

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH  
elder abuse



**M**aria was married and widowed twice and has stepchildren from her second husband. For some reason, she feels responsible for her adult stepchildren. She finds it difficult to say no when one of her stepsons asks to borrow money to pay his rent. She doesn't want him evicted from his apartment, so she gives him the money, which is never repaid. The requests are becoming more frequent and though Maria recognizes that the situation needs to change, she feels powerless to make that happen.

**Though Maria recognizes that the situation needs to change, she feels powerless to make that happen.**

A second stepson used to be a drug addict and though he claims he no longer uses drugs, Maria wonders, because sometimes his behavior is erratic. Then there is Maria's stepdaughter. Recently, she asked if she could borrow Maria's car, and then returned the car with a noticeable dent in the side. The stepdaughter has not acknowledged the damage, and she has made no efforts to have it repaired.

A friend of Maria's at church, Carol, has noticed that things do not seem to be going very well for her. Carol worries that Maria is not able to properly take care of herself and wonders about things like the dent in the car. It is not until Carol happens to stop by Maria's house one day that she realizes that something is very wrong. Because of their friendship, Carol is accustomed to entering Maria's house without invitation. When she does, she hears arguing in the dining room and thinks she hears a slap. When Carol walks into the room, Maria is seated on a chair and her cheek is red. One of her

stepsons is standing over her, yelling that he needs more money.

Maria is clearly embarrassed when she sees Carol. Her stepson stops yelling and quickly leaves the house. Carol sits next to Maria and asks her if this is the first time that such an incident has occurred. When Maria admits that it has happened several times, Carol knows that Maria needed help.

Carol calls their pastor, who agrees to meet with them. Together, the three of them discuss the situations that Maria has been facing. They agree that she needs someone to check in on her regularly. Carol invites friends to be part of a schedule so that someone will stop by Maria's house every day. Maria, along with her pastor and Carol, tells the stepchildren that all requests of her will be run by a group of people for input before Maria will agree to anything. The support of her friends and church gives Maria the strength she needed to identify the abuse. This allows her to take steps to end the abuse and begin healing.



## The problem of elder abuse

**H**armful acts, unwanted acts, or acts that put someone at risk, done knowingly or unintentionally by a caregiver or a family member toward an elderly adult, may be abusive. Sometimes elder abuse also takes the form of neglect, when a caregiver does not respond appropriately to the needs of an elderly adult.

Elder abuse is almost as prevalent as child abuse and it can happen no matter one's social or economic status. Unfortunately, it is not often reported.

Sometimes elder abuse is not reported because abusive actions are not recognized as abuse. Instead, people think they are overreacting to a particular action or inaction by a family member or caregiver, and they make excuses. Perhaps a daughter really did not mean to hit; she is just having a bad day. Perhaps a caregiver really does need extra

**The intentional or negligent acts that are abusive may cause physical, emotional, sexual, or financial harm to the victim.**

money each week and so the elder believes it is best to give in to those requests. Perhaps a nephew really did forget to purchase groceries and so there is no food.

These actions, or inactions, whether they happen over and over again or just once, are likely abusive.

Sometimes elder abuse is not reported because of the cultural value placed on energy and youth. Our fast-paced culture makes it difficult to slow down and take seriously the needs and feelings of the elderly. It becomes easy to ignore the needs of seniors and to assume that it is normal to be inattentive to their needs.

The issue of elder abuse needs to be considered in two ways. Attention needs to be given to the needs and vulnerabilities of the elderly, and attention also needs to be given to caregivers and families.

**Ignoring abuse will not make it go away. Instead, abuse will undoubtedly escalate unless there is some type of safe, effective intervention.**

The elderly may be susceptible to abuse due to

- poor health,
- dependency on others,
- a passive personality, or
- a desire not to create problems for others.

Caregivers and family members may tend toward becoming abusers if they

- have power and control over an elderly person,
- are financially or psychologically unprepared to take care of an older adult,
- have a poor self-image,
- have a history of drug or alcohol abuse,
- have an inability to set appropriate limits and boundaries in caregiving,
- are exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of caregiving, or
- lack appropriate outside support and self-care practices.

Ignoring abuse will not make it go away. Instead, abuse will undoubtedly escalate unless there is some type of safe, effective intervention.

## Elder abuse, the Bible, and the Christian story

**I**f you are an elderly person experiencing abuse or a concerned friend or family member who suspects that a loved one is being abused, know that you are not alone. In fact, the problem of elder abuse has been with us throughout history—including in Bible times.

The Bible includes stories and teachings that address how the elderly are to be treated. It recognizes that though the elderly have wisdom due to their age, there are those who will take advantage of their vulnerabilities.

The Old Testament includes the story of the relationships of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. As Isaac ages, his vision fails. This leads his wife, Rebekah, and his son, Jacob, to plot against him and take advantage of this vulnerability. Genesis 27 tells how Rebekah and Jacob plan for Jacob to wear skins so that he will seem hairy like Esau, to trick Isaac into giving the birthright and blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. When Isaac touches Jacob, he thinks he is touching Esau. To make sure, Isaac asks if he is really touching Esau, and Jacob lies and says that he is Esau. When Isaac discovers that he has been tricked and lied to, the Bible says that he trembles violently.

As God’s people wandered through the desert, God gave commandments by which God’s people were to live. One commandment clearly addressed the needs of the older generation: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

This honor is demonstrated in the New Testament by Jesus. As he was on the cross and experiencing great physical pain and

suffering, Jesus made sure that his mother would receive care and support. He identified a disciple with whom Mary could live and said to the disciple “ ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (John 19:27).

Later in the New Testament, Paul teaches the early church how to be Christians, giving clear instructions about things that people are not to do. Colossians 3 provides examples of these instructions as Paul writes, “But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth” (v. 8). Such actions and attitudes lend themselves to an abusive relationship.

Paul continues, however, providing a counterpart to this. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12). Following these teachings means people will be considerate of others, including the elderly, and will be careful not to participate in actions or attitudes that may lead to abuse.

**Churches need to consider how members treat each other and be prepared to provide support as necessary.**

The early church needed to hear these instructions from Paul, and so do our churches today. Churches need to consider how members treat each other and be prepared to provide support and assistance as necessary. Churches need to model the healthy relationships and attitudes noted by Paul, so that everyone is valued and treated with dignity and respect.

## Steps toward healing

**Y**ou may recognize that you, or someone you love, is a victim of elder abuse. Acknowledge what is happening so that steps can be taken toward healing. If the situation is ignored, there is good possibility that the abuse will continue and almost certainly get worse.

If you are the one being abused, as healing steps begin, know that you are not the cause of the abuse. It is the caregiver or family member who has the problem, not the one who is abused.

1. Tell others what is happening so that you have a support system. This can be a difficult step because it means admitting what happened and not making excuses for the actions of the abuser. Remember, however, that God loves and cares for everyone, including seniors. The church and others

**If you are the one being abused, know that you are not the cause of the abuse.**

would like to help you, but they first need to know your situation. Telling others is not a bother to anyone. Instead, people will do what they can to find solutions to this difficult situation.

2. Hold the abuser responsible for abusive actions. Let the abuser know that certain actions and attitudes must stop. It is best if this happens in the presence of others so that you are supported. If you are not able to have this conversation, have a friend or advocate do it on your behalf. In addition, holding the abuser responsible may mean notifying a local law enforcement official. Reporting abuse to authorities does not mean that you are getting the abusers into



trouble; instead, the abusers got themselves into trouble by their own behaviors.

3. Develop rules for the ways in which you and the abuser can relate with each other. Just as Maria's friends made rules for her and her stepchildren, you and your support group may also need to identify rules. This might mean you will not have any interactions with an abuser without another person present.
4. Find community services that address elder abuse. Many communities have adult protective services or law enforcement personnel trained to handle difficult situations. These services may include provision for temporary shelter and care in collaboration with residential care facilities. The services will also provide awareness of steps to take to end abuse and to begin healing.
5. Attend adult day care programs or other senior venues to socialize and find companions. This will provide opportunities for you to learn to know others who are also facing aging and the various situations that happen as a result.

## For further awareness

### Books

Kennedy, Gary J. *Geriatric Mental Health Care: A Treatment Guide for Health Professionals*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2000.

Quinn, Mary Joy and Susan K. Tomita. *Elder Abuse and Neglect: Causes, Diagnosis, and Intervention Strategies* 2nd ed. New York: Springer Publishing, 1997.

Soto Albrecht, Elizabeth. *Family Violence: Reclaiming a Theology of Nonviolence*. New York: Orbis Books, 2008.

Wallace, Harvey and Cliff Roberson. *Family Violence: Legal, Medical, and Social Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Wright, Thomas Lee. *The Family Guide to Preventing Elder Abuse: How to Protect Your Parents and Yourself*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017.

### Websites

**Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse:** <https://cnpea.ca>

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** [www.cdc.gov/features/elderabuse/](http://www.cdc.gov/features/elderabuse/)

**International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse:** [www.inpea.net](http://www.inpea.net)

**National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse:** [www.preventelderabuse.org](http://www.preventelderabuse.org)

For this pamphlet, special thanks to: Delores Friesen, Lois Edmund, Linda Gehman Peachey, Elsie Goerzen, Carolyn Heggen, Irma Janzen, Melissa Miller, Byron Rempel-Burkholder, Sam Showalter, and Donna Stewart.

© 2017 by MennoMedia, Harrisonburg, VA in close cooperation with agencies and seminaries of the Mennonite Church and Mennonite Brethren denominations; member institutions of the Mennonite Health Services Alliance and the MHSA mental health council; teachers, pastors, therapists, and other Mennonite professionals.



CLOSE TO HOME

**Local resources for help with  
elder abuse:**

**For more information on other Close to Home  
titles, go to:**

**[www.mennomedia.org/closetohome](http://www.mennomedia.org/closetohome)**



MennoMedia