

HOW TO NOTICE ELDER ABUSE WHEN TALKING WITH OLDER PEOPLE ON THE PHONE

Many older people would not describe things they are experiencing as elder abuse or even think that there may be a legal option to deal with their situation. You may also want to note that even if an older person is not experiencing elder abuse in the present, perhaps something they say triggers a need for further discussions or a referral about options to prevent the potential of elder abuse happening in future.

For example, maybe they disclose they are going to be loaning money to a relative, or need to make or re-make their will or EPA, or want to sell their house, or have not seen their grandchildren, or that conflict already exists between them with their children, or they are a carer for their spouse but they are also unwell.

Having information to take steps to protect themselves now can go a long way in giving them comfort and peace of mind for the future but, importantly, preventing elder abuse from occurring.

NOTICE RISK FACTORS FOR ELDER ABUSE

Risk factors for elder abuse are factors that increase an older person's vulnerability or exposure to elder abuse. Please note that risk factors have their limitations and so it is important to consider these in conjunction with red flags. Here are some things you may want to look out for that an older person may disclose over the phone:

- being dependent on someone
- social isolation
- poverty
- substance abuse
- mental health issues of the older person or the abuser
- shared living arrangements
- age or gender-associated vulnerabilities
- frailty
- cognitive impairments
- loss of autonomy
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage.

NOTICE RED FLAGS FOR ELDER ABUSE

Red flags are warning signs that there is perhaps more to the story and the person may need some further support.

Physical or Sexual Abuse

An older person may:

- disclose injuries or physical pain that does not really match the story of how they got the injury
- be hypervigilant or fearful of someone at the house, or show anxious responses
- have past or present domestic violence orders against someone in the family, someone who lives with them or who is in contact with them
- tell you that they have a fear of being touched.

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

An older person may show or talk about:

- unexplained paranoia or suspicion of people or relatives
- feelings of helplessness
- increased family conflict
- family dysfunction
- decreased social contact
- loss of interest in self-care
- anxiety and/or depression
- disrupted sleep patterns
- fearfulness.

Financial Abuse

An older person may:

- have no money for food and medication
- show indications that they do not know what is happening to their money or if they are receiving it
- have signed legal decision-making documents (PA, EPA) recently but cannot understand them (e.g. a person from an NESB who signed without an interpreter being present)
- have signed property transfers when unable to comprehend the transaction
- have ownership of the home but lives in sub-standard conditions compared to rest of family
- feel pressure from a family member to act as a guarantor for a loan, sell or transfer their house or give away money
- have family with high expectations they will provide care, including for grandchildren, or financial support
- be fearful or anxious when asked about personal finances
- be left without care
- have adult children who have moved in and are not paying rent or contributing to bills.

YOUR GUT INSTINCT IS ANOTHER IMPORTANT RED FLAG

If the older person has said something to make you suspect abuse may be occurring (e.g. being forced to do things against their wishes, feeling ashamed or threatened) then you should pay attention.

Social Isolation

An older person may:

- show indications that they are living with someone who isolates them from others (friends, family, church)
- have relocated far away from friends and family
- have withdrawn from social networks or hobbies (this may be due to COVID-19)
- reveal that someone is withholding mail from them.

Neglect

An older person may:

- say, or there are some other indicators, that they are over-medicated or under-medicated
- have been left alone and unattended, when they require care
- be in poor health and undernourished.

