Social Isolation

The relationship between social isolation and elder abuse

Social isolation and the abuse of older adults deeply impact individuals, families and communities. It is important to understand social isolation, loneliness and elder abuse, and how they interact.

Social Isolation

Social isolation is defined as a low quantity and quality of contact with others. Social isolation occurs when an individual has few social contacts and social roles, as well as the absence of mutually rewarding relationships.

Social isolation can occur among older adults who live alone or who have no friends or family nearby. It can occur when a person moves to a new area or has little social involvement. Older adults who are socially isolated are at a higher risk of experiencing elder abuse.

In Indigenous and newcomer communities, social isolation can be intensified by factors such as geographic remoteness, cultural or language barriers, or limited access to culturally appropriate services. The erosion of traditional support systems, combined with these barriers, increases the vulnerability of older adults in these communities to mistreatment, making it more difficult for them to access help or be recognized by others.

24 per cent of Canadian seniors report low social participation (also known as objective isolation).

12 per cent of Canadian seniors report feelings of loneliness and weak sense of community belonging (also known as subjective isolation).

- Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians, Statistics Canada, 2020

Loneliness

While older adults who face social isolation may feel lonely, the two experiences are not the same.

Loneliness is a complex and usually unpleasant emotional response. Loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people. Social isolation is a lack of contact between an individual and society.

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is any intentional or reckless act or willful and negligent disregard, occurring within a relationship of family, trust or dependency, directed at someone 65 years of age or older, that:

- causes physical, emotional or psychological harm;
- involves the misappropriation or misuse of money or other personal possessions or personal or real property;
- subjects an individual to non-consensual sexual contact, activity or behaviour; or
- fails to provide the necessities of life.

In Alberta, approximately one in 10 older adults experience one or more forms of abuse.

- National Prevalence Study on Mistreatment of Older Canadians (2015)

Often more than one form of abuse occurs at the same time. In Alberta, financial and emotional abuse are the two most reported forms of elder abuse.

Abuse is a pattern of controlling behavior. In families, an abusive person can use many ways to gain power over another family member. For example, a family member who controls an older adult's finances without permission, forces or withholds medication, or uses emotional or physical violence, is committing elder abuse.

Social Isolation: A Risk Factor for Elder Abuse

Social isolation is considered both a risk factor for and a result of elder abuse. As a risk factor, it represents

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the complexity and importance of the social network around the health and well-being of older adults.

Social isolation can lead to increased fear of crime and theft, thus making older adults less likely to participate in social activities.

Over time, someone experiencing abuse at the hands of a trusted person may recede further into isolation because of the dynamics of abuse. Feelings of shame may cause them to withdraw from social settings.

Some may be conditioned to believe this abuse is normal and even acceptable. These feelings and perceptions may keep the victim of abuse silent, reinforcing the isolation that is a part of the cycle of abuse.

Research shows that older adults who are socially isolated and/or have poor social networks are consistently more at risk. There are two key risk factors that may indicate elder abuse:

Ageism, elder abuse and social isolation are some of the top issues facing seniors in Canada.

- National Seniors Strategy, National Institute on Ageing

- not feeling safe with those closest to them
- being prevented from socializing with family and friends

An older adult experiencing elder abuse will likely become more socially isolated as abuse continues and/or worsens.

Health Effects

Social isolation among older adults is related to negative health effects and a reduced quality of life. Social isolation can be triggered by a change in a person's health, affecting their ability to connect with others in meaningful ways. Those experiencing social isolation have an increased chance of reduced quality of life, poor mental health, depression, disability from chronic diseases and premature death.

Help an Isolated Older Adult

As family members, service providers or caregivers, you can:

- measure the supports an older adult has or doesn't have
- inform others on how to include those who are isolated
- make regular phone calls to check-in
- set up a visitation schedule among family and friends
- offer to take the older adult shopping
- offer transportation to medical or other appointments
- invite the older adult to meet for coffee or other outings
- offer assistance with technology
- offer to research community resources
- drop off prepared meals or offer to prepare meals with them
- raise awareness of elder abuse by wearing purple

Reducing social isolation ultimately helps reduce the risk of elder abuse and can improve quality of life.

Finding ways to eliminate isolation and foster a community where people from all walks of life can contribute and engage with others in healthy ways is not only good for an individual's health, but also for the health of our communities.

Social connection resources

For supports to reduce social isolation please contact your local seniors support society or center to learn what programs they have in place.

For a map of services across the province visit: https://www.healthyagingalberta.ca/the-map

Or visit:

- **Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council**, Edmonton Contact at 780-423-5635 or at https://seniorscouncil.net/
- **Golden Circle Seniors Resource Society**, Red Deer Contact at 403-343-6074 or at https://goldencircle.ca/
- **Wild Rose Community Connections**, Calgary Contact at 403-601-2910 or at https://www.wildrosecommunityconnections.com/
- **Kerby Centre/Veiner Centre**, Medicine Hat Contact at 403-265-0661 or at https://unisonalberta.com/

For more information about elder abuse:
https://www.alberta.ca/get-help-elder-abuse

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