

COVID-19 and Abuse of Older Adults Ideas for Increasing Safety and Strengthening Families in Faith Communities

This is an unprecedented time. The COVID-19 crisis intersects with an elder abuse crisis that already affected at least 1 in 10 older adults. COVID-19 can worsen abuse because older adults may be sheltering with their abusers. In addition, economic insecurity can put older adults at greater risk for financial exploitation, while physical distancing can make it harder to reach out for help.

We all want to make sure everyone in our communities is safe. Public health research tells us that one of the best ways to increase safety and prevent abuse in our families, congregations, and communities is to provide information about abuse and available local services to everyone. Whether someone uses the information for themselves or shares it with a friend or family member, this is a good way to provide vital information without singling anyone out or forcing anyone to talk about abuse. When life-saving information and resources are shared throughout the community, they will reach those who need them most. Older adults are often strongly attached to their faith communities. Because the faith community connection is so strong, congregations provide an excellent opportunity to provide information about services for older adults experiencing abuse. If you are a faith leader or a member of a faith community, you have an important role to play! Everyone can be a resource and an ally!

One way to be an ally is to share information with your faith community and ask others to do the same. To make it easier, we've compiled some vital information for you. In this resource you will find tips to help you: 1) learn to be an ally; 2) support older adults in your community; 3) provide information and resources to everyone; 4) address common concerns of people in your faith community.

For additional information, please contact any of our staff using the email addresses below.

Safe Havens: info@interfaithpartners.org • **NCALL:** ncall@ncall.us
Futures Without Violence: health@futureswithoutviolence.org

Learn to Be an Ally of Older Adults Experiencing Abuse

- Find out more. Brief resources about abuse of older adults developed especially for faith communities and faith leaders are available here. Additional resources about older adults, COVID-19, and abuse are here.
- Learn more about services in your local community. You can contact local service providers directly or reach out to national organizations such as those listed on pages 6 and 7 in this document.
- Post information about local and national services on your faith community's website and social media, in newsletters and service programs, on bulletin boards, etc.
- Know your state's reporting requirements and share any limits on your confidentiality with everyone in your congregation.

When You Are Speaking with Someone in Your Faith Community

1. Prioritize safety and confidentiality.

- Try to connect with people when they are alone so that they have privacy.
- Reinforce that everyone deserves to be safe, respected, and well cared for.
- Create “safe space” by reaffirming your confidentiality within the limits of your state's reporting requirements.



“We all deserve to be safe and well. Everything you tell me is confidential, and that doesn’t change because we’re not in my office or the confessional or the sanctuary. As always, I will not share anything unless you tell me something I’m mandated to report [refer to state law], or unless you are going to harm yourself or someone else.”

2. Talking about abuse is usually not straightforward.

- For many reasons (shame, stigma, fear, trying to protect the family, etc.), it can be really difficult for older survivors to disclose that they are experiencing abuse. They may not even know what abuse of an older adult looks like, or what's included in "abuse." Many people think only of physical abuse, and don't have the language to describe the verbal assault, aggression, anger, sexual coercion, bullying, control, emotional manipulation, or financial exploitation that they are experiencing. All these experiences are part of abuse, and they undermine health and spiritual wellbeing. They can also be dangerous and lethal.
- Even if they recognize that they are the victim of abuse, most people wouldn't talk about it outright, or at the beginning of a conversation. It takes trust and compassionate listening for a survivor of abuse to begin to talk about the situation.
- Often, these conversations begin about something that seems to have nothing to do with abuse, such as concerns about family members, drug or alcohol involvement, hunger, financial instability, parenting, or homelessness. These issues may be connected to other serious challenges, like abuse. Because concerns like homelessness or drug involvement are also important, you'll want to provide support. We've compiled some information for you to supplement the local resources that you may already know about. Please see pages 6 through 10 in this document for those resources.
- Listen with both your mind and your heart, and don't be afraid to ask gentle questions. For example, an older adult may tell you that a family member has moved in with them. You could ask what that's been like, and listen carefully to the response. You could also keep an eye out for changes in financial stability or level of engagement.
- Keep in mind the "red flags" that may help you identify an older adult who is experiencing abuse. Visit the resource, [Red Flags and Warning Signs of Elder Abuse](#), for more information.

3. If a Congregant Tells You They May Be Experiencing Abuse, Provide Resources and Referrals

- If a congregant mentions abuse, avoid blaming, judging, or jumping in with a “quick fix.” Instead, stay focused on the person speaking and allow them to tell you their experiences. Believe them.
- Avoid ageist responses, such as, “Are you sure that really happened? Maybe you just got confused.” Or “You are so lucky to have family to help you since it must be difficult to manage a household at your age.”
- State clearly that the person causing harm is always responsible for their behavior. The victim is not at fault and should not be encouraged to “try harder.”
- Keep in mind that the person causing the harm may be someone the older adult loves or is providing care for them. The older adult may want to maintain contact with the person causing harm.
- Refer the speaker to local and national services and resources. People can either call or text for services. If possible, name a staff member at your local service agency, describe the services they provide (education, safety planning, one-on-one counseling, support groups, etc.), and convey your trust. There is a list of national resources and services below. You could also offer to set up a three-way call or to be present with the person while they call. There are more details about services for older adults experiencing abuse in the resource list on pages 6 and 7 in this document.



***“Thank you for sharing
this with me.
I am so sorry this
is happening.
You don’t
deserve this!”***



*“What you are telling me makes me
worry about your safety.”*

*“A lot of people experience things like this and
there are people who can help. I can help you
connect with them. I can even be part of the call
if that would be helpful.”*

*“We all really care about you.
What can I do to help?”*

- Spiritual support is also frequently welcome and helpful. Offer to pray with or for your congregant, and offer scriptural or other resources that will provide strength and courage during a difficult time. Reassure them that your faith does not require that anyone put up with abuse or harm. Everyone deserves to be safe, respected, and well cared for. Make your reassurance as specific to your faith tradition as possible. Counteract any misinterpretations of your faith, scripture, or traditions that encourage acceptance of abuse. Clearly state that abuse is not the victim’s fault and not part of a healthy, faithful relationship. Follow up when it is safe to do so.

4. Whether or not abuse comes up in the conversation, offer information and resources about abuse of older adults to everyone.

- The COVID-19 pandemic can make things more difficult for people experiencing abuse, especially older adults. We can all look out for each other and for the people we love and care for.
- Abuse can become dangerous, so it’s important that we all know where to get help.
- Even during the pandemic, community services are open. There is free, confidential help available for anyone. To find help in your community, you can contact the resources listed on pages 6 and 7 in this document.

- To help get this important information out to everyone in your community, you can post it on your faith community's website and social media, and in newsletters and programs.
- Ask everyone to pass this information on to friends and family. The goal is to spread information that will support and strengthen families throughout the congregation so that everyone can be safer.
- For additional information, check out the links below.



"I know COVID-19 has made things harder for us all. Because this is such a difficult time, we are sharing ideas with everyone about how to help yourself and people you care about. For example, older adults you know may experience more challenges now in relationships, including increased anger, aggression, control, or harm."

"There is free, confidential help available if you know an older adult who is being hurt or needs support. I'm sharing this with everyone in this unprecedented time."

"How are things going right now for you?"

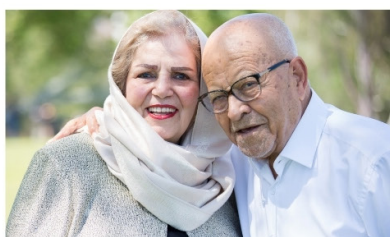
National Resources to Find Services

- **Domestic Violence:** You, your friends, and your family members can call the 24/7 National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233/800-787-3224 TTY. The hotline is open 24/7. Anyone can call, and all the support is free and confidential. You can even call just to ask a question about someone you are concerned about. You can also chat with national advocates at thehotline.org. These advocates are trained to help adults of all ages.
- **Sexual Abuse:** There is also a free and confidential Sexual Violence Hotline (which also serves older adults) at 1-800-656-4673. You can chat with sexual violence advocates at online.rainn.org.

- **Adult Protective Services:** To learn about adult protective services and how to report if you are concerned about an older adult, visit <https://www.napsa-now.org/>.
- **Services for Older Adults:** The [Elder Care Locator](#), which can help people connect to services for caregivers and older adults and their families, is available at 800-677-1116.
- **Abuse in Facilities:** For help if you are concerned about an older adult who lives in a nursing home, assisted living or other facility, contact <https://theconsumervoice.org/> to learn more about ombudsman.

Additional Resources on Abuse of Older Adults/Elder Abuse

- [Futures Without Violence](#)
- [National Adult Protective Services Association](#)
- [National Association of Area Agencies on Aging](#)
- [National Center on Elder Abuse](#)
- [National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life](#)
- [Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse](#)
 - [Safe Havens' Helpful Resources for Faith Leaders](#)
- [U.S. Department of Justice Elder Justice Initiative](#)



Addressing Concerns that Could Be Related to Abuse of Older Adults

Chances are there are many concerns that your faith community members are facing during the pandemic. Conversations about these concerns may lead to a conversation about abuse. Or, these concerns may be symptoms of abuse. For example, if you listen carefully and compassionately you may find that someone who voices concerns about other family members may disclose that they are concerned about a family member who is bullying and controlling an older adult. However, it's also possible that someone could express these concerns without any abuse present. In any case, your support can help to strengthen and encourage people in your community.

1. Concerns for Family and Friends

- Many things have changed in the world around us and in our own lives. These changes can be challenging. It can be hard to find hope in the midst of fear, hunger, hurt, economic hardship, or worry.
- Reassure congregants that they are not alone in this. The faith community is available to help when needed.
- Ask congregants to help you reach out to their friends in the faith community to keep the network of love and support strong.
- There is 24/7 crisis support available from the Crisis Text Line, which can be reached by texting "HOME" to 741741.
- There is also a Hunger Hotline available Monday through Friday from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM ET. Call 1-866-3-HUNGRY or, for help in Spanish, 1-877-8-HAMBRE.

2. Concerns for Children and Grandchildren

- While children and grandchildren love hugs and just being together, that might be impossible during the pandemic.
- Explore ways to stay connected, such as calling, reading a book online, FaceTiming or Zooming, playing a game over the phone, or sending a card, email, or text message.
- Build a network of congregational volunteers who can provide help with the technology if that's a stumbling block.

- Remind congregants that there is a confidential National Parent Hotline, which is available Monday through Friday from 12:00 PM to 9:00 PM CT and can be reached at 1-855-427-2736. Anyone who is caring for a child can call.

3. Concerns about Substance Use

- The stress of having everything change around us so quickly has been significant. In addition, many are dealing with lost wages or loss of a job, work becoming more dangerous because of the pandemic, the loss of a loved one, and isolation due to physical distancing. Many people are concerned or experiencing anxiety or depression during this time.
- We're all looking for comfort. Some people may turn to drugs or alcohol for comfort.
- Reassure everyone that they are not alone in this, and help is available. Knowing where to turn for help may be life-changing. Let people know that you are available for support.
- There is also a confidential Substance Abuse Helpline. They're available 24/7 and the number is 1-800-662-4357 (HELP).



4. Concerns about Taking Care of Yourself

- In this situation, it's easy to forget to take care of yourself. Lack of self-care can affect us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Ask people in the congregation what they are doing to take care of themselves. What works for them?
- Suggest that it helps to take a few deep breaths, take a walk, or do something for yourself before the stress becomes overwhelming.
- Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, meditation, scripture reading, or listening to favorite sacred music can also be uplifting and provide centering and solace during difficult times.
- Encourage congregants to reach out to each other and to family and friends for support.
- Reassure everyone that their faith community is here to support them and that they can call for help.

For additional information and resources, please find us online:

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse:
www.interfaithpartners.org

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life: www.ncall.us

Futures Without Violence: www.futureswithoutviolence.org

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