

Vulnerable Adults and Elderly Abuse Prevention Resources





Who is a Vulnerable Adult?

A vulnerable adult can be anyone over age 18 who:

- Has a physical, mental or emotional disorder that makes it difficult for the person to care for themselves without help and to protect themselves from maltreatment
- Is in a hospital, nursing home, transitional care unit, assisted living, housing with services, board and care, foster care or other licensed care facility
- Receives services such as home care, day services, personal care assistance or other licensed services

MN Department of Human Services "Definitions of vulnerable adult and maltreatment."
Accessed September 18, 2018.

www.mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/adults/services/adult-protection/.

Types Elder/Vulnerable Adult Abuse

Abuse is a form of mistreatment by one individual that causes harm to another person. ***If you witness a life-threatening situation involving a senior or adult with disabilities, immediately call 911.***

These are commonly reported types of abuse* received by Adult Protective Services agencies:

PHYSICAL ABUSE: may include slapping, hitting, beating, bruising or causing someone physical pain, injury or suffering. This also could include confining an adult against his/her will, such as locking someone in a room or tying him/her to furniture.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE: involves creating emotional pain, distress or anguish through the use of threats, intimidation or humiliation. This includes insults, yelling or threats of harm and/or isolation, or non-verbal actions such as throwing objects or glaring to project fear and/or intimidation.

NEGLECT: includes failures by individuals to support the physical, emotional and social needs of adults dependent on others for their primary care. Neglect can take the form of withholding food, medications or access to health care professionals.

ISOLATION: involves restricting visits from family and friends or preventing contact via telephone or mail correspondence.

FINANCIAL OR MATERIAL EXPLOITATION: includes the misuse, mishandling or exploitation of property, possessions or assets of adults. Also includes using another's assets without consent, under false pretense, or through coercion and/or manipulation.

ABANDONMENT: involves desertion by anyone who assumed caregiving responsibilities for an adult.

SEXUAL ABUSE: includes physical force, threats or coercion to facilitate non-consensual touching, fondling, intercourse or other sexual activities. This is particularly true with vulnerable adults who are unable to give consent or comprehend the nature of these actions.

SELF-NEGLECT: involves seniors or adults with disabilities who fail to meet their own essential physical, psychological or social needs, which threatens their health, safety and well-being. This includes failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter and health care for one's own needs.

** Definitions of abuse vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Please contact your local APS office for additional information.*

A Closer Look at the Context and Reality

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

While each of us can be vulnerable in any given set of circumstances, the phrase "vulnerable adults" has a wide and varied definition. It can apply, but is not limited to: adults with physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions who have an illness or a situation that renders them unable to protect themselves or get help when injured or abused. It applies to adults whose condition or disability impairs their ability to provide adequately for their own care, and to adults who habitually lack the use of reason, along with individuals who have a court-appointed guardian. The term can also apply to the elderly, whose various circumstances might make them susceptible to persons or situations that cause them harm, or individuals who are residents or patients within hospitals or nursing homes, or an adult who receives care services from a licensed personal care service within the home.

Adult persons needing or requiring help from other adults are always in a position of vulnerability, because of the disparity of power within those helping relationships. In the same vein, the adult who's providing the service is always responsible for upholding professional boundaries. When a professional or caring adult who's providing service abuses his/her position of power, it's a serious violation of trust, ethics and morality.

REALITY AND PREVALENCE

Similar to child sexual abuse, most vulnerable adult abusers are known and trusted by the victims, and include caregivers and even family members. Some abusers seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults, which is the means for an offender to gain control of a vulnerable adult and bring about his/her cooperation. Grooming could include flattery, bribery, accusations, intimidation, anger, control, creating a false sense of trust, encouraging ++secrecy, special attention and more.

Statistics tell us that most abuse of vulnerable adults falls within the realm of mental or emotional abuse, physical abuse, financial exploitation, sexual abuse and neglect—which could include caregiver neglect or self neglect. While a small percentage of elder abuse involves sexual exploitation, financial exploitation is a major cause of abuse for this group, and sexual acts can be used as a tool to exert power and control over any situation. Depending on the type and circumstances of the abuse, vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these crimes are often afraid to communicate—sometimes because of fear of retribution, or feelings of shame. Another reason is because the people who commit these acts are often relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists and caregivers. The vulnerable adults may also have a debilitating physical, verbal, emotional, and/or intellectual/ psychological impediment that prevents them from communicating or coming forward to report an abusive situation. They may not remember what happened or become confused about what is occurring; or, they may not even realize they've been victimized at all.

A CLOSER LOOK AT FINANCIAL ABUSE AND FRAUD

One specific type of abuse to highlight for vulnerable adults includes financial or material exploitation where abusers, for their own profit or advantage, use or steal the vulnerable adult's resources of trust funds, income, bank accounts, credit cards or property. The exploitation could also include borrowing money and promising to return it, or providing investment or retirement opportunities. Fraud falls within this realm of financial exploitation, and includes telemarketing and mail scams.

Caring adults who have received training within the Protecting God's Children Program are familiar with efforts to protect children that involve limiting the dissemination of personal information—particularly over the Internet—because of victimization risks. This is the type of message that should be echoed to persons of all ages, and particularly vulnerable adults. These measures include being circumspect with providing: full names or nicknames, DOBs, phone numbers, home addresses, images depicting a frequently-visited location, including the home, neighborhood, school, etc.

Recall that the definition of a vulnerable adult is wide and varied. When we know that an individual is already vulnerable based on various factors, there is greater risk to their exploitation and abuse. However, sometimes there are situations that can occur that make an individual more vulnerable when they wouldn't be under normal circumstances. So what happens when personal information is not intentionally provided to someone with bad intentions, but it is nonetheless exploited causing an unsuspecting individual to become a victim?



CASE STUDY

Have you ever had a family member, via any social media platform, ask you to disclose the basis of your relationship online? Perhaps they ask you to denote that you're their cousin, grandchild, parent, child or grandparent? Some social media sites and apps make it novel and fun to connect with family and share this connection over the Internet to create an electronic 'family tree' of sorts that becomes attached to the profile, without realizing it can be devastating when in the hands of the wrong person. Scammers may exploit this information provided via the Internet through obituaries or even popular social media such as Facebook or Instagram—and may use the information gleaned from accounts with limited security settings for their own aims.

The "Grandparent Scam" has been highlighted over the years by the FBI, AARP and popular news outlets such as CBS and The New York Times to refer to a progressively sophisticated type of fraud abuse that's becoming more prevalent due to the increased usage of social networking sites and the Internet. While it has been dubbed the "Grandparent Scam", the reality is that this type of scam can affect anyone, regardless of age or relationship to others. The scammer will look at social media to determine personal information to use as fodder when tricking the victim, which helps to make their fraudulent stories more believable. When a child (or adult) has a social media account without proper protections, it's easy for someone with bad intentions to exploit the information in order to more successfully target the victim. According to the FBI, there are multiple scenarios that could arise, and the possibilities really are endless. Imagine this scenario:

Penelope is a 14-year-old child visiting Spain with her choir as part of her school's spring break trip. She posts updates and beautiful pictures about the experience on social media whenever she has access to WIFI—to which loved ones and friends comment and "like" immediately. Some of Penelope's family members also "share" Penelope's photos on their own profiles and pages, and comment online about how excited they are for her to their own wider social network of friends.

Since families are typically aware when loved ones are in foreign countries, this could make a fraudulent situation more believable if one of these family members is contacted by an imposter. Due to a lack of security protections on any of those individuals' social media accounts, a scammer could look at this information and contact a grandparent (or other relative) who has posted a reaction to one of Penelope's posts, or shared it. This communication could be late at night (when people aren't thinking clearly), where the scammer calls and pretends to be an authority figure, police officer, doctor, etc., who outlines a grave situation involving Penelope and asks the adults to not waste time; rather, to send money immediately. Or, the individual could identify themselves as a crook and threaten to harm Penelope if the relative doesn't comply immediately—threatening worse repercussions if the police are called. The scammer could even call pretending to be Penelope who request

financial help due to a bad situation, such as being arrested, broken down, mugged, etc. They might call crying and using a strained voice, which would make the voice harder to recognize—and the imposter acting as Penelope might appeal to the emotions of the relative to not tell the parents to avoid getting into more trouble. Once the money is wired, it often can't be retrieved again—all occurring while Penelope is safe and sound on her trip. In this scenario, the child's information has been exploited, and the other targeted adult has been the recipient of a fraud scheme.

CONCLUSION

If some type of exploitative or fraudulent situation does occur, it's often difficult for the person experiencing it to immediately determine if it is exploitation due to the manipulation of the abuser. It may be even harder to communicate about abuse after it occurs—particularly depending on the level of the person's vulnerability. This is why it's so important for caring adults to be aware of the types of abuse different adult populations might face—and what types of situations might make adults be more vulnerable. Our next article will explore how to both assist in the prevention of the traditional types of vulnerable adult abuse and the more sophisticated types, and the proper response if it does happen on "our watch".

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www.virtusonline.org/mytraining/display_mtb.cfm?mtb_id=1859&mtb_type_id=2&theme=pf



Prevention and Proper Response

INTRODUCTION

When we are involved in a ministry with an organization as volunteers and employees, we can typically expect protective measures to be in place, guided by an official policy. For example, most organizations have a screening process for incoming candidates and procedures in place to monitor programs. Additionally, training is often provided on protocols and proper behavior. But a persistent question often remains on behalf of caring adults: what can we do individually to ensure that the vulnerable persons in our care are protected? To ensure a safer environment, we can take a number of steps on behalf of the vulnerable person, including knowing the warning signs of a potential inappropriate relationship and being aware of potentially concerning situations. We can then more effectively communicate our concerns to either prevent the abuse of vulnerable adults or respond to it if it's already occurring.

We must start by recognizing our own behavior as we interact with vulnerable adults. It's important to uphold specific boundaries when working or visiting with the homebound as well as at hospitals, nursing homes or assisted living facilities. As caring adults, we also should be aware of the behavior of others toward those who are vulnerable.



WARNING SIGNS OF A POSSIBLE INAPPROPRIATE RELATIONSHIP

There are warning signs that indicate an individual has an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult—similar to ones exhibited by adults behaving inappropriately with children. Do keep in mind that if an individual is exhibiting any of these warning signs, it doesn't necessarily mean there's abuse— however, it's a red flag and must be addressed. Red flags that characterize potentially risky behavior include adults who:

- Always want to be alone with the person
- Discourage others from being around, arranging to be with the vulnerable adult in unmonitored areas or timeframes
- Think the rules don't apply to them
- Use threats or punishments
- Use bad language or tell dirty jokes around the person



SITUATIONS THAT MIGHT BE HARMFUL TO VULNERABLE ADULTS

Being aware of the vulnerable persons in our lives, and their behavior, is also crucial. Listen between the lines and pay careful attention to even the slightest signs of fear in a vulnerable adult. Sometimes an adult may disclose fear of a specific individual, or tell you how they've been harmed. Or they may not recognize abuse is occurring. Being aware of what's happening with vulnerable adults who are being physically or sexually abused, neglected or financially exploited includes noticing and responding to:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns, swelling and other wounds
- One who flinches or reacts strongly when touched
- A lack of personal hygiene care
- Increased complaints about ailments
- Fear, anxiety, anger or depression
- Sudden behavioral/attitude/spiritual preference changes
- Apparent disorientation, confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances
- Inadequate living conditions or a lack of food
- Extreme/inadequate room temperatures, or climate-inappropriate clothing
- Sudden changes to a will/finances in favor of a caregiver or family member
- Financial concerns such as expensive caregiver gifts, disappearance of personal items, credit card problems, missing funds or checks

AVENUES TO COMMUNICATE CONCERNS

After learning the different types of concerns that vulnerable adults can face, the most important thing you can do is communicate. Don't ignore any behavior that makes you feel uncomfortable.

If you don't have a suspicion of abuse, but are concerned about behavior that indicates a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate directly with the person performing the risky behavior or with a supervisor. Continue pursuing your concerns up the "chain of command" until satisfied that safety has been achieved. It may also be appropriate to communicate with the vulnerable adult about the situation, even if he/she has limited cognitive ability. You can:

- Ask open-ended questions that don't suggest the "right" answer
- Repeat their words back to them
- Ask about what you observed, such as, "How did you get that bruise?"
- Don't promise confidentiality—as you may need to report the information
- Assure them what happened was not their fault
- Stop asking questions if it seems to cause trauma

Adult Protective Services are agencies in almost every state enlisted to protect vulnerable adults from abuse, exploitation and/or neglect. In many states, the law mandates that anyone who suspects that a vulnerable adult is being, or has been, abused report those suspicions to the Adult Protective Services. Adult Protective Services regulations vary from state to state, but if you are concerned that someone is a victim of abuse, you must call! If the individual is within a ministry of which you volunteer or work, you would want to then communicate directly with the organization to let them know of the situation. Regardless of the legal mandates, everyone has an ethical responsibility to report suspected abuse to the proper authorities. Many states host 24/7 hotlines to accept reports, and calls are confidential. For more information, (including county/state phone numbers for reporting), visit the National Adult Protective Services Association website. The National Center on Elder Abuse website also provides excellent information on research, news and resources.

Moreover, you can call Adult Protective Services even if you're unsure that you're observing abuse; they'll be able to provide advice on next steps. Keep in mind that it's not your role to investigate, but rather to communicate your concerns to the appropriate party. Just as with reports of suspected child abuse, the law protects those who make reports in good faith from civil liability and allows for anonymity in reporting.

CONCLUSION

As members of the community, we must learn about the threats these at-risk populations face and strive to stop the abuse of all vulnerable people. By understanding the reality of vulnerable adult abuse, learning these warning signs and reporting concerns we can protect others who may not be in a position to protect themselves.

By Crispin Ketelhut Montelione, VIRTUS Online

www.virtusonline.org/mytraining/display_mtb.cfm?mtb_id=1862&mtb_type_id=2&theme=pf

Reporting

WHEN TO REPORT CHECKLIST

If you witness a life-threatening situation involving a senior or adult with disabilities, immediately call 911. Contact your local Adult Protective Services agency any time you observe or suspect the following:

- Sudden inability to meet essential physical, psychological or social needs threatening health, safety or well-being
- Disappearing from contact with neighbors, friends or family
- Bruising or welts on the skin, especially those appearing on the face or lateral and anterior region of the arms (physically abused elders are much more likely to display bruises than seniors injured by accident)
- Fingerprints or handprints visible on the face, neck, arms or wrists
- Burns from scalding, cigarettes, or in shapes of objects such as an iron
- Cuts, lacerations or puncture wounds
- Sprains, fractures or dislocations
- Internal injuries or vomiting
- Appearing with torn, stained, bloody clothing
- Appearing disheveled, in soiled clothing or inappropriately attired for climate
- Appearing hungry, malnourished, disoriented or confused

WHAT IF I'M NOT SURE?

What if you just have a “feeling” about a situation but can’t verify the details? APS workers are professional social workers trained to handle just such a situation. Based on your report, the agency will assess the situation and determine how best to respond. Since laws and regulations vary widely across the United States, only your local APS agency can determine the best course of action in any given situation.

National Adult Protective Services Association “Get Informed” Accessed September 18, 2018. www.napsa-now.org/get-informed/what-is-abuse/.

Local Agencies

If you witness a life-threatening situation involving a senior or adult with disabilities, immediately call 911. Do not use email in emergency situations or to make a vulnerable adult report.

MINNESOTA ADULT ABUSE REPORTING CENTER

844-880-1574

For an immediate response—24 hours a day, seven days a week

HENNEPIN COUNTY'S ADULT PROTECTION SERVICES

612-543-9912

adultprotection@hennepin.us

OUR LADY  OF GRACE

CATHOLIC CHURCH
EDINA

