

Financial Abuse of Seniors

What can financial abuse of a senior look like?

Here's an example:

Janet appreciated her grandson helping her run errands. Since her husband's death, simple things like buying groceries or going to the bank had become difficult for her.

Her grandson, Nicholas, had offered to help and for awhile it seemed like the perfect arrangement. He would take her to the bank and wait while she deposited her pension cheque and withdrew the cash she needed. Nicholas then drove her wherever she needed to go to do her shopping.

As winter approached, Nicholas told his grandmother it would probably be easier on her if he did the errands for her so she could stay warm and cozy at home. Since he had been so helpful, Janet thought nothing of signing her pension cheque over to her grandson, so he could make her purchases and deposit the rest in her account.

Several months later, Janet realized Nicholas had not been depositing the balance in her account. He had been doing her shopping but had kept the rest for himself. She hadn't noticed he had been taking her money until a cheque she wrote bounced.

Facts about financial abuse of seniors

Canadian research suggests that between four and ten per cent of seniors will experience some form of abuse at one point in their life. Abuse of seniors can take several forms, often with more than one type of abuse occurring at the same time.

One of the most common types of abuse of seniors is financial. Financial abuse involves the misuse of a senior's funds or property through fraud, trickery, theft or force. This type of abuse can include any of the following:

- Stealing money or possessions
- Misusing bank or credit cards
- Misusing joint banking accounts
- Forging a signature on pension cheques or legal documents
- Misusing a power of attorney
- Selling or transferring a senior's property against their wishes or best interests
- Failing to provide agreed upon services to a senior, such as care giving, home or vehicle repair, or financial management

- Refusing to return borrowed money or property as agreed upon, or when requested by a senior or their agent
- Changing a senior's will, trusts or inheritance for the abuser's benefit

The abuser in financial abuse situations is often a trusted person in a senior's life, such as a spouse or partner, family member (often an adult child), caregiver or friend.

Often seniors who are victims of abuse are reluctant to speak out. They may be more afraid of what will happen to them if they report the abuse, than of the abuse itself. Sometimes, seniors simply do not have the capacity to report abuse.

In many cases, coercion or threats are used to intimidate a senior. Comments may be made such as: "if you don't do what I say, I will put you in a nursing home," or "you aren't going to live long enough to spend all this money anyway."

Seniors in these situations may blame themselves for the abuse they are subjected to. They may also be reluctant to report the abuse because they are ashamed about the abuse or embarrassed that they placed their trust in the abuser. Some seniors may also believe that it was something he or she did that brought on the abuse. Furthermore, if abuse has been common in a family, both the abuser and the senior may accept it as "normal" behavior.



Warning Signs of Financial Abuse

Warning signs that a senior may be a victim of financial abuse include:

- Unusual bank withdrawals
- Failure to meet financial obligations
- Depression, fear, anxiety or passivity
- Lack of food, clothing and other necessities
- Objects or money missing from a senior's household
- Withdrawals from investments in spite of penalties for early withdrawal
- Abrupt changes in wills, trusts, contracts, powers of attorney, property titles, deeds or mortgages
- Changes in beneficiaries on insurance policies
- Financial activity that is inconsistent with the senior's abilities, such as ATM withdrawals when the senior has difficulty leaving the house
- Sudden close relationship with a new person (including marriage or domestic partnership)
- A caregiver with an extreme interest and involvement in a senior's financial matters
- A senior's sudden reluctance to discuss financial matters

How can you help a senior who is being financially abused?

Victims may not be aware of the community supports and services available to assist them, so it may be up to you to help them.

Here are some things that you can do to support a senior who may be experiencing financial abuse:

- **Educate yourself.** Recognize that abuse and neglect exist in your own community. Learn about local resources.
- **If you think a senior needs help, talk to them first (in the absence of the suspected abuser) to find out how you might assist.** Ask things like: How are you doing? Are you having trouble at home? Can I help you? Is there someone I can put you in touch with who can help you?
- **Listen without judging.** Let the senior know that you care and have respect for his or her decision-making. Listen to the senior first and talk to him or her about how you might assist.
- **Believe the abused senior.** Do this even if the suspected abuser seems nice or is your friend. Do not deny or underestimate what is going on. Abuse is never acceptable and should never be ignored.
- **Encourage the senior to seek support and assistance.**

- **Understand that leaving an abusive relationship is difficult.** Leaving is often a gradual process. It can involve many steps and occur over time. Be respectful of the senior's decisions.
- **Do not confront the suspected abuser.** This could put you or the senior in danger.

You may also want to:

- **Encourage the senior to speak with a legal representative.**
- **Encourage the senior to cancel any bank cards or credit cards** the suspected abuser may have access to and establish a new bank card with a secret access code .
- **Work with the senior to contact pension authorities** to have pension cheques directly deposited or sent to a new account.
- **Arrange with the senior to have bills direct debited** out of his or her bank account.

If you discover a crime or dangerous situation is happening to a senior, call 911, your local or provincial police, RCMP or tribal police immediately.

More information

For more information about elder abuse and the help available in your community:

- Visit the Alberta Elder Abuse Network website at www.albertaelderabuse.ca
- Call the Family Violence Information Line, toll free at **310-1818**

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