

# What you should know about elder abuse

Judith Jones  
Senior Scene

Could someone you know be a victim of elder abuse? The odds are much greater than you may think.

In a day when many seniors are living longer, healthier, more active and more independent lives, elder abuse is a growing problem, underreported and often unrecognized.

Just what *is* elder abuse? Abuse is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over an individual with whom the abuser has an ongoing relationship. Abusive behavior can be physical, emotional or sexual. It may include financial exploitation, neglect or abandonment.

Dolores Harris is a Domestic Violence Senior Specialist at the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center (FJC) in Tacoma. Every day, she meets seniors in our community who have suffered abuse at the hands of spouses, children, grandchildren or caregivers.

Senior abuse can be insidious and difficult to assess. "People often don't associate domestic violence with elder abuse," says Harris. She explains that the normal challenges of aging complicate the evaluation. Signs of abuse may be masked by the victim or the abuser, attributed to clumsiness, confusion, even dementia. "Abusers are often two-faced," says Harris. They may present a picture of loving care and concern to others but show a very different face to the victim in private.

Most victims of elder abuse are women and most of their abusers are spouses, family members or caregivers. Many victims live with their abusers, who may be financially dependent on the elder's resources. At the same time, the victim may be dependent on the abuser for housing, transportation or care.

Harris tells harrowing tales of the situations she sees in her work at FJC: abusers who deprive their victims of medications and doctor's care, who withhold the victim's phone, walker, even her dentures. Some abusers make threats – "if you didn't have me you'd have no one" – or try to deceive their victims into believing they are experiencing dementia – "you already did that, don't you remember?"

Harris describes a client, in her 70s, unable to convince anyone that she has been physically and verbally abused by her husband for years. "No one believes her," says Harris, "not her attorney, not her kids." Adult children often refuse to believe or accept a victim's account, dismissing abusive behavior with, "that's just Dad's way."

Consider another recent example: "Lucy," a retired schoolteacher in her mid-60s, abused by her husband of more than 30 years in a long-established pattern. In social settings he effectively isolated her by talking about how "crazy" she was. At home it became so bad that he even fired a weapon.

Lucy's husband had all the power in the relationship, including all the financial resources, and her revelation of the abuse split her family. One of her two daughters supported her; the other followed her father's lead in heaping verbal abuse on her mother. Finally, in desperation, Lucy came to the FJC and filed a protection order. When she left the relationship, she had to leave virtually everything behind.

"Sometimes," says Harris, "it becomes easier to walk away with nothing."

What keeps someone in an abusive situation?



**Dolores Harris, a Domestic Violence Senior Specialist at the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center**

Judith Jones

Many victims are reluctant to report abuse. They may be fearful or embarrassed. After many years of relationship, there may be fear of being alone or of losing shared friends, family, pets, even one's home. Cultural or religious values may make separation or divorce unthinkable. Women of a generation raised to stay at home may have no financial resources of their own. A victim with health issues may feel safer staying with a familiar abuser than seeking care from strangers; an older woman may feel responsible to stay or return if a spouse or adult child abuser becomes ill.

All of these factors mean that elder abuse often goes unreported. The National Center on Elder Abuse estimates that only one in six cases is reported to authorities. The keys to preventing this abuse are awareness and education.

What can you do? Be alert to the signs of abuse and don't be afraid to ask questions if you suspect mistreatment. Harris emphasizes the importance of being willing to believe the victim.

When should you suspect abuse? Warning signs include: bruises or unexplainable injuries, unusual depression, changes in personality or behavior, sudden changes in financial circumstances, withdrawal from normal activities, strained or tense relationships, frequent arguments with a spouse/caregiver. If you suspect elder abuse, don't hesitate to ask questions or seek help.

The Crystal Judson Family Justice Center, located at 718 Court E in downtown Tacoma,

offers a safe, welcoming, one-stop resource for those experiencing domestic abuse. Services are free of charge and no appointment is needed. Interpreters are available for non-English-speaking clients. Call the Center at (253) 798-4166 or (800) 764-2420 for more information.

## If you experience elder abuse:

- Know that you're not the only one
- Be willing to tell your story
- Be willing to call for help
- If you suspect that an elder you know is experiencing abuse:
  - Don't be afraid to speak out and ask questions
  - Be willing to listen and believe their story
  - If the danger is immediate, call 9-1-1.

## Resources

Crystal Judson Family Justice Center  
<http://www.aplaceofhelp.com>  
(253) 798-4166 or (800) 764-2420  
Domestic Violence Helpline  
(253) 798-4166 or  
Toll Free (800) 764-2420  
*National Center on Elder Abuse*  
<http://www.ncea.aoa.gov>

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Shashi Daniels, Au.D.  
Doctor of Audiology

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# Q. Do I have a hearing loss?

# A.

Take this simple test:

	YES	NO
• Women & children's voices difficult to understand.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Confusion among sounds of words: dime/time, bake/take....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Need to be directly facing a speaker to understand.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Complain that people mumble or slur words.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Continually asking people to repeat themselves.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• People feel you speak too loudly.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Prefer TV or radio louder than others.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Difficulty hearing within groups of people.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Avoid group situations where listening may be difficult....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Difficulty hearing at movies, worship, concerts, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Have ringing in your ears/have noises in your head.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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