



“Elder Abuse, An Emerging Social Issue”

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood areas of abuse and neglect in our society is the field of “elder abuse.” Most professionals and members of the community have heard, read and seen the stories about victims of child abuse, battered woman who are victims of Domestic Violence and persons in health care facilities who have been physically abused or neglected. Unfortunately, very few know the reality of victims of “elder abuse” i.e. elder mistreatment who are living in our neighborhoods.

Several stereotypical myths still exist about the victims, the causes of abuse and what interventions can be used to address it. One of the most often mentioned myths is that most victims of abuse, neglect or exploitation live in nursing homes. Totally untrue! In fact there are far more victims living in the community – where over 95% of all older adults live – than in nursing homes. Connected to this misperception is the belief that the most impaired, and thus most vulnerable, are automatically are sent to live in long-term care facilities. The reality is that many more impaired, vulnerable older adults are living in their own homes/apartments or with relatives.

The next myth is that more than 90% of all elder abuse is caused by a “stressed caregiver.” This belief grew out of the early efforts to explain why those over age 60 would be the targets of abuse or neglect. It was based in a similar (and now debunked) theory that tried to explain why child abuse occurs. Can caregiving for an older adult create stress? Absolutely. But to make a strong link between cause and effect, thus excusing the actions of the caregiver (perpetrator) has been shown to provide a convenient “excuse to abuse.” Although studies are few, we estimate that just about 15% of elder abuse is related to caregiver stress – not 90%.

A more accurate model to frame this form family violence in would be a version of the Domestic Violence focus on power and control. Whether it is physical, verbal, financial abuse or active neglect, the “caregiver’s methods to control the older adult need to be redefined. As I often ask colleagues, “Was there Domestic Violence 40 years ago? Where did all those women go?”

The last myth that needs to be challenged is that Adult Protective Services, located in every county in the state, has the same powers to intervene as their counterparts in Child Protective Services. What many professionals and the public seem to ignore is that Adult Protective deals with adults, just like us, who have the same rights and abilities to refuse

assistance as younger battered women. APS cannot just step in to “force” an older person – even if they are being abused or financially exploited – into a nursing home.

Working with victims, professionals and families to combat this increasing problem has always been a challenge. Few resources exist, and comprehensive laws to help law enforcement intervene are nonexistent. Lifespan’s Elder Abuse Prevention Program, as part of the statewide Elder Abuse Coalition, strives to educate the public about the warning signs of abuse or exploitation and helps professionals find options for clients. In our region, you can call Lifespan at 585-244-8400 for consultation, intervention services or to request an educational presentation.

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