

Suggested Session Plan on Elder Abuse

You are encouraged to read the three chapters by Wijk-Bos, Fortune, and Robb before you lead this process. These articles provide valuable information about and insight into the problem of abuse and mistreatment. Please study the Session Plan in advance and make photocopies of necessary materials as noted.

1. Read aloud the following statement to the group:

“For most older adults, life is immeasurably enhanced by their relationship with family members. At no other time of life, save perhaps for childhood, does the family play such a pivotal role.”¹

Then ask the following:

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
- If you agree, why do you think the family plays such a pivotal role?

List the answers to the last question on newsprint or chalkboard.

2. Read aloud to the group “Some Facts You Should Know about Elder Abuse” on page 83 or consider writing them out in advance on chalkboard or newsprint and posting them on the wall. Ask the group if there were any facts that surprised them or if there are any general comments they would like to make.
3. Read the following statements aloud. Have the group discuss whether the statement is true or false. Then read the comment following the statement to clarify the answer.

The most common form of psychological abuse is rejection or simply ignoring elderly people.

True. This kind of treatment conveys that elderly persons are worthless and useless to others. Elderly persons may subsequently regress and become increasingly dependent on others, who tend to resent the imposition and demands on their time and lifestyles. The pattern becomes cyclical: the more regressed the person becomes, the greater the dependence.²

Individuals with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia have a greater risk for physical abuse than elderly persons with other illnesses.

True. Because these illnesses result in a high burden on the caregiver and subsequent depression of the caregiver, individuals with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia have a greater risk for physical abuse. Living with and providing care to a confused elderly person are difficult, round-the-clock tasks that often exhaust family members. Family stress increases as members must work harder to fulfill their other responsibilities in addition to the needs of the elderly person.³

Statistics show that up to 10 percent of senior citizens suffer from some form of abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

True. Elder abuse ranges from 2 to 10 percent based on survey methods, and samplings. There are no official statistics on elder abuse due to various methods of collecting data.

Five percent of elders are institutionalized; the rest either live alone or with family members.

True. Women, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, or other female relatives represent more than 70 percent of all caregivers. Elderly men are generally cared for by their wives, whereas elderly women rely on their adult children. Family members in general prefer to provide care rather than to institutionalize their relatives.⁴

Abuse of older adults by a family member is a recent phenomenon.

False. There is evidence from antiquity that abuse occurred throughout the ages, including idealized family times in the nineteenth century when, in an agricultural society, three-generation families commonly lived together. Evidence from sermons and court documents supports that often older adults were victimized, usually by family members, and that often the incentive for keeping grandparents in the home was to assure the transfer of property.⁵

Negative behavior patterns observed in some older adults can be attributed to "bereavement overload" that is due to the various losses in their lives.

True. The aging process is characterized by various losses: loss of job, income, friends, or family through death or

moving; declining health; death or disability of their spouse; and losses of roles that accompany other losses. A tie with another person can make the critical difference between satisfaction and unhappiness.⁶

For those persons who still live independently, the average family provides about twenty-five hours a week of special attention.

True. The average family spends about twenty-five hours per week on shopping, laundry or dry cleaning, housecleaning, socializing, and so on.⁷

Parent-caring is becoming a major source of stress in family life.

True. Bernice Neugarten stated in 1980, "Large numbers of families . . . are going too far in caring for older people, stripping themselves of economic, social, and emotional resources to do so. In fact, one recent study showed that parent-caring is becoming a major source of stress in family life. The institutionalization of a family member usually comes only after the family has already done everything possible for them to do."⁸

Many families tend toward the belief that home care is the "best" alternative, and they may offer it in response to a sense of duty or guilt, rather than as a logical choice among potential options.

True. "Family members too frequently fail to understand or investigate [all] the options before they are confronted with a personal crisis and initiate a long period of home care. It is not unusual for adult sons or daughters, age 50 to 70, to accept in-home responsibility for 85- to 90-year-old parents, uncles, aunts, or siblings. In many cases the caregivers are only slightly more able than the dependents."⁹

4. Ask the group members to get into small groups. Provide for each group a copy of "Categories of Mistreatment," page 89, and a case study (case studies are located on pages 91-96). After each group has had time to discuss its case study, gather the groups together, and have a person from each group summarize the case study and the group's discussion.

5. Tell the group that the key to help eliminate the problem of violence and mistreatment of elder persons is prevention. Distribute copies of "Toward Prevention," pages 95-99, to each person. Spend a few moments allowing the group to read through it.

Then ask the participants to get into three groups, each taking one of the three categories: individuals, families, communities. Ask each group to carefully look at the Dos and Don'ts in their assigned category and, based on what is listed there, choose three or four ways the church could be supportive by helping to make the Do or the Don't a reality.

Have the groups share with the total group their suggestions. List these on newsprint or chalkboard.

6. Have the groups choose two or three items from the list and brainstorm to come up with a concrete plan for taking action to educate and help eliminate the mistreatment and abuse of elder persons. Consider sharing these with the church's session for endorsement and implementation.

Notes

1. Joseph J. Gallo, William Reichel, and Lillian M. Andersen, *Handbook of Geriatric Assessment*, second edition (Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, Inc., 1995).
2. Jacquelyn Campbell and Kären Landenburger, "Violence and Human Abuse," in *Community Health Nursing: Promoting Health of Aggregates, Families, and Individuals*, eds. M. K. Stanhope and J. Lancaster (St. Louis: Mosby Year Books, 1996), p. 743.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 744.
4. Patricia C. Birchfield, "Elder Health," in *Community Health Nursing: Promoting Health of Aggregates, Families, and Individuals*, eds. M. K. Stanhope and J. Lancaster (St. Louis: Mosby Year Books, 1996), pp. 591-92.
5. Richard J. Ham and Philip D. Sloan, *Primary Care Geriatrics: A Case-Based Approach*, 2nd edition (St. Louis: Mosby Year Book, 1992), p. 467.
6. Birchheld, p. 592.
7. Richard L. Douglass, *Domestic Mistreatment of the Elderly: Towards Prevention* (Washington D.C.: Criminal Justice Services of AARP, 1992), p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Some Facts You Should Know about Elder Abuse

- Persons over age 85 make up the fastest growing segment of the population of the United States.
- Children who find themselves caring for elderly parents may themselves be elderly.
- One in ten older adults has a child who is at least 65.
- Most often, the caregiver is a woman in her 60s caring for her mother.
- Because more persons are living to advanced age, the average woman can expect to spend more years caring for an elderly parent than her counterpart in 1990.
- The trend toward smaller families (meaning there are fewer adult children to serve as caregivers) further strains the support system of the older person.
- Seventy-two percent of primary caregivers are women. Of these female caregivers, 29 percent are daughters of the older person and 23 percent are wives of the older person.
- All fifty states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands have legislation protecting elderly persons.