Financial abuse of older adults

What is financial abuse?

Financial abuse means using a person's money or property without permission or in a dishonest way. It can include pressuring someone for money or property. Financial abuse can take away or limit an older person's resources, choices and options.

Financial abuse is the most reported type of abuse that people may experience in later life and accounts for over half of reported elder abuse situations.

Financial abuse can involve a family member or person the older adult trusts, such as a friend or care provider. Financial abuse can happen when a family member or friend takes over financial decisions and control of the older adult's money (with or without permission). It can happen if a family member, friend or power of attorney controls the money but disregards the older adult's financial obligations. It also happens if someone does not fulfill instructions under the power of attorney.

Financial abuse and neglect negatively impact trust among family members. Adult children may not realize their actions are financially abusive or neglectful toward their parent(s).

Common examples of financial abuse include:

- A family member who repeatedly pressures a parent for money, or borrows money but never repays it
- A family member who sells a parent's house or other property and then uses the money for their own benefit
- Adult children who use a parent's pension or other income, leaving the parent to ask the adult child for money
- A person who misuses their authority under a power of attorney, for example, to take money from a person's bank account for themselves
- A person who forces or tricks a senior into signing or changing a contract, power of attorney or will

Financial abuse may involve any amount of money or any size of property. Some forms of financial abuse involve theft or fraud which are considered crimes.

Financial neglect occurs when the person who has a duty to provide care or help to an older adult fails to pay their rent or mortgage, medical insurance or other bills, putting the older adult at risk.

Who can experience financial abuse?

Older adults who are socially isolated, cognitively impaired or in poor health are more vulnerable to financial abuse.

For information about how older adults may experience abuse or neglect differently, visit HealthLinkBC File #93c Abuse and neglect of older adults: Understanding different experiences.

Why does financial abuse occur?

Financial abuse occurs when a person's sense of need, entitlement or greed for money is greater than their ability to remain fair, honest and caring with a parent or other older adult.

Financial abuse often starts during an older adult's health crisis or after a major change in their health. Some older adults become vulnerable to financial abuse when their spouse, partner or close friend dies.

For some, expectations and assumptions about who will inherit their parents' money or property can impact an adult child's behaviour.

Older adults may use banking machines or have joint accounts with their grown children but not recognize the potential risk.

What are the health effects of financial abuse on older adults?

Financial abuse hurts older adults in many ways, and it seldom stops without intervention. Many financial abuse situations involve lies, threats or intimidation. These are forms of emotional abuse. These situations can lead to ongoing stress and financial strain for an older adult.

An older adult may feel very hurt by the person and abusive behaviour, but they may not ask for the money or talk about the situation. The situation can become worse over time and sometimes leads to physical abuse.

Financial abuse can take away or limit an older adult's finances or access to money, impacting their ability to take care of themselves. It can harm their health by reducing the resources available for proper housing, good nutrition, medication and healthy activities.

How can you help prevent financial abuse and neglect?

To help prevent financial abuse and neglect, consider these tips:

- Set up your finances so that the bank automatically pays your bills, especially if your health changes or you need to go to the hospital or into a care facility
- If you lend money, write down the amount, the person's name and the date you loaned it, and keep the note in a safe place. This can help you remember the amount of money given as a loan or gift. You may also consider establishing a loan contract, where the borrower formally agrees to a repayment schedule. You may wish to consult with a notary or lawyer
- Consider an advance care plan, including a power of attorney and a representation agreement, if you can trust someone to assist you with your finances in the event you must be hospitalized or become incapable
- For any major decision involving assets or property, consider using a notary or a lawyer. Make sure you understand every document you sign and that any interpreter is provided by an independent third party

What should I do if I see a crime or harmful situation?

If you see a crime or a situation that puts an older adult at immediate risk, call the police or **9-1-1** right away. Advise that you want to report a situation of suspected elder abuse, neglect or self-neglect.

Call the Seniors Abuse Info Line (SAIL) at 604-437-1940 in the Lower Mainland, or toll free at 1-866-437-1940.

For more information

For information and services, call or visit:

- Seniors Abuse and Information Line (SAIL), hosted by Seniors First BC, 604-437-1940 in Vancouver or toll-free at 1-866-437-1940, or visit https://seniorsfirstbc.ca , which can refer low-income older adults with minimal assets to Seniors First BC's legal programs
- Government of B.C. – Protection from Elder Abuse or Neglect
- Public Guardian and Trustee at 604-660-4444 or visit www.trustee.bc.ca if an older adult's finances are at risk
- Legal Aid BC at 604-408-2172 or toll-free at 1-866-577-2525 or visit https://legalaid.bc.ca
- Victim Link toll-free in B.C. at 1-800-563-0808 or visit VictimLinkBC for information for victims of family and sexual violence or crime

For more information on abuse and older adults, visit the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- HealthLinkBC File #93a Preventing abuse and neglect in older adults
- HealthLinkBC File #93b Abuse and neglect of older adults: Information for family caregivers
- HealthLinkBC File #93c Abuse and neglect of older adults: Understanding different experiences

* The Public Health Association of Canada defines duty of care as the responsibility or legal obligation of a person or organization to avoid acts or omissions that could likely cause harm to others.