

Red Flags and Warning Signs of Elder Abuse

Faith community leaders and members often ask for “red flags,” or warning signs of elder abuse. However, be cautious. Some aspects of aging, such as how easily an older person may bruise, may both mask and/or mimic abuse. Most or all of the red flags need NOT be present for abuse to be occurring. If you see one or two of these indicators, please follow up with questions.

Someone who might be a victim of elder abuse:

- Has repeated “accidental” injuries.
- Has physical injuries, such as bruises, broken bones, pressure injuries, or burns.
- Is unable to follow through on treatment plans or medical care.
- Says she is “walking on eggshells.”
- Characterizes a loved one as “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”
- Appears to be isolated or is unable to meet with you alone.
- Says or hints at being afraid or harmed.
- Makes veiled disclosures, such as “my son has a temper,” or “I have to ask my wife’s permission for everything.”
- Suddenly has poor personal hygiene or is not meeting her personal needs.
- Experiences sleep disturbances.
- Considers or attempts suicide.
- Is living in unsafe, unsanitary, or hazardous living conditions, including homelessness.

- Misses appointments, meetings, services, or community events unexpectedly.
- Has sudden or unexplained changes in lifestyle, choices, or behavior.
- Adds new names to his bank accounts, opens new lines of credit, or has unusual or sudden changes in financial transactions or financial institutions.
- Is verbally abusive to the older adult while charming and friendly to others.
- Says things like “she’s difficult,” “he’s just stubborn,” “she’s so stupid,” or “she’s clumsy” to convince others that the older person is incompetent or crazy.
- Is overly attentive to the older person, which may mask controlling behaviors.
- Controls the older person’s activities and outside contacts.
- Talks about the older person as if she is not there or not a person.
- Threatens suicide, homicide, or both.
- Stalks, or subjects the older person to unwanted pursuit, following, or harassment that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear or emotional distress and serves no legitimate purpose.
- Sabotages the older person’s efforts to attend services, meetings, events, or appointments by refusing to provide transportation or by some other means.

Sometimes, you will not be able to observe any of these red flags or the indicators may be explained by other causes. No single indicator can be taken as conclusive proof. Look for patterns or clusters of indicators that suggest a problem. If you are concerned, please follow up with further questions to find out more.

Excerpted from “Where Faith and Safety Meet: Faith Communities Respond to Elder Abuse”

© Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, 2010.

This project is supported by Grant No. 2008-TA-AX-K052 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.