

Elder Abuse: The Church Speaks

The following material is from the Presbyterian Church (USA) policy, *Turn Mourning into Dancing! A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence*, approved by the 213th General Assembly (2001)*

Although the tendency may exist to define elder abuse only in terms of physical maltreatment, elder abuse must be conceptualized more broadly. Elder abuse generally is defined as physical, sexual, emotional or psychological and financial abuse. Three types of elder neglect also occur: passive neglect, active neglect and self-neglect.

Physical Abuse:

Physical abuse of the elderly implies hitting, slapping, punching, pushing, shaking, biting, pulling hair, forcefeeding and other willful acts that may result in bruises, lacerations, fractures or any other types of physical injury. Physical abuse in elderly marital partners may be a continuation of abuse that has occurred throughout the marital relationship or more recently occurring because of physical or mental illness.

Mrs. G., age 78 was cared for by her son, a banker who was unmarried and lived with her. In his frustration of dealing with her mental confusion and her failure to take her medications in the proper dosage and at the appropriate time, on occasion he would slap his mother as if he were disciplining a small child. One day a neighbor visiting Mrs. G. noted severe bruises on her arm. When the neighbor learned they had been inflicted by Mrs. G.'s son, the neighbor reported him to Adult Protective Services.

Emotional Abuse:

Emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of elder abuse and includes name-calling, derogatory comments, the use of insults, harassment and threats or speaking to an elderly person in a childish or demeaning manner. Withholding affection, failing to provide a sense of security and the caregiver refusing to allow an elderly person access to family members and friends may also be considered emotional abuse.

Mr. S., a ninety-year-old widower, lived with his son and daughter-in-law following the death of his wife. Mr. S. had difficulty controlling his bladder and frequently would soil his bed sheets or the chair on which he sat. This was upsetting to his daughter-in-law who would resort to name-calling.

Sexual Abuse:

Although sexual abuse is not as prevalent with the elderly as it is with children, it does occur. Sexual abuse of the elderly is defined as engaging in sexual acts with an elderly person by means of force, threat of force or without consent, including forcing an elderly person to perform sexual acts on the perpetrator.

Elder Neglect:

Neglect is also a serious problem for the elderly and may be seen in the following forms: passive neglect, active neglect and self-neglect.

Passive Neglect is defined as the refusal or failure to fulfill a caretaking obligation. Abandoning a person or not providing food or health-related services are examples. Passive neglect generally is not a conscious or intentional act on the part of the caregiver. Rather, it often occurs when a caregiver is not aware of community sources that may aid the elderly person in need or disputes the value of prescribed services.

Active Neglect is the conscious and intentional withholding of care an elderly person needs, such as supplying proper nutrition, the meeting of toileting needs, treatment for physical conditions and the use of restraints.

Mr. H. hired a daytime housekeeper to help Mr. H.'s elderly mother who lived in a neighboring city and was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Mr. H. was not aware of the alcohol problem the housekeeper had when he hired her. Consequently, the housekeeper failed to cook nutritious meals for Mr. H's mother and often would restrain her in a chair for long periods of time.

In **Self Neglect**, there are no caregivers as perpetrators; rather, elderly persons are neglecting themselves. Self-neglect is an unfortunate label for a condition affecting the elderly because it implies willful self-degradation or destruction. Self-neglect, however, is hardly ever willful but, rather the result of elderly persons being unable to care for themselves because of depleted physical or social resources.

Mrs. W. visited her elderly mother who lived over a thousand miles from her. Although she maintained regular telephone contact with her mother, it was not until she visited her personally that she became aware of her mother's deteriorating physical and mental condition and her inability to function independently.

Financial Abuse:

Financial abuse is defined as the misappropriation or stealing of an elderly person's finances or personal possessions. The elderly can be victimized financially by family members, individuals hired as caregivers or by companies taking advantage of a potential elderly customer. This form of abuse can have permanently devastating effects because it impacts on the elderly person's financial status that can subsequently affect the individual's future care. The elderly often are

susceptible to financial abuse from businesses because of impaired cognitive functioning or in the case of elderly widows where their husbands handled the finances and they are unfamiliar with their financial status.

Mrs. Z., age 87, continued to live in her home following the death of her husband. One day a furnace salesman called on her and indicated he would give her furnace a free inspection. After inspecting the furnace, the salesman spoke with alarm to Mrs. Z. about the dangerous condition of the furnace. Since winter was approaching, Mrs. Z. had the salesman replace the furnace. A few weeks later Mrs. Z.'s son visited his mother. When he learned about the new furnace, he recalled it had been replaced two years prior and had been inspected yearly by the company that had installed the furnace. A call to the company that installed the furnace that had been replaced revealed it was in perfect working condition at the time of the last inspection.

*The 2001 policy and its recommendation can be viewed by visiting <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/dancing.pdf> or can be ordered (\$4.00) by calling the Presbyterian Distribution Services at 800-524-2612, or online through the Presbyterian Marketplace, <http://www.pcusa.org/navigation/resources.htm>, Specify PDS order # OGA-01-018.

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