



World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

ACTION GUIDE



About Elder Abuse

While there is no singular definition for elder abuse – some are based on age, vulnerability, or determined by state statutes or tribal codes – The Elder Justice Roadmap offers one definition, created by the field for the field. It states that elder abuse is “abuse, neglect, abandonment, or financial exploitation of an older individual by another person or entity who has a trust-based relationship with the older adult or any harm that occurs because an older person is targeted by a stranger based on their age or disability.”¹

Each year, an estimated 5 million older adults experience abuse, neglect, or exploitation.² Older Americans lose an estimated **\$2.6 billion** to **\$36.5 billion** annually due to elder financial abuse and exploitation, funds that could be used to pay for basic needs such as housing, food, and medical care. Unfortunately, abuse occurs in every demographic and can happen to anyone – a family member, a neighbor, even you. While cases of elder abuse appear to have been on the rise during the pandemic³, it is commonly understood that many cases never come to light. One study has estimated that only one in 24 cases of abuse are reported.⁴



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1 The Elder Justice Roadmap, A Stakeholder Initiative to Respond to an Emerging Health, Justice, Financial and Social Crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/file/852856/download>.

2 Ibid.

3 Han, S. D., & Mosqueda, L. (2020). Elder abuse in the COVID-19 era. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. Retrieved from <https://agsjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jgs.16496>.

4 Lachs, M., & Berman, J. (2011). Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, Self-reported Relevance and Documented Case Surveys. Retrieved from <https://ocfs.ny.gov/reports/aps/Under-the-Radar-2011May12.pdf>.

About World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD), launched on June 15, 2006, by the [International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) at the United Nations (UN), aims to create an opportunity for communities around the world to promote a better understanding of the abuse and neglect of older persons by raising awareness of the cultural, social, economic, and demographic circumstances affecting elder abuse and neglect.

In addition, WEAAD is held in support of the [UN International Plan of Action on Ageing](#) acknowledging the significance of elder abuse as a public health and human rights issue. This observance is a call-to-action for individuals, organizations, and communities to lift up our voices – and those of older survivors – and raise awareness about elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

The UN recently set forth the [UN Decade of Healthy Ageing \(2021-2030\)](#), an initiative that brings together governments, civil society, international agencies, professionals, academia, the media, and the private sector to improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live. The UN Decade of Healthy Ageing aims to address four areas of action: age-friendly environments, combatting ageism, integrated care, and long-term care.



Ageism and Elder Abuse⁵

Turn on the TV, scroll through Instagram, or flip through a magazine and you're likely to see that the narrative about the physical and mental decline associated with aging is deeply embedded in American culture. How we feel about getting older shapes our views on an individual's relevance, standards of ability, beauty, and health, and concepts of self-worth.

Every day, in subtle and obvious ways, older adults are marginalized and even dismissed in our society. We see it in statements like "over the hill" or "I'm having a senior moment." It's in our actions, when we automatically talk louder or in simplistic terms to an older person or talk about that person in front of them instead of addressing them directly. And it's in our attitudes when we view older people as diminished or incompetent or that aging is something to fear and resist.

Ageism refers to how we think, feel, and act towards ourselves or others based on age. Ageist ideas are often ingrained and systemic, inhibiting people's objectivity and influencing decisions at the micro (individual/family), meso (organization/community), and macro (government/ societal) levels of human interaction.⁶

Like other -isms, ageism segregates and reinforces inequalities between groups. In contrast to other -isms, ageism affects everyone at different stages in their lives. "Ageism is associated with a shorter lifespan, poorer physical and mental health, slower recovery from disability and cognitive decline. Ageism reduces older people's quality of life, increases their social isolation and loneliness (both of which are associated with serious health problems), restricts their ability to express their sexuality and may increase the risk of violence and abuse against older people. Ageism can also reduce younger people's commitment to the organization they work for. For individuals, ageism contributes to poverty and financial insecurity in older age, and one recent estimate shows that ageism costs society billions of dollars."⁷

5 Excerpted from Ageism: Across the Lifespan and Everywhere and Combating Ageism is Combating Abuse written by the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life.

6 Law Commission of Ontario. (2012). Framework for the Law as it Affects Older Adults. Retrieved from <https://www.lco-cdo.org/en/older-adults-final-report>.

7 World Health Organization. (2021). Global report on ageism: executive summary. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/03/9789240020504-eng.pdf>.

We invite you to check out the NCEA's [research brief](#) for a deeper dive into the scholarship and research exploring the concept of ageism, its multifaceted forms, impacts, and redresses.

The Consequences of Ageism

Age-prejudice is associated with consequential and compounding harms for older adults. Among other impacts, ageism is correlated with:



Poorer medical and mental health outcomes



Employment discrimination



Significant monetary losses



Increased social isolation and loneliness



Environmental stressors



Elder abuse

Ageism blinds us to the benefits and strengths of aging and increases our fears of growing older. Worse yet, ageism also creates a culture that ignores and tolerates elder abuse and allows the abuse of older adults to continue unabated. "The adoption, endorsement, and activation of ageist stereotypes can lead to discriminatory behaviors, including neglect, abandonment, and emotional, financial, and physical harms."⁸

Individuals who commit abuse often rely on ageist assumptions and beliefs to justify their behavior. They rationalize abusing, neglecting, or exploiting an older adult because "they're going to die soon anyway." They assume older adults have dementia and don't understand – or can't report – what is happening to them. They may view older adults as less worthy of respect or dignity if they have physical limitations or rely on others for care. Instead of seeing older adults as fully human, they are viewed as disposable, inconvenient, and irrelevant.

Ageism also impacts society's ability to detect and respond appropriately to abuse. Age-based ideals regarding how an abuse victim should look and behave can shape the response to a victim disclosing abuse. Too often older adults are not believed when they report abuse because of ageist assumptions about dementia, and/or misconceptions about the dynamics of interpersonal violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

8 Shepherd, B. F., & Brochu, P. M. (2021). How do stereotypes harm older adults? A theoretical explanation for the perpetration of elder abuse and its rise. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 57*, 101435. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178920301397>.

Steps for Addressing Ageism in the Context of Elder Abuse

1. Confront your own attitudes about aging.

We can't challenge bias until we can identify it. Be mindful of the language you use when you talk about older adults and be willing to confront others who perpetuate ageist tropes or make ageist assumptions.

2. Believe older survivors and trust their decisions.

A commitment to anti-ageism requires us to understand the complexity involved with elder abuse and support a survivor's right to make decisions about their relationship based on what they think is best for their life.

Leaving a relationship that is many decades old may have ripple effects that impact every facet of one's life, including loss of a home, caregiver, access to other family members, and a lifetime of personal effects. Some older survivors have cultural, generational, or spiritual beliefs that are incompatible with ending a marriage. When someone is being abused by a child or grandchild, there can be shame or embarrassment associated with bringing attention to their behavior.

3. Stop the erasure of older adults.

When describing services and supports for survivors, it's essential to include images of older adults and ensure that the images and messages portray older adults in a way that respects their diversity, resilience, and life experience. A couple of age-positive collections to check out include AARP x Getty Images' [The Disrupt Aging® Collection](#) and a [free image library](#) curated by Centre for Ageing Better.

It is also important to center the voices of older survivors and amplify their perspectives and experiences. Some older survivors may want to share their stories publicly to help others and prevent the pain they experienced from happening again. If you invite an older survivor to speak, be prepared to provide emotional support before, during, and after they speak.

Important Considerations in Engaging Survivor Voices



- Not all older survivors should share their story publicly.
 - Always consider safety and confidentiality concerns first.
 - How is the survivor doing emotionally?
 - How comfortable is the survivor with public speaking?
- Consider helping the survivor write/update their emotional and physical safety plan before sharing their story.
- Ask the survivor about transportation needs and help make arrangements if needed.
- Consider these strategies to prepare the survivor on what to expect at the event.
 - Ask the survivor what they need to be comfortable at the event.
 - Discuss how long the event will be and take into consideration the timing of mealtimes and medications.
 - Discuss seating options, length of time standing, and the set-up of the room.
- Be explicit with the survivor about the audience they will be sharing their story with.
- Arrange for an advocate to accompany the survivor at the event, to serve as their support person from start to finish.

An excellent resource that provides guidance on this subject is [From the Front of the Room: A Survivor's Guide to Public Speaking](#) created by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV).



- Engage the voices of older survivors when working on legislation to enhance protections for victims of elder abuse, stalking, sexual assault, and domestic violence.
- Invite older survivors to join vigils and memorial events for victims.
- Create opportunities for older survivors to speak at support groups.
- Include older survivors in your local Coordinated Community Response team.
- Invite older survivors to join your board of directors.
- Incorporate feedback from older survivors on your agency's resources, programs, and policies.
- The NCEA offers many ways for people to [connect with us](#) and stay abreast of the latest resources and activities in the elder justice field.
- Join the national community of advocates and others committed to promoting respect and dignity across the lifespan by joining [NCALL's advocates' listserv](#) or subscribing to [NCALL's e-newsletter](#).

More Information

NCEA

National Center on Elder Abuse

National Center on Elder Abuse

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TOGETHER, WE CAN PREVENT AND ADDRESS ELDER ABUSE.