

Awareness day highlights the need to protect older West Australians

It's estimated that almost one in six - or 16 per cent - of people aged 60 or over, have been the victim of elder abuse in the past year. World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, which takes place on June 15, aims to raise awareness of elder abuse as a global issue.

As a provider of support services to Australian families, Relationships Australia WA (RAWA) is encouraging people to understand elder abuse and help to protect the rights of older Australians in the community.

"World Elder Abuse Awareness Day presents an important opportunity for everyone within our community to have a frank discussion about what elder abuse is and how important it is to maintain healthy relationships with our friends, families and others in our community," RAWA Executive Director Kylie Dunjey said.

"Elder abuse is a subject that is rarely discussed, but is something that sadly affects a lot of older Australians.

"The more we talk about it, the more we can help reduce the instances of elder abuse in our communities and prevent future harm to our most vulnerable.

"We provide a range of support across WA to help families and older people – whether that be assisting with difficult conversations or helping people plan for a happy and healthy future."

There is often a misunderstanding of what constitutes elder abuse, many people do not know how to identify elder abuse or know what to do if they believe or suspect it is happening.

Q: What is elder abuse?

A: Elder abuse can take many different forms, but generally happens at the hands of a trusted person. It can include:

- Physical – this includes all forms of physical assault, along with the use of restraint by physical or chemical methods.
- Psychological/emotional - involves any action or threat that causes fear of violence, isolation, deprivation, humiliation or powerlessness.
- Social - forced isolation that prevents or restricts the older person's contact with friends, family or the community.
- Financial - this is the illegal, mismanagement or improper use of the older person's finances.
- Sexual - any sexual contact, language or display of pornography without the older person's consent, or through coercion.
- Neglect - involves the failure of a carer to provide basic necessities such as food, shelter, or medical care, or preventing someone else from providing them.

Elder abuse is not a crime committed by a stranger, age discrimination or an estranged relationship.

Q: When is elder abuse likely to occur?

A: The risk of elder abuse increases when the carer or older person is experiencing high levels of stress, addiction or is dependent on another for support. Elder abuse can occur when the older person is unable to

stop or report abuse due to cognitive impairment or physical limitations or if there is isolation as a result of location, cultural or language barriers, or health complications.

Q: What do I do if I suspect elder abuse?

A: Elder abuse is distressing and it is important to find someone who understands the sensitive and confidential nature of the issue to help you decide what to do. If someone is in immediate danger, call 000. Ask about the person's well-being – be quick to listen and don't judge. Take note of signs and symptoms that may help those who investigate. Reassure the older person that there is help available and provide them the contact details of a relevant support organisation.

Q: What should I do if I'm being exploited or mistreated?

A: The first priority is your safety. If you feel threatened or unsafe, call 000. The police can assist you in removing an abusive person from your home, or help you to find safe accommodation. Find someone to talk to and share your concerns. It is important to remember that you have a right to feel comfortable and safe, and that people, including adult children, can get help for their problems.

Q: How can I prevent elder abuse?

A: RAWA offers a Senior Relationship Service aimed to support older people and their families to develop and maintain strong, healthy relationships that are promoted and valued. Specialised counselling assists older people and their families with ageing-related issues including support for the following issues: reconciliation, conflict prevention and resolution, difficult conversations, planning for the future and the rights and safety of the older person. Advocare also provide free support to older people at risk of or experiencing elder abuse - they manage the Elder Abuse Hotline in WA and can provide over the phone support for anyone experiencing elder abuse. Advocare also work with older people, and with consent, a family member, or another representative, to resolve situations. The WA Elder Abuse Hotline can be contacted on 1300 724 679.

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Relationships Australia provides professional relationship support services throughout Australia. We are a not-for-profit, non-aligned, community-based organisation with partial funding from the Federal, State and Local Governments. Relationships Australia operates Australia-wide.