abuse. Though still largely hidden problem, it is beginning to receive the attention of both those who study aging and the general public, by efforts on local levels through multidisciplinary teams and through national efforts, such as the Elder Justice Act, passed in 2010. The public has become aware of the issue by the confessions of such figures as actor Mickey Rooney and the late American philanthropist and socialite Brooke Astor.

Approximately, 30 percent of the congregants of the Episcopal Church are aged 65 and over. It is now time that the Church becomes aware of and actively addresses the problem of elder abuse, not only for its current older parishioners and their families, but also for those who hope to grow old in the future.

Checklist for Prevention

Preventing Elder Abuse

Any person — elders, family members, or professionals — who suspects that financial abuse of an elder has occurred should report it. One of the challenges in describing and documenting abuse is the differences in terminology among disciplines and the laws in each state.

If in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and report suspected abuse to appropriate authorities, such as Adult Protective Services or a law enforcement agency. Reports can be made confidentially, and, in most cases, the reporting person is protected from civil and criminal liability.

Successful prevention of elder abuse demands a multidisciplinary approach. There are a number of strategies that both lay members and clergy can employ to help protect elders. Older adults themselves can take several precautions to avoid falling prey to abuse.

✓ **Stay Connected**

Keep in touch with families, friends, and neighbors as much as possible. Stay in touch with the church. One of the hallmarks of abuse is isolation, and being in contact with a number of different people and entities can help reduce the likelihood that a person could be abused.

✓ **Stay Organized**

Keep belongings neat; keep track of possessions; open and send your own mail; direct deposit Social Security and other checks; complete and sign your own checks whenever possible; use an answering machine to screen calls and if possible, do not provide personal information over the telephone or computer.

✓ **Stay Informed**

Consult with an attorney about future plans, including executing a power of attorney; consult with an attorney about caregiving arrangements; review your will; know where to go if you suspect abuse; ask for help from the church, from police, from Adult Protective Services, or if necessary, employees at a bank.

✓ **Stay Alert**

Do not leave items of value out in the open; do not sign any document unless someone you trust reviews it; do not be left out of decisions about your finances or other important parts of your life. Families, particularly those who find themselves in a caregiving role,

also need to be aware of situations that place their older loved ones at risk for abuse. Family members should periodically inquire about their older family members' financial resources and perceived limitations that may stem from their financial situation. They also need to keep an eye out for such things as:

- Unusual worry about finances or fear of an individual
- Unexplained trembling or crying
- Changes in communication patterns
- Any abrupt change in behavior
- Overpayment for goods and services
- Unusual cash withdrawals from a financial account in a short period of time
- Missing belongings from the home or room in a facility
- Excessive time spent on the Internet
- A signature that seems forged, unusual, or suspicious
- An unexplained reduction in bank accounts
- An increase in the number and amount of credit card accounts
- An abrupt or unexplained change in the power of attorney, will, or other legal or financial documents
- Sudden transfer of assets to a family member or someone outside the family

Clergy and lay members within the Episcopal Church are well positioned to contribute to the prevention of elder abuse by:

- Educating parishioners about their rights and about types of elder abuse
- Bringing the issue of elder abuse and its prevention to the attention of the Episcopal Church and other denominations
- Educating older parishioners about the option to assign responsibility to an outside person if their children are of concern
- Staying apprised of current trends in elder abuse and techniques for stopping it
- Training appropriate personnel in techniques for interviewing older parishioners
- Seeking assistance from other entities (social services, medical/nursing personnel, government agencies)
- Describing how family members, with the help of legal counsel, can explore options such as financial conservatorship for clients who are frail, mentally ill, or cognitively impaired
- Encouraging clients or family members to discuss with legal counsel the option to assign financial guardian or power of attorney, as needed
- Reporting suspected cases of elder abuse to local authorities

*Some of these steps may apply to individual situations and should be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

(Adapted from *Broken Trust: Elders, Finances, and Family*, May 2009, the MetLife Mature Market Institute)

Elder Abuse Case Examples (from Lenten Scenarios)

1.

Mrs. L. has recently lost her husband. She has been having increasingly more serious medical issues and hired a home health care worker, Ms. Nancy. Ms. Nancy has moved in with Mrs. L., and visitors have commented that some of the furniture has been removed from the house by Nancy's friends. According to concerned people, Mrs. L.'s car is being used by Ms. Nancy to visit the local casino. These visitors have some serious concerns that Mrs. L.'s assets are gradually being taken by Ms. Nancy.

2.

Ms. Smith and her husband, longtime members of the church, were approached by several people at the most recent Sunday service. After talking to the Smiths a bit, some of the group walked away to have a private conversation because they were worried about Ms. Smith. They had observed some bruises on Ms. Smith's arms, and when one of the members of the group asked her about them, she said that she "bumped into things a lot." At that point, her husband very abruptly ended the conversation and told those gathered that it was none of their business how she got hurt.

3.

Mrs. G lived with her son, daughter, and daughter-in-law. The son was the principal of the local high school and much involved in the community. The daughter was the primary caregiver. Mrs. G had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and had been confined to her bed for the last 10 years. On the day she died at home, the local EMS crew observed what appeared to be a very bad pressure sore. They contacted local law enforcement officers who were able to determine that Mrs. G died from an infection from the pressure sore and malnutrition. No one in the community believed that this family could have possibly neglected their mother to the point where she died. Ultimately the son and daughter were convicted on neglect but received only probation.

4.

Mr. T has reached a point in his life where he really shouldn't drive. He has made a decision to allow his son to move in with him, and he pays him to help with such tasks as going to the grocery store, taking him to medical appointments, and helping with those things around the house that have become difficult to do, given Mr. T's declining health. His church attendance has declined because his son really doesn't want to go to church and doesn't see why it is important. Some people from the parish have stopped by the home, but the son always seems to have a reason why Mr. T isn't available for visitors. When they finally are allowed in, they notice that he has some bruises on his arm, smells of urine, and generally looks unkempt. He won't talk about any of these problems, and the church visitors leave.

5.

Mrs. Wilson has not been seen at church in almost a month. Some parishioners are concerned and stop by her home to see how she is doing. They are met at the door by a man in his forties, who identifies himself as the older woman's grand-nephew, James. He informs them that his aunt isn't feeling well and that is the reason she hasn't been going to church. After asking the visitors to wait outside for a few minutes while he "straightens up the mess," the nephew allows them inside. He goes to a back room and returns with Ms. W. The visitors observe:

- She is very thin.
- She is wearing a sleeveless dress despite the fact that it is only 55 degrees outside.
- The house does not appear to be heated.
- Her walk is unsteady, and she does not have a walker or cane. The nephew does not offer assistance, and as he leads her into the room, she stumbles and almost falls.
- She has bruises on both outer upper arms.
- There is only one bedroom.
- There is a lock on the outside of the door to the bedroom

6.

Mr. Brown lost his wife of 55 years last year. This month, several members of the church stop by to see how he is doing. He introduces them to his new friend, Sally. Sally seems to be much younger than Mr. Brown, who appears to be somewhat confused. They notice that there is a new car in the driveway as well as some new and expensive furniture...all very interesting, because for most of his life, Mr. Brown was known to be very frugal and living on a very modest income.

7.

Several members of the parish, having visited Mrs. L, took their concerns to the Rector. He then scheduled a visit to the home of Mrs. L and came away with the same concerns. He felt that there was a reasonable belief that the home health care worker, Ms. Nancy, was financially exploiting and possibly neglecting Mrs. L. He then contacted the local Adult Protective Services who, in turn, contacted local law enforcement. After a thorough investigation, a family member was appointed her guardian, and Ms. Nancy may be facing criminal prosecution. Mrs. L is now receiving regular visits from members of the parish.

The Virtues of Aging, Gracefully

*By The Rev. CanonCarolynne G. Williams, Canon for Pastoral
Care and Elder Ministry*

Spiritual writer, Joan Chittister, in her book [*The Gift of Years*](#), says these words in regards to aging:

“Age is not all decay”. George MacDonald said, “it is the ripening, the swelling, of the fresh life within that withers and burns the husk”. It is not the getting older that is difficult. It is the fear of getting older that plagues us. Instead of seeing a long life as a gateway to the flowering of the spirit, the growing of the soul, we are far more likely in a culture geared toward movement and dexterity, physical beauty and public achievement, to see it as the coming of a wasteland”. (pg. 130)

When are we old? There are several ways to answer this question. I believe that the correct answer is one that we have all heard before: “We are as old as we think we are.” Each of us hears a message within that determines how we view ourselves. The message within will sometimes whisper to us that we are no longer useful or we are too old to “do that.” If the message that we hear within us is one of discouragement and non-support, if the message is one that says that we are no longer useful and are being slowly forgotten, then our outlook on life and living is somehow tarnished and thrown out of balance.

Our attitude toward life and living has a lot to do with how old we actually are, mentally. Our response toward the people that we interact with in community influences, to a great measure, how old we actually are. When we accept that we are old because our chronological age says that we are, according to the standards of western society, we are tempted to calmly wait for old age to settle in to us, as we wait for the long wait — before dying. We calmly wait for old age to come and sit in our laps and claim us regardless of what our minds and hearts may be telling us. Sometimes when we accept being old, in an unhealthy way, we begin to embrace settling into a stage of *dormancy*. We become extremely dependent upon others without just cause, except that we *believe* that we are old, therefore we are supposed to have an attitude that says, “I am old”. Aging with grace is aging beautifully. The medical history, status of health and the aging process is a stage in life that most of us want to embrace. However our personal approach, especially in thought, attitude and action makes the difference.

The community parish in which I serve, as priest, has on the church rolls several generations of parishioners. Our youngest parishioner, Robert, only a couple of months old and our oldest parishioner, Mary, who died a couple of months ago at the age of 105, are and were equal in the eyes of God; unconditional love. We, at the Cathedral of St. Philip, began our ministry with older adults specifically, of whom we call elders, in the latter part of 2006. The ministry grew out of pastoral care needs that indicated very

clearly that older adults within our congregation, as they aged, needed responses from their parish that were not necessarily being met on a routine and consistent basis. There are more than 647 parishioners that are age 72 and older. Less than 1 percent is infirmed and/or confined.

Most of our older adults are active, connected, vibrant, strong in their faith, and giving to their parish community and their extended community with love, patience and grace. They are involved and committed people of God. Their faith serves them well in the church and in the world.

As we all age gracefully, there are virtues and values that are recognizable and life-giving. As we age in community, we are all called to carry the Word of God's love and God's grace which is extended to all who will receive this gift. Aging gracefully carries a certain message that says to us that if we concern ourselves equally with something to live FOR and not just concern ourselves with something to live on, our attitudes and approach to living will not only include God, but move God and the presence of God's holiness to the top of our endless list.

Our attitude toward aging makes the difference in how we age; Grace — our gift from GOD.