

## u Resources u

**National Domestic Violence Hotline:**  
Toll-free 800-799-SAFE (7233);  
or 800-787-3224 (TTY) Deaf and  
hearing impaired.

**National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA)**  
**Website:** [www.gwjapan.com/NCEA](http://www.gwjapan.com/NCEA)  
202-898-2586 Fax: 202-898-2583  
E-mail: [NCEA@nasua.org](mailto:NCEA@nasua.org)  
1225 I Street, NW, Suite 725  
Washington, DC 20005

**Citizens for Better Care:** <http://cbcmi.org/>  
2111 Woodward Ave., Suite 610  
Detroit, MI 48201-3421  
313-962-5968; 800-833-9548  
E-mail: [info@cbcmi.org](mailto:info@cbcmi.org)

***Aging: God's Challenge to Church and Synagogue***, Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. and Donald F. Clingan.  
Nashville: Discipleship Resources.  
ISBN 0-88177-144-9.  
Order tollfree: 800/685-4370 or  
online: [www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org).

***Designing an Older Adult Ministry***,  
Richard H. Gentzler, Jr. Nashville:  
Discipleship Resources.  
ISBN 0-88177-269-0.  
Order tollfree: 800/685-4370 or  
online: [www.discipleshipresources.org](http://www.discipleshipresources.org).

***Growing Older in America***,  
Robert J. Riekse and Henry Holstege.  
McGraw-Hill, 1996. Chapter 21,  
Elder Abuse-Crimes/Scams/ Cons,  
pp. 445-70. ISBN 0070527423.

# *Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation*

## **BELIEVE IT! REPORT IT!**

**CENTER ON AGING  
& OLDER ADULT MINISTRIES**

Several years ago I listened to an interview with an older, abused woman who had filed for divorce. She had been a stay-at-home mom, and had no resources of her own. Her husband, not wanting to lose his power over her, played the part of the innocent “Mr. Nice Guy” in court. The judge refused to believe the woman and did not grant the divorce. At the end of the interview the woman said, “The only choice I have is to go back to him unless I want to become a bag lady.”

In another case study, Mrs. L., who is 80 years old, has some health problems and trouble getting around. Susan, 54, came to live with her. Things were going well until Susan lost her job. She started drinking excessively and spent hours in front of the TV. This angered Mrs. L. and led to arguments between them. Recently, the arguments have been getting physical. Mrs. L. discovered that Susan has been taking large sums of money out of their joint account. Mrs. L. is upset and frightened that confronting Susan will make her angrier.

The case study of Mr. and Mrs. P. revealed that they used their savings to buy a duplex 10 years ago, with an apartment for them and one for their married daughter, Sarah, and her family. Relations were amicable until Mr. P. died about two years ago. Mrs. P. is now 75, with a heart condition. Since Mr. P.'s death, Sarah has been going out a great deal and leaving the care of the children and the housework to Mrs. P. She also insisted that Mrs. P. begin paying rent and buying gifts for the children. When

Mrs. P. objected, Sarah instructed the children not to speak to her, and Mrs. P. was ignored for a week. Mrs. P. is unhappy with her treatment, but fears rejection and abandonment if she does not comply.

### **A Serious Problem**

Abuse of the elderly through neglect, exploitation, abandonment, physical mistreatment or other means, is difficult to define. According to the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), broadly-defined elder abuse falls into three basic categories: domestic, institutional, and self-neglect or abuse.

Sally Steiner, senior policy specialist with the Michigan Office of Services to the Aging, notes that state laws vary widely in definitions of elder abuse and what is to be reported. Current estimates are that between 1.5 and 2 million older adults are abused annually, with only one in 10 to one in 14 cases being reported to a public agency.

The NCEA has the following statistics on their webpage, [www.gwjapan.com/NCEA](http://www.gwjapan.com/NCEA): From 1986 to 1996, domestic elder abuse increased nationwide from 117,000 reports to 293,000 reports – an increase of 150 percent. Given the prediction that the number of people over age 65 will double by 2030, it is imperative that something be done now.

According to 1996 data, the average age of victims of domestic elder abuse is 77.9 years, with the majority of victims being female (67.3 percent). However, the perpetrators are almost evenly divided between males and females, with adult

children being listed as the most frequent abusers (NCEA website). Clearly, elder abuse is a far more serious problem than most people realize.

## When Abuse Happens

You can recognize when elder abuse, neglect or exploitation is occurring. The current Michigan Citizens for Better Care brochure gives the following advice: Physical abuse involves acts of violence resulting in pain, injury or disease. Signs of physical abuse you might see include: scratches, welts or burns; bruises, lacerations, or fractures; multiple injuries in various stages of healing.

- **Psychological abuse** and neglect is behavior that causes mental suffering. Signs might include: confusion; withdrawal; depression; fear; agitation.
- **Physical neglect** is the failure of the responsible person to provide goods or services needed for the elderly to function or to prevent harm. It may also include failure to use available funds for appropriate care. Note that vulnerable adults who cannot care for themselves may neglect themselves. Signs of neglect include: dehydration or malnutrition; poor personal hygiene including soiled clothing and body odor; decreased weight; pressure sores (decubitus ulcers).
- **Exploitation** involves misuse of the adult's financial and material resources. Signs may include: unusual activity in the bank account; transfer of assets; substandard care despite

adequate financial resources; hoarding of personal items; missing valuables or clothing; lack of spending money.

## Why Does Elder Abuse Occur?

According to the NCEA, elder abuse, like other types of domestic violence, is extremely complex. "Generally," they state, "a combination of psychological, social, and economic factors, along with mental and physical conditions of the victim and the perpetrator, contribute to the occurrence of elder maltreatment." Among those factors, the NCEA lists caregiver stress, impairment of the dependent elder (meaning those people in poor health are more likely to be abused), learned behavior, and personal problems of the abusers. The NCEA also notes that two-thirds of older abuse perpetrators are family members of the victims.

## What You Can Do to Help

Elder abuse, neglect and exploitation will only get worse if nothing is done. If you suspect that a friend, neighbor or family member is a victim, contact a federal, state or local government agency for help. Many states have instituted 24-hour toll-free "hotlines" for receiving reports of elder abuse. These calls are confidential. Adult Protective Services, or the County Department of Social Services, are designated as the agency to receive and investigate allegations of abuse and neglect. Every State Attorney General's office is required by federal law to have a Medicaid Fraud Unit to investigate and prosecute patient abuse or neglect in health care programs that

participate in Medicaid, including home health care services. Local police, sheriff's offices and prosecuting attorneys may investigate and prosecute cases of elderly abuse and neglect. In states where statutes make elder abuse a crime, there may be a requirement to report all suspected cases to a law enforcement agency.

Because few of the 1500 domestic violence shelters nationwide have special programs and services for elder abuse victims, the Administration on Aging is funding several model projects to help shelters develop services for women 50 years and older (Administration on Aging, 1996, # 367, Washington D.C., U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services).

## We Can Fight Elder Abuse

Elder abuse can be fought on many fronts. Public education is key, as people need to understand clearly what elder abuse is, why it happens, how to recognize it, and what can be done about it. Control of life issues needs to be highlighted. Elders need to retain as much power and control over their own lives as possible, thus reducing the risk of abuse. Addressing the systematic issue of "ageism" is crucial, as it creates a social environment making it easier for elder abuse to occur.

Churches can help. The fifth commandment, in Exodus 20:12, speaks of "honoring your father and mother." Christians can be the eyes and ears of our communities, offering assistance, love, companionship and care to elderly friends and neighbors, both inside and outside our congregations. We can also help by

reporting to the proper agencies when abuse is suspected.

Too many of our elderly are suffering in silence, afraid to admit what is happening to them behind closed doors. It is time to break that code of silence.

*By Louise Thomas*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Louise Thomas** is Chair of the West Michigan Conference Older Adults Committee, North Central Jurisdictional member at large on the United Methodist Committee on Older Adult Ministries; and a Commissioner on the Michigan Dept. of Community Health/Commission on Services to the Aging. She lives in Grand Rapids, MI.

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For more information about Older Adult Ministries, please contact:

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