



Safety planning with older people

Information for workers about promoting the health and wellbeing of older people by helping them make their own safety plan.

This Tip Sheet can be used in conjunction with the Seniors Rights Victoria *Plan for Your Safety* Help Sheet to develop a personalised safety plan for an older person at risk of or experiencing abuse.

Older people have rights

Older people have the right to live in safety, to be treated with dignity and respect and to make their own decisions. Some older people are denied these rights, often by those who are closest to them. As support workers we can help promote an older person's safety and wellbeing. It is important that we do so in ways that respect their rights, including the right to choose not to take any action.

What is 'elder abuse'?

Elder abuse is any mistreatment of an older person by another person with whom they have a relationship of trust. Often that person is a family member or carer but it could be a friend or neighbour whom they depend on.

The abuse can be financial, psychological/emotional, physical or sexual. It can also involve deliberate social isolation or neglect. More than one type of abuse may be occurring together.

Some forms of elder abuse are criminal acts, for example, theft, fraud and assault.

Why is abuse hard to talk about?

There are many reasons why older people may find it difficult to talk about abuse. They may feel ashamed or guilty about their family member's behaviour, or they may not think of it as abuse. Many older people feel 'protective love' towards the abuser, who may be a close family member. They may want to help them and feel afraid of getting them into trouble. They may also fear being forced to leave their home, being forced into care or losing their cultural and support networks.

TIP

Remember, the older person may have managed abuse for years and already have some ways of staying safe.

Safety planning can help the person feel more in control of the situation.

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What is a safety plan?

A safety plan is a plan of action to help someone protect themselves from abuse. It includes steps to improve safety and strategies for responding to or escaping abusive behavior when it happens.

Of course, safety planning is not a guarantee of safety, but it can help to talk, plan and prepare. Safety planning can help an older person feel more confident and in control, reducing fear and stress.

Approach to safety planning

Safety plans need to be practical and realistic, taking into account the person's strengths as well as their need for support. Emotional safety and wellbeing can be as important as physical safety. When talking to an older person about safety planning it is important to be supportive:

- Listen and give assurance that you will maintain confidentiality
- Provide reassurance that they are not at fault and that no one deserves abuse
- Encourage positive self esteem and assertiveness
- Let them know they are not alone, that help is available and provide information about how to get it
- Provide information about help available for the abuser, such as drug and alcohol or mental health services
- Inform them about the support you can offer now and in the future and follow up as agreed.

How to develop a safety plan

A personalised safety planning Help Sheet for older people is available from Seniors Rights Victoria. It is designed to help them think about their safety and to record important phone numbers and items to take if leaving home in a hurry.

Encourage and support the older person to work through the plan (or develop their own) and to keep it accessible. Offer ongoing support and

encourage the person to review their safety plan often.

Steps to improve safety

Start by talking about who the older person can talk freely and openly with and who can give them the practical support they need.

Personal safety measures to consider:

- Getting a personal safety alarm
- Asking neighbours to be alert for any signs of a problem
- Establishing a code to signal neighbours or friends that they need to call 000
- Keeping a list of up-to-date telephone numbers
- Getting a mobile phone, (perhaps a user-friendly, easy-read model)
- Making a safe place where the older person can retreat – with radio, TV, music etc
- Talking to the Police about the person's safety and applying for an Intervention Order.

Home safety matters to consider:

- Improving outside lighting
- Changing locks and giving keys to trusted people (remember home care workers and consider a key safe)
- Adding a telephone, perhaps in the bedroom, perhaps a large-digit model.

Financial safety matters to consider:

- Reviewing who has access to bank accounts, including via internet banking and ATM cards
- Keeping cash locked up along with any other valuables
- Opening a separate bank account to improve independence
- Setting up direct debits or Centrepay so that bills are automatically deducted at an affordable regular amount
- Saving a bit of money if possible.

Other safety matters to consider:

- Getting involved in a support group or in meaningful activities, which can be a source of strength and confidence
- Identifying supportive friends or family who the person may call if they are feeling down or need support
- Identifying appropriate cultural or faith-based supports
- Reducing the older person's dependency on the abuser, for example by arranging home care services.
- Joining a community visitor or telephone chat scheme, such as Red Cross Telechat, or a community register scheme. Contact the local police station or local council for details.

Planning for an emergency

Think about where the person can go in an emergency, where they can stay and who may lend them money or support.

Prepare an 'emergency bag'. Include essential items from the list of personal items in the person's safety plan.

Develop a code the person can use to signal others that they need help. Share it with trusted neighbours or family members who can act in an emergency.

Think about the safety of pets – removing them to safety and caring for their needs

Leave important items with someone they trust. This may include money, spare keys, clothes and copies of important documents.

Plan an escape route – safe ways out of the home. It can help to visualise or practice the route.

TIP

Some family violence services and police services may offer financial assistance to help with the cost of improving home safety.

Information Resources

Some of the information resources you may like to give or support the older person to obtain may include:

- The 'Safe at home' booklet from Victoria Legal Aid, covering how to get an intervention order
- Emergency '000' information in the person's own language (at www.triplezero.gov.au)
- Contact details for local support services, including emergency accommodation, counselling and home care services
- Telephone counselling services (Lifeline, 1800 Respect)
- Seniors Rights Victoria contact information and *Plan for Your Safety Help Sheet*
- Taxi phone numbers and information about the half price taxi program
- Information on how to access legal support, alternatives to legal action such as mediation or dispute resolution and services for crime victims.

Steps to protect yourself and your co-workers

- Don't confront the abuser.
- Always notify colleagues where you are going and when you expect to return.
- Try to work in pairs.
- Take your mobile phone.
- Note the entry and exit points of the property and make sure you can always reach them.
- Park your car where it can't be blocked in (not in the driveway).

“My client, ‘May’, was referred to me due to concerns identified by her home care worker.

May had told the worker that she needed to get her shopping done as soon as her pension was paid because her son, ‘Doug’, visited every pension day to demand money. She confided that Doug was a heavy drinker and that when she tried to refuse to give him money in the past he had pushed and threatened her.

When I met with May, she said that she didn’t want to get her son into trouble with the Police but she felt she had to say no to him, for his own sake as much as for hers.

So we worked through a Safety Plan together. We role-played what she would say to Doug when he arrived at the door. May decided it would be best to stand in the front yard to talk, because Doug would be less likely to behave badly where he could be seen or heard by others. She also asked the next door neighbours to watch for her if they noticed Doug’s car in the drive.

May’s plan worked. Doug left empty-handed and learned that when May says ‘no’, she means it. May’s confidence was boosted; she is less stressed and is now better able to manage financially.”

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Where to get help or more information

Seniors Rights Victoria

1300 368 821 10am–5pm, Mon–Fri
www.seniorsrights.org.au

Free, confidential support, legal advice, information and education to help prevent elder abuse and safeguard the rights, dignity and independence of older people.

Seniors Information Victoria

1300 135 090
10am–5pm, Mon–Fri

Free information for older Victorians on a wide range of issues.

Seniors Online Victoria

www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au

Victorian Government website with online information for seniors and links to a wide range of health, aged care and support services for older people.

1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732
www.1800respect.org.au

National sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service. Includes support and debriefing for professionals and a ‘support for workers and professionals’ section on the website.



Seniors Rights Victoria acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government, Victoria Legal Aid and the Commonwealth of Australia Attorney General's Department.



This CLC is funded and supported by Victoria Legal Aid



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