Anticipating Public Thinking

Elder Abuse Swamp Glossary

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Understanding how Americans think and talk about elder abuse helps communicators like you choose your communications cues strategically. If you can predict how the public will interpret your messages, you can create more effective messages that engage people in productive conversations about:

- elder abuse and what it is
- the social and systemic factors that contribute to elder abuse, and
- how policies, programs, and systems-level changes can support older Americans' wellbeing and benefit all of us.

What is elder abuse and how does the public think about this topic?

Elders + Abuse: Though elder abuse remains a less familiar concern, the American public is able to draw on separate understandings of abuse and older age when reasoning about the topic. Non-experts' preexisting assumptions tend to construct elder abuse as a relationship between a perpetrator and a victim and typically cast older people as powerless and vulnerable. While advocacy messages that leverage the public's extant understanding of abuse and older age may increase the salience of elder abuse, activating these assumptions is likely to reinforce stereotypes of older people as passive, vulnerable beings.

Deterioration: The American public's perception of older people is heavily marked by the widespread belief that aging is a process of deterioration and dependency, which triggers patterns of paternalistic thinking that denies older people agency. Reasoning from this model leads people to the fatalistic conclusion that abuse is inevitable because older people are inherently vulnerable. Communicators should take care to avoid message cues that activate these dominant perceptions.

Elders as Agents: Despite dominant stereotypes of older people as vulnerable and passive, the American public also holds a more dormant model of older people as capable adults to be consulted and empowered rather than merely cared for and protected. This cultural model is extremely recessive, however, and can be muted easily if a message inadvertently activates more dominant paternalistic models of aging.

Spotlight on Individuals: The American public believes that elder abuse is primarily the consequence of individual characteristics of its perpetrators and victims. This tendency to attribute the cause of elder abuse to personal weaknesses such as, on the one hand, greed, laziness, or other moral failings, and on the other, poor mental and physical health obstructs people's ability to see the broader social and systemic factors that contribute to elder abuse. As a result, they have difficulty moving beyond condemnation to engage in solutions-oriented thinking.

Modern Life Is the Problem: The public commonly makes sense of the prevalence of elder abuse by reasoning that societal changes have placed constant strain on caregivers. Mounting stress, paired with the devaluation of older people and the belief that nursing homes are unfortunate but necessary, join together to explain the inevitability of abuse. While this model encourages the public to consider societal factors, it also works to reinforce a sense of fatalism about elder abuse by linking it to deep and seemingly unchangeable trends. Advocates should avoid words, phrases, and stories that activate this fatalistic model.

Solutions: The public shares a deep fatalism about the possibility of preventing elder abuse and, when pressed to think about solutions, people focus on surveillance and remediation after the fact. This limited understanding of solutions is unsurprising, given the public's strong paternalistic perceptions of older people as vulnerable, passive wards in need of protection. Education and awareness campaigns that emphasize individual-level solutions over structural ones can unintentionally limit the range of solutions people can envision. To help the public think more expansively, communicators should regularly include systemic solutions in their messages about elder abuse.