

Sexual Harm in Older Adults

This workshop focuses on educating caregivers, as well as older adults how to recognize the signs of sexual harm, and how to respond appropriately.

Contents: Workshop # 8



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Introduction

People may not realize that sexual harm (sexual assault, harassment, and abuse in relationships) are problems that affect the older adult community.

Unfortunately, it is a reality that can affect all age groups. Older adults, especially women, continue to be vulnerable to sexual harm.

Victims can obtain resources and support, including medical care and Sexual harm in older adults is an under-recognized issue and therefore it is important for everyone to recognize signs, and know where counseling.

Remember

Sexual harm is not about sex. It is about power, where someone is exerting power and control over another vulnerable person.

Opening Discussion

Engage in discussion with your group by asking them the following questions:

What is sexual harm?
Is it a problem in the older adult community?

What is Sexual Harm?

DISCUSSION:

What do you think sexual harm is?

Sexual harm is any non-consensual sexual contact. According to the United Nations, sexual violence is “any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality.” This can include:

Unwanted sexual touching/fondling/activity

- Any act that uses the victim for the perpetrator’s sexual gratification
- Coerced nudity and sexually explicit photography
- Forced intercourse or rape
- Forcing a person to perform a sexual act(s)
- Sexual harassment, indecent exposure or sexual threatening of any kind

Remember

Sexual contact with any person incapable of giving consent (e.g. persons with dementia or other cognitive impairments, such as being under the influence of some medications or alcohol) is considered sexual assault.

Who might sexually assault or harass an older person?

- Spouse
- Family Member
- Caregiver
- Another Resident
- Volunteer
- Health Care Aid
- Community Care Provider
- Medical Professional
- Community Member
- Neighbour

Emotional / Behavioural Impact of Sexual Harm

In addition to the physical components of sexual harm, there is also an emotional component. The emotional impact of sexual harm can often lead to victims experiencing:

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Depression / Withdrawal
- Anger
- Shame
- Crying Spells
- Flashbacks
- Low Self-esteem
- Self-blame

Signs of Sexual Harm in Older Adults

DISCUSSION:

What do you think, are some signs of sexual harm?

Since experiences of sexual harm may not be reported by victims, for any number of reasons, it is important that family, friends, or caregivers be able to recognize the physical signs of sexual assault. We can then be better equipped to recognize provide support to victims.

Below are some signs/indicators that a person may have been sexually assaulted:

- Bruising around breasts, inner thighs, and/or genital areas
- Unexplained genital infections or disease
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Anal and vaginal bleeding
- Sleep disturbances
- Uncharacteristic change in attitude toward sex

Take the Quiz: Is this Myth or Fact?

	Myth	Fact		Myth	Fact
Older women and older men are equally vulnerable to sexual harm.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	An older adult with diminished mental capacity is incapable of consenting to an intimate relationship.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Older adults living in long-term care do not have the right to be intimate with another resident.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Women are usually the perpetrators of sexual harm against others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Older adults do not have to worry about sexual harm.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	If you are married, your partner has the right to have sex with you at any time without your consent.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

All of these are myths. If you thought any were facts, let's discuss.

Some older adults still suffer from the trauma experienced from sexual abuse in their childhood.

It is important to know that just because someone experienced trauma, such as sexual harm, a very long time ago, it does not mean that they are not still suffering. Many older adults are impacted, in a variety of ways, by those childhood experiences of sexual abuse.

What You Can Do to Help

DISCUSSION:

How would you respond to an older person who told you they had been sexually harmed?

Responding with empathy is an important first step. Here are some ideas about what to say:

- Thank you for trusting me.
- I am sorry this has happened.
- I believe you.
- How can I help you right now?
- You are not alone and we can connect you with people who can help.

We recommend that the person be encouraged to contact the nearest Sexual Assault / Domestic Violence Response Centre at a regional hospital (www.satcontario.com) and / or to contact a sexual assault centre (SAC) crisis line for consultation and referral.

What are my duties to report?

- Sexual Assault and Harassment are Criminal Acts.
- Anyone (visitor, nurse, personal support worker) witnessing or suspecting sexual assault in a Long-Term Care Home or Retirement Home has a duty to report the assault to either the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care or the Retirement Home Regulatory Authority.

Who Do I Call if I Need Help?

For more resources and support from professionals, contact:

[Seniors Safety Line](#)

1 866 299 1011

[Assaulted Women's Help Line](#)

1 866 863 0511

[Long-Term Care ACTION Line](#)

1 866 434 0144

[Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres](#)

Sexualassaultsupport.ca

[Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres](#)

416-323-7327

[Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority](#)

1 855 275 7472

[Support for Male Survivors](#)

1 866 887 0015

[Talk 4 Healing](#)

A helpline for Aboriginal women
1 855 554 HEAL (4325)

Sexual Harm Tip Sheet

What is sexual harm?

Sexual harm is any non-consensual sexual contact. According to the United Nations, sexual violence is “any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality.” This can include:

- Unwanted sexual touching/fondling/activity;
- Any act that uses the victim for the perpetrator’s sexual gratification;
- Coerced nudity and sexually explicit photography;
- Forced intercourse or rape;
- Forcing a person to perform a sexual act(s);
- Sexual harassment, indecent exposure or sexual threatening of any kind.

Some people are impacted by sexual harm in the following ways:

- Depression – guilt/shame, low self-esteem, grief;
- Anxiety – phobias, flashbacks, trauma symptoms;
- Sexual difficulties;
- Interpersonal problems – destructive relationships, problems sustaining relationships, distrust, isolation, poor social skills, parenting problems;
- Substance abuse, eating disorders, self-mutilations, suicide attempts, self-defeating behaviour.

Symptoms you may see or recognize:

- Bruising around breasts, inner thighs, and/or genital areas
- Unexplained genital infections or disease
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Anal and vaginal bleeding
- Sleep disturbances
- Uncharacteristic change in attitude toward sex

Sexual Harm Tip Sheet

Take the Quiz: Is this Myth or Fact?

Myth Fact

Older women and older men are equally vulnerable to sexual harm.

☐ ☐

An older adult with diminished mental capacity is incapable of consenting to an intimate relationship.

☐ ☐

Older adults living in long-term care do not have the right to be intimate with another resident.

☐ ☐

Women are usually the perpetrators of sexual harm against others.

☐ ☐

Older adults do not have to worry about sexual harm.

☐ ☐

If you are married, your partner has the right to have sex with you at any time without your consent.

☐ ☐

How Do I Respond to Someone Who Has Been Harmed?

Responding with empathy is an important first step. Here are some ideas about what to say:

- Thank you for trusting me.
- I am sorry this has happened.
- I believe you.
- How can I help you right now?
- You are not alone and we can connect you with people who can help.

We recommend that the person be encouraged to contact the nearest Sexual Assault / Domestic Violence Response Centre at a regional hospital (www.satontario.com) and / or to contact a sexual assault centre (SAC) crisis line for consultation and referral.

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