

Barriers to Reporting and Starting the Conversation

There are many reasons why a person experiencing elder abuse may not report. One British Columbia-based survey of older adults, for example, found that 41% of respondents had experienced at least one situation that could be classified as financial abuse, but that only 6.4% of respondents had self-reported as being victimized by financial abuse (Vancity 2017, p. 2). In addition to shame and embarrassment and fear of retaliation, other barriers to reporting abuse include isolation from outside resources/support, fear of not being believed, financial or physical dependency on the abuser (e.g., in a caregiving situation), and fear that information that a victim of elder abuse reports will be used against them to hurt their reputation, relationships, or livelihoods (Sound Generations, 2020; Westwood, 2019).

2SLGBTQI older adults who are experiencing elder abuse or who suspect they may be experiencing financial elder abuse may turn to friends, family, and community for support. Friends, family, and community members may also notice abuse happening and want to help. Below are some tips and “conversation starters” and key questions that can be used to support.¹

Abuse is a difficult and emotional topic to approach.

Make sure that older adults know they are not at fault and that they are not alone. Listen carefully to what they say and let them know you are there to support them and to help. Reassure them that you will respect their confidentiality and ask them what they would like to do about the abuse.

Keep an open mind and do not be judgmental.

Typically, an older adult has a relationship with the abuser and does not want anything bad to happen to that person. The older adult may be fearful of making things worse and may be feeling vulnerable and afraid.

¹ This “Starting the Conversation” content has been reproduced with slight modifications from Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario’s “Starting the Conversation” resource, with permission. See the original resource at: https://eapon.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EAPO_StC-How-to-Ask-about-Abuse-and-What-you-Need-to-Know_2021.pdf

Sample Conversation:

Mary: Sam, I am very concerned about what I have been witnessing.
(Describe what you have been seeing, hearing, noticing).

Mary: This bothers me because it is wrong and you do not deserve to be treated this way. It worries me to see you feeling *(describe)* and I am worried that *(describe specific concern)*.

Mary: You are not to blame for the problem and I want to help, but first, tell me what you would like to do? I will respect your wishes. *(Listen to what the older adult has to say and encourage them to tell you what they want to do).*

Mary: I realize how difficult that was for you to share with me. I will not share this with anyone or do anything without your permission. Let's look at some of the options and see what you think about them. *(Share some of the resources that you have found. Most importantly follow through and continue to support the person).*

What if the older adult refuses your help?

Do not feel badly if your first offer of help is rejected. This can be a common initial reaction. People often need time to think.

Try this as a response:

Mary: Okay. I will respect your wishes. I just want you to know that you can reach out to me anytime. Is it okay if I ask you about this next time we see each other?