



Elder Abuse
Prevention
Ontario



Engagement and Disclosure Issues for Victims of Elder Abuse

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What Happens After Screening and Risk Assessment?

**Disclosure and engagement
processes are often
overlooked (yet critical)
pieces to EA detection and
early intervention**

Broad Engagement Challenge

The majority of EA victims remain hidden and never interface with formal support services

- Burnes et al. (2019): 1 out of every 6 (15%)
- Acierno et al. (2010): 1 out of every 6 (18%)
- Lachs and Berman (2011): 1 out of 24 (4%)

Only 4% to 18% of EA victims come into contact with or receive help from formal support systems

Most EA victims are highly reluctant, not eager, to disclose or engage with formal support systems

Why Are EA Victims So Reluctant
to Come Forward and/or Disclose
Their Mistreatment Situation to
Service Providers?



Qualitative Interviews with EM Victims

Afraid of Perpetrator Retaliation

- *What made it feel hard? It look hard because you feel afraid (I: Yeah), you know? Sometimes, if somebody, if you and somebody have an argument, and you really want to confront them, you just kind of confront them in that way because you feel afraid that if you go and expose that person, that person will hurt you.*



Qualitative Interviews with EM Victims

Embarrassment, Shame and Stigma

- *You know I am a person, I am a very private person. I don't want anyone else outside to hear my stories because it's too embarrassing.*
- *Yes. I didn't want to tell anybody. I didn't want anyone to know what's going on. Shame, shame is a big thing.*



Qualitative Interviews with EM Victims

Knowledge and Awareness

- *I think it's a situation that affects a lot more people than we are aware of. I believe that more advertisement should be done you know. For me, I have spoken to a lot of people that I know that are going through similar challenges and they are kind of reluctant to you know seek help. For one reason or another but I think if there's more awareness and maybe the culture*



Qualitative Interviews with EM Victims

Family Preservation and Reputation

- *For the sake of my children, for the sake of my family's reputation, I stayed on. I think I made a big mistake there I should've done something.*
- *You don't, you don't, think your family is going to - you don't want to hurt the family. You want to try to live with that person, if you can.*

Other Reasons EA Victims May be Reluctant

- Stigma or distrust in involvement with public systems
- Fears about what might happen to themselves (e.g., loss of autonomy or caregivers, nursing home placement)
- Fears about consequences for perpetrator (e.g., homeless, prosecution, incarceration)
- Fears of severing (family) relationships and reputational risk
- Concern of losing limited financial or social supports or that disclosure could impact critical relationships with caregivers upon whom they depend
- Concern that disclosure will set off a chain reaction of life events over which they have little control

A service provider's insistence that a victim leave the perpetrator or pursue other major life-altering actions can be a serious deterrent in the disclosure process

Disclosure

- When an older adult who has experienced EA informs a health or social service provider or any other third party
- Victim disclosure receives very little attention in the EA literature yet represents an important component within the overall detection effort

Disclosure - A Process

- Victim disclosure is generally conceptualized as a dynamic process that evolves over time, rather than a discrete or single outcome event
- Process typically involves a non-linear process characterized by stages such as:
 - Denial or misportrayal (e.g., to keep abuse behind closed doors)
 - Reluctance
 - Delayed, tentative, or active disclosure (often under crisis circumstances)
 - Retraction or recantation of disclosure
 - Re-affirmation
- Disclosure process can take months or years to unfold, and most victims are in a state of denial or tentative disclosure, rather than a state of active disclosure
- The dynamic disclosure process may not be adequately facilitated using existing screening tools that are administered as brief, discrete events

Disclosure – Things to Keep in Mind

- Disclosure is hindered when clients perceive their service provider as lacking time or interest, or demonstrating discomfort - victims are attuned to clinicians' hesitance in discussing victimization
- Direct asking about potential victimization is important because it indicates a readiness to hear disclosures – however we can ease into these questions
 - Begin with innocuous, open-ended questions such as “how is it going with [family member] helping you out at home” or “how have things been going since [child/grandchild] has moved back into the home”, which provide opportunities for discussion before steadily progressing to more focused, probative questions (e.g., how are disagreements or conflict handled in your family? what is conflict like for you at home?)
- Disclosure is a process that may unfold over the course of several visits, and providers should remain open, patient, and continue to ask questions
- Overall demeanor that elicits trust, careful listening, showing genuine interest, and that conveys respect, compassion, and non-judgment

Disclosure – How Not to Respond

- Within the interpersonal dynamic of the disclosure process between a victim and service provider, the receiver's reaction is critically important
- Major barrier to disclosure among victims is the fear of receiving a negative or stigmatizing reaction
- Negative or stigmatizing reactions are characterized by attributes of blaming or minimizing the abusive experience
- Victims commonly express concern that practitioners will respond with disbelief or judgment for either being in an abusive relationship or failing to protect themselves
- A common negative response is abruptly switching topics or rushing through the conversation

Disclosure – How to Respond

- Disclosure can be life-changing if service providers provide validation, empathy, support, encouragement, and suggestions rather than demands
- Disclosure is often motivated by a desire for someone to listen without being told what actions to take
- Practitioners must be aware of ageist interpersonal tendencies to patronize or paternalize older adults, which may exacerbate the potential to direct action, rather than listen
- Explicit acknowledgement of the disclosure and provision of referrals and follow-up have also been well-received by victims

Help-Seeking Among EA Victims

EA Victim Help-Seeking Prevalence

- Help-seeking from formal support systems (social services, law enforcement, healthcare) occurred among 15.4% of all EA victims
- Help-seeking rates varied according to subtype: emotional abuse (10.7%), physical abuse (24.9%), and sexual abuse (22.6%)

Help-Seeking Among EA Victims

Predictors of EA Victim Help-Seeking

Help-Seeking Significantly Higher In Scenarios Involving:

- Physical abuse
- Poly-victimization
- Perpetrator had history of police involvement (OR=3.01, CI:1.08–8.44)
- An informal “concerned person” supporter in their personal social network

Help-Seeking Significantly Lower In Scenarios Involving:

- Victim dependence on perpetrator for daily activities
- Victims who live with their perpetrator

Takeaways

- Help-seeking is more likely in more severe or egregious forms of EA
- Help-seeking is less likely in scenarios involving dependence (e.g., care needs, living together)

What Facilitates EA Victim Engagement?

Victims of EA Were Asked the Following Question:

What are some specific things that a worker can do to help you feel more comfortable in working with them?

Knowing Someone is There for Me (to Call, to Call Me, to Check on Me)

Well, we can call them anytime we you know need to talk to someone.

She call me sometimes to ask if everything's okay. You know she always keep checking up on me.

To give me a call, to help me if I need the help...And you know, I really feel more secure, now. I do. I feel more secure. I feel like I have somebody, and I'm not alone, we're not alone, you know...Somebody who actually gives a damn.

She also does wellness checks on us...You know she just picks up the phone and calls. She'll sit and listen to you talk for a half hour, and I guess you can probably tell I can talk for a half hour, and she'll sit and listen you know.

When I have a problem, I'm feeling down, I could call her...you know. Whether everything's going okay or not so there's not nothing more they can do. They just being there.

Encouragement and Strengthening

Mr. James, he says (when I am doubting me), he says I am stronger [crying], you get off your back, you are stronger [crying].

Paula, when I break down, she is there to lift me up.

It's kind of hard to say, you know, say your step-child or child is abusing you. You say, is it really true? Have I done enough to you know butter up the situation so it wouldn't be this way? And [worker] let us know, no, no. This is not right. This is abuse. And you can do something about it cause sometimes when you live with it long enough you begin to, I can't say collude, but you begin to think maybe I am doing something. [Worker] let us know that we were okay, this is considered abuse..

Just by talking to me and encouraging me. Because when it first happened, really, I felt bad and at first sorry. But, now I feel more independent and stronger about the situation.

At first I thought I couldn't, I didn't want to do this [eviction] to my daughter. But, now since I started going there, I did it, and now I just feel good about what I have done. They've been very helpful.

Warmth and Genuineness

Well, just caring and compassion

And even if I start to get a little tangential, she listens, you know she's very kind...She's very concerned, very considerate, and genuine. You know it's not phony, like this is my job.

I have been in many support groups...And this is the first time I ever felt like I'm with family. I feel very comfortable, and I feel like they really care.

Other Common Themes

- Connecting with tailored services
- Accompanying to difficult experiences such as court
- Provide information
- Caseworker perceived as making an effort

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Why are your experiences like in trying to engage victims of EA?

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Questions?