

TYPES OF ABUSE AND POSSIBLE INDICATORS OF ABUSE

What Constitutes Abuse?

'Abuse is a violation of an individual's human and civil rights by any other person or persons' [No secrets DH 2000]

Abuse may consist of a single act or repeated acts. It may be physical, verbal or psychological, it may be an act of neglect or an omission to act, or it may happen when a vulnerable person is persuaded to enter into a financial or sexual transaction to which he or she has not consented, or cannot consent.

Abuse can happen in any relationship and may result in **significant harm** to, or exploitation of, the person subjected to it. For information about assessing significant harm, [see section 1.3 \(definitions of abuse\), page 10](#)

***An accepted definition of significant harm is:**
"...ill-treatment (including sexual abuse and forms of ill treatment that are not physical); the impairment of, or an avoidable deterioration in, physical or mental health; and the impairment of physical, emotional, social or behavioural development".
[Law Commission 1995]*

Signs and Indicators of abuse

Please note that these indicators are a guide only. All situations must be discussed with the appropriate line manager. A full investigation and assessment is required to establish the existence of abuse leading to the significant harm of a vulnerable adult. Typically an abusive situation will involve indicators from a number of groups in combination.

Physical Abuse

Physical injuries which have no satisfactory explanation or where there is a definite knowledge, or a reasonable suspicion that the injury was inflicted with intent, or through lack of care, by the person having custody, charge or care of that person, including hitting, slapping, pushing, misuse of or lack of medication, restraint, or inappropriate sanctions.

Possible indicators of physical abuse

- History of unexplained falls or minor injuries.
- Unexplained bruising – in well protected areas, on the soft parts of the body or clustered as from repeated striking.
- Unexplained burns in unusual location or of an unusual type.
- Unexplained fractures to any part of the body that may be at various stages in the healing process.
- Unexplained lacerations or abrasions.
- Slap, kick, pinch or finger marks.
- Injuries/bruises found at different stages of healing or such that it is difficult to suggest an accidental cause.
- Injury shape similar to an object.
- Untreated medical problems.
- Weight loss – due to malnutrition or dehydration; complaints of hunger.
- Appearing to be over medicated.

Psychological Abuse

Psychological, or emotional abuse, includes the use of threats, fears or bribes to negate a vulnerable adult's choices, independent wishes and self esteem; Cause isolation or over-dependence (as might be signalled by impairment of development or performance) or prevent a vulnerable adult from using services, which would provide help

Possible indicators of psychological abuse

- Ambivalence about carer.
- Fearfulness expressed in the eyes; avoids looking at the carer, flinching on approach.
- Deference.
- Overtly affectionate behaviour to alleged perpetrator.
- Insomnia/sleep deprivation or need for excessive sleep.
- Change in appetite.
- Unusual weight gain/loss.
- Tearfulness.
- Unexplained paranoia.
- Low self-esteem.
- Excessive fears.
- Confusion.
- Agitation.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual acts which might be abusive include non-contact abuse such as looking, pornographic photography, indecent exposure, harassment, unwanted teasing or innuendo, or contact such as touching breasts, genitals, or anus, masturbation, penetration or attempted penetration of vagina, anus, mouth with or by penis, fingers or other objects.

Possible indicators of sexual abuse

- A change in usual behaviour for no apparent or obvious reason.
- Sudden onset of confusion, wetting or soiling.
- Withdrawal, choosing to spend the majority of time alone.
- Overt sexual behaviour/language by the vulnerable person.
- Self-inflicted injury.
- Disturbed sleep pattern and poor concentration.
- Difficulty in walking or sitting.
- Torn, stained, bloody underclothes.
- Love bites.
- Pain or itching, bruising or bleeding in the genital area.
- Sexually transmitted urinary tract/vaginal infections.
- Bruising to the thighs and upper arms.
- Frequent infections.
- Severe upset or agitation when being bathed/dressed/undressed/medically examined.
- Pregnancy in a person not able to consent.

Financial Abuse

Usually involves an individual's funds or resources being inappropriately used by a third person. It includes the withholding of money or the inappropriate or unsanctioned use of a person's money or property or the entry of the vulnerable adult into financial contracts or transactions that they do not understand, to their disadvantage.

Possible indicators of financial abuse

- Unexplained or sudden inability to pay bills.
- Unexplained or sudden withdrawal of money from accounts.
- Person lacks belongings or services, which they can clearly afford.
- Lack of receptiveness to any necessary assistance requiring expenditure, when finances are not a problem – although the natural thriftiness of some people should be borne in mind.
- Extraordinary interest by family members and other people in the vulnerable person's assets.
- Power of Attorney obtained when the vulnerable adults is not able to understand the purpose of the document they are signing.
- Recent change of deeds or title of property.
- Carer only asks questions of the worker about the user's financial affairs and does not appear to be concerned about the physical or emotional care of the person.
- The person who manages the financial affairs is evasive or uncooperative.
- A reluctance or refusal to take up care assessed as being needed.
- A high level of expenditure without evidence of the person benefiting.
- The purchase of items which the person does not require or use.
- Personal items going missing from the home.
- Unreasonable and/or inappropriate gifts.

Neglect / Acts of Omission

Neglect can be both physical and emotional it is about the failure to keep a vulnerable adult clean, warm and promote optimum health, or to provide adequate nutrition, medication, being prevented from making choices

Neglect of a duty of care or the breakdown of a care package may also give rise to safeguarding issues i.e. where a carer refuses access or if a care provider is unable, unwilling or neglects to meet assessed needs. If the circumstances mean that the vulnerable adult is at risk of significant harm then Safeguarding Adults procedures should be invoked.

Possible indicators of neglect

- Poor condition of accommodation.
- Inadequate heating and/or lighting.
- Physical condition of person poor, e.g. ulcers, pressure sores etc.
- Person's clothing in poor condition, e.g. unclean, wet, etc.
- Malnutrition.
- Failure to give prescribed medication or appropriate medical care.
- Failure to ensure appropriate privacy and dignity.
- Inconsistent or reluctant contact with health and social agencies.
- Refusal of access to callers/visitors.

A person with capacity may choose to self-neglect, and whilst it may be a symptom of a form of abuse it is not abuse in itself within the definition of these procedures.

Discriminatory Abuse

Is abuse targeted at a perceived vulnerability or on the basis of prejudice including racism or sexism, or based on a person's disability. It can take any of the other forms of abuse, harassment, slurs or similar treatment.

Discriminatory abuse may be used to describe serious, repeated or pervasive discrimination, which leads to significant harm or exclusion from mainstream opportunities, provision of poor standards of health care, and/or which represents a failure to protect or provide redress through the criminal or civil justice system

Possible indicators of discriminatory abuse

- Hate mail.
- Verbal or physical abuse in public places or residential settings.
- Criminal damage to property.
- Target of distraction burglary, bogus officials or unrequested building/household services.

Institutional Abuse

Institutional abuse happens when the rituals and routines in use, force residents or service users to sacrifice their own needs, wishes or preferred lifestyle to the needs of the institution or service provider. Abuse may be perpetrated by an individual or by a group of staff embroiled in the accepted custom, subculture and practice of the institution or service.

Possible indicators of institutional abuse

- May be reflected in an enforced schedule of activities, the limiting of personal freedom, the control of personal finances, a lack of adequate clothing, poor personal hygiene, a lack of stimulating activities or a low quality diet – in fact, anything which treats service users as not being entitled to a **'NORMAL'** life.
- Institutions may include residential and nursing homes, hospitals, day centres.
- Sheltered housing schemes, group or supported housing projects. It should be noted that all organisations and services, whatever their setting, can have institutional practices which can cause harm to vulnerable adults.

The distinction between abuse in institutions and poor care standards is not easily made and judgements about whether an event or situation is abusive should be made with advice from appropriate professionals and regulatory bodies.

Predisposing Factors

Abuse can happen in a range of settings, in a variety of relationships and can take a number of forms. There are a number of indicators, which could, in some circumstances, in combination with other possibly unknown factors suggest the possibility of abuse. Abuse may be more likely to happen in the following situations:

Environmental Problems – overcrowding/poor housing conditions/lack of facilities.

Financial Problems – low income, a dependent vulnerable adult may add to financial difficulties, unable to work due to caring role, debt arrears, full benefits not claimed.

Psychological and Emotional Problems – family relationships over the years have been poor and there is a history of abuse in the family or where family violence is the norm.

Communication Problems – the vulnerable person or their carer has difficulty communicating due to sensory impairments, loss or difficulty with speech and understanding, poor memory or other conditions resulting in diminished mental capacity; this also includes people for whom English is a second language.

Dependency Problems – increased dependency of the person, major changes in personality and behaviour, carers are not receiving practical and/or emotional support.

Organisational Culture – services which are inward looking, where there is little staff training/knowledge of best practice and where contact with external professionals is resisted increase the vulnerability of service users. High staff turnover or shortages may also increase the risk of abuse.

Patterns of abuse

Patterns of abuse and abusing vary and reflect very different dynamics. These include:

Serial abuse in which the perpetrator seeks out and ‘grooms’ vulnerable adults. Sexual abuse may fall into this pattern, as do some forms of financial abuse.

Long term abuse in the context of an ongoing family relationship such as domestic violence between spouses or generations.

Opportunist abuse such as theft happening because money has been left around.

Situational abuse which arises because pressures have built up and/or because of difficult or challenging behaviour.

Neglect of a person’s needs because those around him or her are not able to be responsible for their care, for example if the carer has difficulties attributable to such issues as debt, alcohol or mental health problems.

Stranger Abuse. Vulnerable adults can be targeted by strangers; this may be an individual, a gang, or people offering services (e.g. the conman who tells the older person he will repair their roof, taking a large amount of money but actually doing nothing). Different forms of abuse can be inflicted in these situations e.g. financial, physical, emotional. No Secrets states that:

“Stranger abuse will warrant a different kind of response from that appropriate to abuse in an ongoing relationship or in a care location. Nevertheless, in some instances it may be appropriate to use the locally agreed inter-agency adult protection procedures to ensure that the vulnerable person receives the services and support that they need. Such procedures may also be used when there is the potential for harm to other vulnerable people.”