

## Elder Abuse and How to Recognize It

When Emotional Abuse takes the form of Emotional Elder Abuse, it has culminated into the worst possible case scenario for the victim, our elder. It is what I call the "Perfect Storm" where the perpetrators have found the ideal situation: the elder lives alone, their family is grown up and live elsewhere and are not paying very close attention. The family doesn't notice when someone starts to move in on the elder and worst, they won't suspect anything, because the perpetrator of EEA will always be a person of 'trust' – either a relative or someone such as a caregiver or social worker or neighbor – who has faked their affections to gain the trust of the elder and those around them. Instead, this person, skilled at blending into the victim's life and not attracting any attention onto themselves, quietly and strategically, moves in and gains control over the elder.

Signs of Emotional Elder Abuse are not 'obvious' but are more about what doesn't feel right. In order to be able to detect signs of Emotional Elder Abuse, one has to understand what happens on both sides of the situation that the perpetrator is responsible for 'creating' or manipulating intentionally:

- a) What is life like if there is elder abuse taking place in the family?
- b) What is the perpetrator doing to the victim in private?

### **What does the family feel or go through?**

First and foremost, for the family, there will be a gradual build-up of confusion, conflict and doubt, where there wasn't any before. No one will know why it's happening, and what to do about it. There will also be a gradual build-up of resentment, bitterness, unhappiness, loneliness, hurt, pain, distrust and anger that has been brewing amongst all the members of the family. Slowly, over time, everyone will find themselves yelling at each other or no one will be talking to each other.

What no one is supposed to notice is, that there is only one person who is responsible for all of this, and only one person has taken the position of 'advisor' or 'councillor' – someone that everyone seems to be going to get some sense of what is going on ...Someone who seems to know what is going on at all times and has all the answers...And that is the perpetrator!

Using a certain strategy and various tactics i.e. lying, gossip, accusations, etc., the perpetrator is creating tension between everyone in order to break everyone up. This causes three things to happen: it isolates the victim from any help from family and friends, it separates family and friends from each other, so they can't figure out what is really going on, and control is being

maintained by the perpetrator by keeping all parties separate and dependent entirely on the perpetrator.

Signs to look for:

- Is someone is trying to draw you into something? If so, don't get personally involved. You're being 'influenced' to become an accomplice by helping the perpetrator victimize the elder.
- Is someone asking you to help fight their battles for them? Ask yourself "*Why can't they handle the situation themselves?*" If you don't have any issues with the targeted person, why would you want to get involved? Then don't.
- Is someone dropping lines like "*She's so controlling*", "*She's always nagging me.*" Question what you hear. If it doesn't ring true, realize that, perhaps, someone is trying to gain your sympathy wrongly by playing the victim and is trying to influence you against someone.
- Is there a lot of family fighting going on? Ask yourself "*Who is the source of all of this conflict?*" If conflict didn't exist before, then someone is creating conflict now for a reason.
- Best sign of all comes, when you get too close to the truth and suspect someone is hurting an elder ...The perpetrator will immediately throw up all sorts of smokescreens to cause so much conflict, confusion and doubt in your mind, and everyone else's, just to throw everyone off. Try not be to be swayed by any of this and stick by your instincts.

### **What is happening to the victim that you don't see?**

Emotional Elder Abuse is where the elder lives in 24/7 terror – it's a pressure cooker for them, because of everything that the perpetrator is doing to them and causing them to feel in order to break them and get them to give over control of them voluntarily, believe it or not.

Emotional Abusers can be very skilled at getting into deeper levels of the elder's psyche that renders them not only emotionally, but physically weak to a point, where they are unable to defend themselves at all.

The strategy they use involves using various tactics such as isolating a victim, publicly humiliating them, repeat behavior, causing a lot of confusion, blaming, yelling, physically attacking them, threatening them, starving them, instilling fear, instilling guilt. This they do, 24/7, in the absence of witnesses.

You may sense that the victim is acting differently – they're 'not themselves'. What you'll see or witness depends on the stage and level of the Emotional Elder Abuse but mostly, you should

notice that the elder doesn't seem to be acting independently and lacks certainty about everything.

Good signs to go by:

- Is the elder acting nervous?
- Do they look like they think someone is watching them?
- Are they deferring to someone too much?
- Are they sitting on their own when the family is all together?
- Is someone hovering over them too much?
- Do they seem sad, depressed?
- Is the elder acting embarrassed or overly defensive if you suggest anything is wrong?
- Do they seem in denial?

### **What Are the Signs of Elder Abuse?**

It cannot be overstressed, that Emotional Elder Abuse doesn't take different forms such as physical, negligence, or financial. Elder Abuse actually begins with Emotional Abuse and culminates into Emotional Elder Abuse. It involves individuals, that pretend to have our elders' best interests at heart, but instead, use this pretense to conceal their real motives: to victimize them without shame, guilt or conscience. They can be either a family member or caregiver who wouldn't be suspected, because of the very nature of their relationship to the elder, or someone new in the elder's life, who works quickly, and guilefully, to move in on the elder with a hidden agenda. And it is because they are perceived to be persons-of-trust to the elder and the family, that their actions and their crimes are ignored. In fact, Emotional Elder Abuse is about a crime committed by a skillful manipulator who has no regard for anyone but themselves, family included.

The perception that these perpetrators all leave is that they are caring, doting and extremely attentive to the elder's every need. Instead, they are very calculating and purposeful in nature and quite detached in their manner with everyone, including the victim. You will never find them, for example, hugging the elder, nor having a conversation with them, but rather hovering around the elder, scolding or reprimanding them for not doing as they are told, while seemingly, doing it out of concern for their well-being. What no one will suspect, but the elder will feel, is a constant pressure to accept, without question or any objection, whatever this person does for them, or wants them to do.

With regards to their strategy, Elder Abuse involves a person manipulating the elder and everyone close or related to them in so many different ways in order to cover up what they are

actually up to. First they work quickly to secure a strong bond of trust with the elder while they go about isolating them from family and friends by breaking up those relationships. Once they've done that, the perpetrators begin to use other methods on the elder to 1) maintain and keep stricter control of the elder and/or 2) to take advantage of them in other ways i.e. sexually or financially. What no one realizes is that the elder is enduring, at pressure cooker intensity, 24/7 assault on all of their senses. They are being physically abused (punched, grabbed, slapped, etc.), their (medical, hygienic, etc.) needs are being purposely neglected and the psychological abuse is an ongoing, unrelenting stream of baseless criticism, accusations and blame. The assault, over time, renders them weak, confused, stressed, and guilt-ridden. If they receive no help, they will perish and their death will be attributed to natural causes. The perpetrator will oftentimes go free.

If we want to stop these offenders, acquiring knowledge and awareness of what Emotional Abuse is and understanding what role it plays in the crime of Elder Abuse is vital. It's all about knowing the difference between a healthy and an abusive relationship in order to be able to spot perpetrators of Elder Abuse. At the moment, Elder Abuse is a widespread illegal activity that is being ignored and it is becoming an epidemic. What happens to an elder is nothing that they should be ashamed of or fear reporting. We, as a community, have to come together to help our elders. We have to show them our support. It means trusting our instincts when we sense that something is not quite as it seems and then following through with very deliberate actions. We can't keep walking away from our elders who are in trouble. They need our help.

### **Early signs (of Emotional Elder Abuse)**

During this stage someone is quietly moving in on the elder, trying to get their trust by faking their affections while simultaneously and discretely manipulating and plotting against the elder: Changes in relationship/social patterns with family, friends, and/or outside activities; signs the elder is becoming distant and withdrawn

- new friend, long-lost distant relative or family relative becoming suddenly too attentive or possessive; a too-good-to-be true relationship developing too quickly
- family members are finding themselves in conflict with one another more frequently meaning someone is slowly undermining trust bonds or relationships that the elder has in order to isolate the elder from them
- someone is always too focused on discrediting a member in the family who is close to the elder every time you speak to them; means they're trying to influence you against that person and get your help in breaking up the relationship that the person has with the elder; it's another way of getting the elder isolated

- hearing the elder speaking ill of someone they once were very close to; means the caregiver may be influencing the elder against someone the caregiver considers too close to the elder; it's another way of isolating the elder without anyone suspecting anything
- signs the elder is becoming very reliant on only the caregiver for their emotional and material needs to the exclusion of all others

### **Later stages of Emotional Elder Abuse**

Watch for more overt signs:

- signs of intimidation, such as yelling, screaming or threats
- signs of verbal abuse, such as ridicule, blaming, accusations, complaining
- signs of being neglected, ignored, or given the "silent treatment"
- frequent arguments or tension between the elder and the caregiver
- changes in personality, mannerisms, behavior characteristics, or speech
- signs of depression, sadness, anxiety, fear, fatigue, guilt, shame
- the elder acts like they are being watched; they are very guarded in their actions
- signs of the elder being embarrassed about, overly defensive of or constantly excusing someone's behavior if someone suggests anything is wrong

### **What to do if you or a Loved One is being abused?**

Trust your instincts. If you sense that the elder may be in trouble, please call and report your suspicions and insist that a proper investigation takes place. At the very least, try to ensure that the elder's family, friends and neighbours are aware of your suspicions so they too can keep an eye on the elder. The more aware everyone is of the situation, the more likely a crime can be prevented as perpetrators of this crime fear being exposed. It puts them out of business, if they know they're being watched. If and when that happens, they either go into hiding, or move on quickly to avoid being caught. Either way, the elder is safer than they would be if no action were taken.

Also, if anyone does suspect an elder is in trouble, there are a few things that should be noted.

If a perpetrator's attempts to move in on an elder aren't sabotaged very early on, then, because of the way the elder has been manipulated, anyone trying to help the elder later will

have to deal with a bond between the elder and the abuser that is very deep and not easily broken. Nothing that is said to the elder will convince them, that their abuser is out to hurt them. The intervener will then have to take charge despite any objections by the elder. They will have no other choice. And refusal of help should not be mistaken for denial. More than likely, the elder is not yet aware that they are in trouble.

In later stages of elder abuse, when other methods or control tactics are used on the elder, the elder will go through more complicated feelings that won't help them. For example, when they eventually realize that they have been betrayed by a loved one, they'll be deeply hurt, troubled and searching for answers to how it happened to them. As a result, they will be greatly confused and afraid to trust another. When this happens, most victims are unable to ask for help. Rather than face the shame and embarrassment of confessing to a stranger how, for example, their son stole their home and savings from them and they don't even know how it happened, they learn to endure life with their abuser if they have to and remain quiet.

Kindness and patience is the key to helping an abused elder. For one thing, chances are they haven't felt loved or cared for in a while and feel beaten up emotionally. They've lost their sense of self and feel incredibly alone and helpless. This will have left them feeling very brittle, regardless of their stamina. When trying to help them, applying as little pressure as possible is of the essence. What needs to be shown to them is the opposite of what they have been experiencing with their abuser. Also, they may not be ready to talk about their perpetrator who may just happen to be their adult child as it may be too embarrassing for them. Take it all very slowly.

All in all, the elder is dealing with a myriad of known and unknown feelings, thoughts, emotions and open wounds. Because of so many unknown factors, it is then very important to tread lightly in trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together that represent their life as it is at the moment of intervention before one can help determine where to begin to help not only them, but perhaps their family as well, if they still exist. If they did have a support system before, maybe it can be rebuilt again, if it's not too late.

### **Issues That Must Be Treated As Priority**

#### **❖ Reduce the stress in the elder's life**

- The elder will be very thankful for help of any kind. They're tired.
- The elder must not be removed from the home, if at all possible. Elders can't handle change and intervention all at once.

- Not knowing what they've been through, do not insult, arrest, or judge their abuser in front of them.
  
- ❖ **Work on the elder's self esteem**
  - They are likely heart-broken, distraught, filled with guilt, absolutely confused and experiencing many anxieties about themselves.
  
- ❖ **Allow the elder to make decisions for themselves. Start empowering them!**
  - They won't be used to this at all and they may be surprised when you start asking them for their permission, for their opinion and for their decision;
  - Talk things through with them slowly. Don't rush them.
  - Provide them with information. They are probably totally unaware of their circumstances.
  - Give them information about their family and what you suspect they don't know that will help them understand their circumstances.
  - Ask them how they feel about things.
  
- ❖ **Never argue with the elder**
  - Not knowing what they've been through, this will only make them feel that they are dealing with someone no different from their abuser.
  - Depending on their awareness, the elder may consider this an insult to them if you question their judgement of their abuser. They may not realize that their judgement is skewed and based on what their abuser has led them to believe.
  
- ❖ **Preserve the elder's dignity**
  - The elder will appreciate someone else "laying down the law" to the abuser, if for example, it is an adult child. They may not be able to do it themselves.
  - The elder will appreciate someone bringing order to the situation.

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