

Elder Abuse

Spot the signs

General Background

1 July 2023 - 30 June 2024

In 2006, the United Nations General Assembly, designated June 15 as World Elder Abuse Awareness Day as a day when the whole world expresses opposition to the abuse and suffering inflicted to some of our older generation. The public discussion created since then, has led to the United Nations recognising that elder abuse is a public health and a human rights issue.

Yet it usually occurs behind closed doors and is seldom noticed in public, so raising community awareness is crucial.

Each year, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day campaigns in many countries put the spotlight on the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older people. Global events help to challenge the ageist views common in many societies, that devalue older people.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Office for Seniors and many agencies raise awareness of elder abuse and neglect.

One of Age Concern New Zealand's priorities is the prevention of elder abuse and neglect, and local Age Concerns around Aotearoa New Zealand run events and activities during the week of 15-22 June. Read more on page 4.



Talk to us

Contact details for Age Concerns services in each region are available at www.ageconcern.org.nz
0800 65 2 105

What is Elder Abuse and Neglect?



Elder Abuse and Neglect is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person [1].

This internationally agreed definition is used in New Zealand too. It recognises that elder abuse is a violation of Human Rights.

What are the effects of elder abuse?

Elder abuse and neglect can be a significant cause of injury, illness, lost productivity, isolation, and despair. Abuse can reduce a person's independence by undermining their self-esteem and confidence.

Elder abuse damages family and whānau relationships, financial security, mental and physical health, as well as increasing dependency on health and support agencies which may result in the need for residential care.

Elder abuse and neglect have a negative impact^[3] on the wellbeing and quality of life of older people. But it also damages our reputation of living in a welcoming and inclusive society.

[1] Definition adopted from WHO Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse, 2002
https://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/

[2] Ministry of Health & Age Concern New Zealand, Family Violence Intervention Guidelines: Elder Abuse and Neglect, 2007, p 14.
<https://www.tewhaturora.govt.nz/assets/Our-health-system/Preventative-Health/Family-Violence/family-violence-guidelines-elder-abuse-neglect-1.pdf>

[3] Ayalon, L., Lev, S., Green, O., & Nevo, U. A systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions designed to prevent or stop elder maltreatment Age and Ageing. 2016. 45(2) 216-227
<https://academic.oup.com/ageing/article/45/2/216/2195310?login=true>

How prevalent is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is a global issue. It can happen to people of any gender, culture, faith, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socio-economic group. As much goes unreported it is difficult to know exactly how common elder abuse is. There are different rates between self-reported anonymous questions about elder abuse and the number of cases reported to agencies in the same year. Several American and Irish prevalence studies showed estimates that only 1 in 14, 24, or 45, of all abuse incidents come to the attention of an agency that can intervene to help stop the abuse.^{[1][2][3]} Other surveys across several countries suggest that between 2% - 14% of older people report experiences of abuse or neglect each year.^[4]

An analysis from the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing concluded that up to 10% of the population aged over 65 years who are living in the community may experience abuse.^[5]

Increases in the numbers of cases that elder abuse agencies deal with, does not prove that the rate of elder abuse is increasing, but it shows that it is being reported more often. This reinforces why Age Concern keeps raising awareness about elder abuse and neglect. Anyone in any community can contact Age Concern, to talk through signs that question older people/kaumātua's safety.

What does elder abuse look like?

It is common for several types of abuse to occur together. These types are:



PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Actions and words that cause misery, anxiety, or fear. For example:

- Ridicule, humiliation, threats, coercion, and bullying.
- Control, social isolation, and prevention of choice.
- Demeaning personal, cultural, gender, or sexual identity choices.



FINANCIAL ABUSE

Illegal or improper use of money, property, or other assets. For example:

- Unauthorised taking of money, possessions or failure to repay loans
- Misuse of power of attorney or bank cards
- Use of home and assets without contributing to costs.
- Scams that establish relationship with the older person for exploitation e.g. romance scams



PHYSICAL ABUSE

Infliction of pain, injury, or use of force. For example:

- Hitting, pushing, rough handling
- Over-medication or under-medication
- Inappropriate use of restraints or confinement.



NEGLECT AND SELF-NEGLECT

Not providing for physical, emotional, or social needs. For example:

- Inadequate food, clothing, shelter
- Lack of social contact, support
- Health needs not attended to.



INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE

A policy or accepted practice within an organisation that does not respect a person's rights or causes them harm or distress. For example:

- Rigid routines that disregard a person's culture or customs.
- Rationing of continence products or other personal or care needs



SEXUAL ABUSE

Non-consensual sexual acts or exploitive behaviours. For example:

- Inappropriate touching
- Sexual acts which are not wanted
- Dismissing older people choices about sex.

[1] National Research Council, Elder mistreatment: Abuse, neglect and exploitation in an aging America. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2003. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22812026/>

[2] Lifespan of New Greater Rochester Under the Radar: New York Elder Abuse Prevalence Study. Self-reported prevalence and documented case surveys. Final report. 2011.

<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/reports/Under%20the%20Radar%2005%2012%2011%20final%20report.pdf>

[3] Naughton, C. et.al. Elder abuse and neglect in Ireland: results from national prevalence survey Age and Ageing 2012. 41(1) 98-103 <https://academic.oup.com/ageing/article/41/1/98/46750?searchresult=1>

[4] Pillemer, K., Burnes, D., Riffin, C., & Lachs, M., Elder Abuse: Global Situation, Risk Factors, and Prevention Strategies. 2016. The Gerontologist 56 (Suppl 2) April 16. S194-205 https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/56/Suppl_2/S194/2605277

[5] Waldegrave, C. Measuring Elder Abuse in New Zealand: Findings from the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing (NZLSA) <https://www.officeforseniors.govt.nz/assets/documents/our-work/elder-abuse/Elder-abuse-technical-report.pdf>

Why don't older people seek help when they are abused?

It is not easy to tell someone about the elder abuse that I may be experiencing, because I:

- depend on the abuser for support.
- have low self-confidence and self-esteem.
- am afraid that if I complain the abuse will get worse.
- am ashamed that my family or whānau is abusing me.
- am told it is my fault for not giving them what they want.
- don't want to make a fuss or get my loved ones into trouble.
- can't fathom that someone I love and trust, would do this to me.
- have dementia or an illness that prevents me from telling anyone.
- am isolated, so it is difficult to find someone I trust to tell or ask for help.

How can I tell if someone is being abused or neglected?

Any of the following signs may indicate an older person/kaumātua is being abused:

- Unexplained transactions or loss of money
- Withdrawal from family members or friends
- Fear of a particular person or being touched
- Injuries such as bruises, cuts, or broken bones
- Symptoms like anxiety, depression, or confusion
- Being talked over, not given choices or listened to
- Malnourishment, weight loss, poor hygiene or health

What does it look like when older people/kaumātua are treated with dignity and respect?

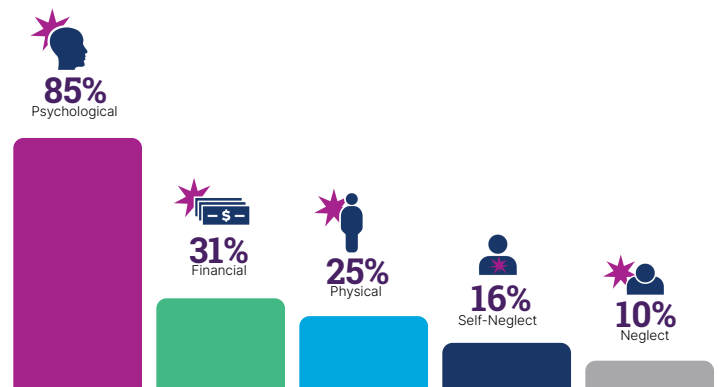
- Make our own decisions.
- Are part of each community.
- Receive the care and support we need.
- Live safely, free of exploitation and abuse.
- Are valued for who we are and treated fairly.
- Have our physical, spiritual, cultural, and emotional needs met.

10 tips to be kind and prevent abuse



- Honour older people's/kaumātua's wisdom.
- Love and cherish your older relatives/whānau.
- Phone, zoom or facetime older people/kaumātua.
- Visit older people/kaumātua in your neighbourhood.
- Enable older people/kaumātua to set their own pace.
- Involve older people/kaumātua in your social activities.
- Encourage older people/kaumātua to make their own decisions.
- Speak respectfully and listen to older people's/kaumātua's stories.
- Support older people/kaumātua to use their money for their own needs.

Seek advice from any Elder Abuse Response Service or Age Concern if you spot the signs that an older person/kaumātua is being abused or neglected.



Types of abuse

What does Age Concern's elder abuse response work show?

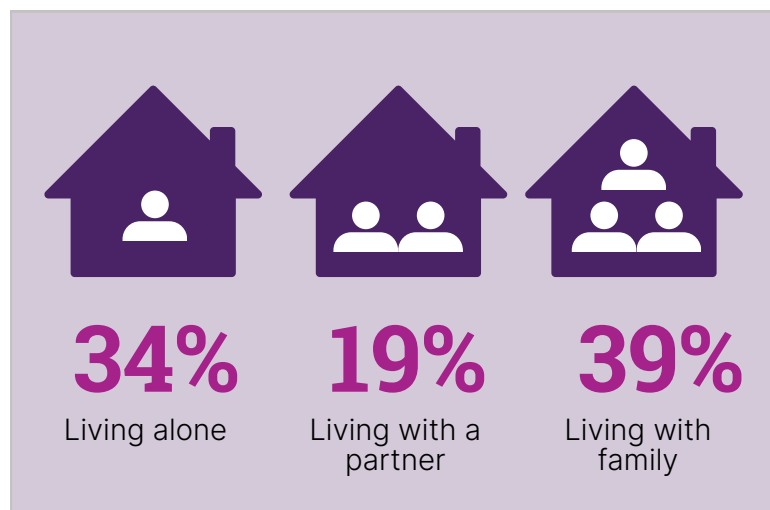
Age Concern
was involved in

2,817
cases



Elder Abuse Response Services are contracted by the government in every urban and rural area of the country.

Age Concerns are contracted in most regions and respond when instances of elder abuse and neglect are referred to them. The statistics presented here are the combined figures reported from Age Concern's Elder Abuse Response Services in the year 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024.^[1]



- **46%** of cases the older person was under 75 years of age.
- **34%** of cases the older person was living alone but 58% lived with partner and/or relatives.
- **88%** of alleged abusers were family members of which 50% were adult children or grandchildren.
- **77%** of the alleged abusers are aged under 60 and 40% live with the older person.
- **58%** of cases the abuse has continued for longer than 3 months, and **31%** longer than a year.

What does Age Concern do to prevent elder abuse and neglect?

Age Concern offers free, confidential, specialist Elder Abuse Response Services throughout most regions of New Zealand.

We work with older people and their family and whānau to stop abuse, reduce the damage caused, and increase understanding to keep all family members safe. Age Concerns work hard to reduce the harmful effects of elder abuse.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on June 15 helps to shine light on this often-hidden issue in our communities.

We emphasise that anyone can call us at Age Concern with questions about the safety of an older person. Even if you are unsure, you have a hunch, or an inkling that something may be amiss with an older person, we would rather you call us sooner, than wait until you have definite proof.

The longer elder abuse goes on for, the more harm is caused, and the harder it is to untangle the effects on older people and within their family or whānau. "Ultimately the challenge for us all is not only to listen to what has been said, but to believe and act upon it"^[2]

The Age Concern network works alongside many services such as health services, needs assessment services, the police, banks, residential care facilities, iwi and other community agencies, to ensure the best possible outcome for older people. In some regions other agencies have elder abuse response contracts too.



If you or an older person/kaumātua you know is being abused, contact your nearest Age Concern. Contact details for Age Concerns services in each region are available at www.ageconcern.org.nz or 0800 65 2 105

[1] Data collected from Age Concern New Zealand's national database for 2023-24

[2] WHO Missing voices: on elder abuse 2002 https://www.who.int/ageing/publications/missing_voices/en/