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Help the Aged is working in partnership with Action on Elder Abuse to confront the mistreatment of older people.

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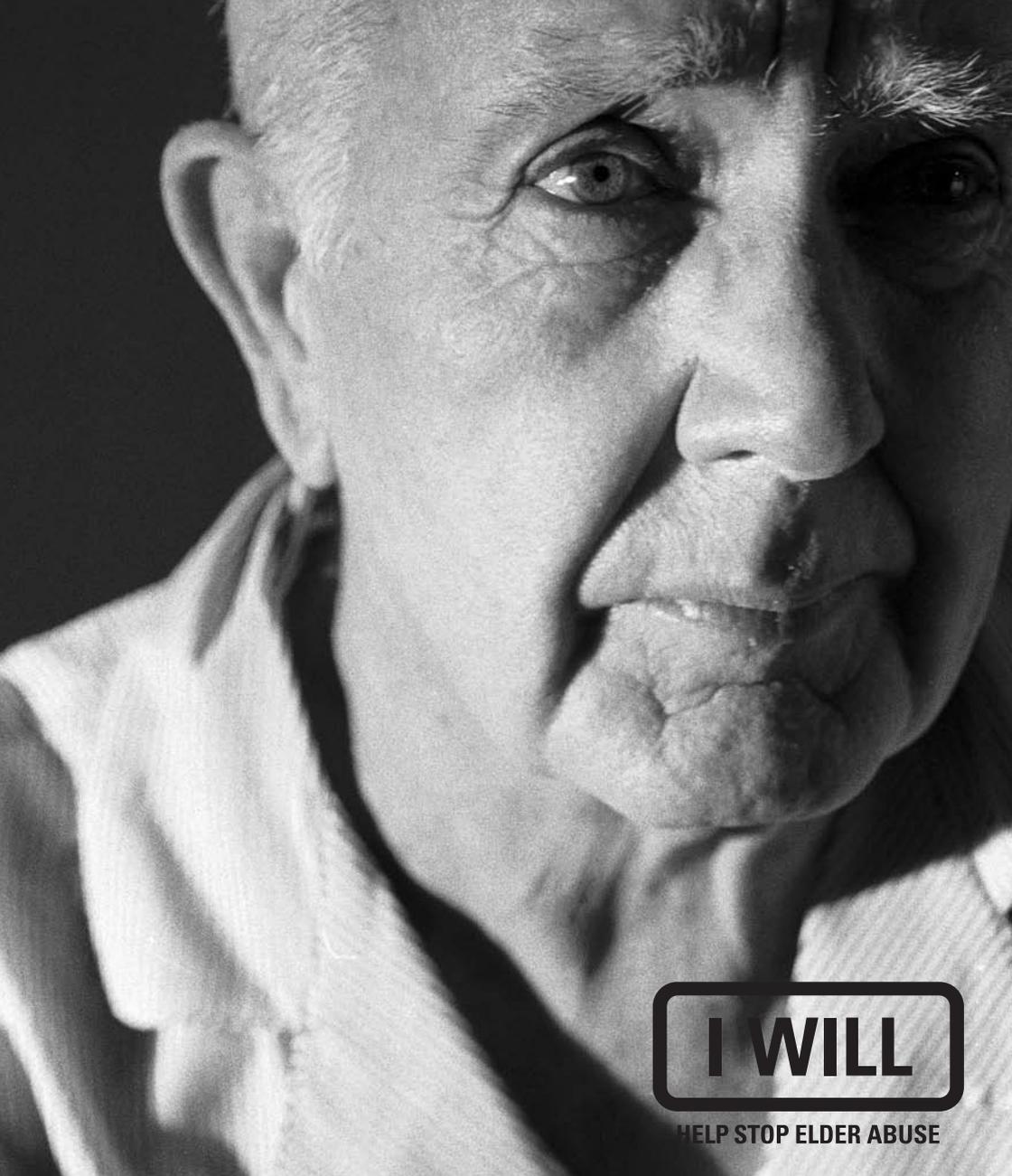
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**WE WILL** fight to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from **POVERTY, ISOLATION** and **NEGLECT**

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**HELPTHEAGED** WE WILL™

**Putting a stop** to the abuse of older people



**I WILL**

HELP STOP ELDER ABUSE

## Why you should read this booklet

You may have looked at this booklet and thought it has no relevance to you at all. Please read on, because at some time in your life you may come into contact with an older person who needs help or protection. This booklet is not meant to scare you. Its aim is to raise awareness about a very important subject – the harming or mistreating of an older person.

The majority of people do not tend to think about older people being abused. But all of us need to be aware of the ways in which older people can be harmed and what to do if we suspect or know that this is happening.

Abuse is often well hidden. Because it is not always easy to spot and because the person suffering abuse may not ask for help, it can be difficult to identify and to address. This booklet explains what to look out for and how you may be able to help. It also offers advice to older people who have experienced abuse.

### What is elder abuse?

**Elder abuse occurs when an older man or woman is harmed, mistreated or neglected – usually by someone they should be able to trust.**

‘Abuse’ is a strong word. It makes many people feel uncomfortable.

What it actually means is harm, mistreatment, exploitation or neglect.

Older people can be harmed in lots of different ways.

### Where can abuse happen?

Most people would not like to think of abuse happening on their doorstep, but the reality is that it can happen *anywhere* – behind closed doors or in a public place.

**In the community** An older person living on your street could be experiencing abuse while you are reading this booklet.

Some older people are in contact with lots of people and frequent different places within the community. Others may not see other

people or get out much. Isolation can make it difficult to report abuse.

**In institutions** Some older people live permanently in, or routinely visit, institutions such as care homes, day centres, hospitals and prisons. Dependence on staff still within an institution makes it difficult to report abuse.

Research shows that most elder abuse happens in people's own homes or in care homes. Dependence on one provider makes it difficult to report abuse.

### Who can be abused?

Any older person – male, female, rich, poor, and from any culture – can be abused. If you hear of an older person being abused you might immediately think of a woman. While women of 70 and older, especially if they are vulnerable and isolated, are most likely to experience abuse, men are also subject to it.

You might also think that only those who are frail are at risk, but people who are in robust health are also abused.

### How much abuse is there?

We will never have a true picture of how much abuse there is. Statistics relating to people who abuse and who are abused can be gathered *only* if they are known to organisations such as social services or the police, or to voluntary groups such as Action on Elder Abuse. Official estimates vary: it has been suggested that 5–10 per cent of older people (perhaps as many as half a million) suffer some form of abuse, but much abuse is never reported.

### Forms of abuse

There are many different forms of abuse. Some can be obvious – for example, an older person being physically assaulted (hit, slapped or kicked) but may rarely be witnessed directly.

Other abuses are inflicted in very subtle ways, so it can be difficult to pick up on them. For example, neglect and humiliation are common types of abuse.

The following examples are all real, though we have of course changed the names.

**Example:** *Nellie was always asking to go the toilet. Care workers ignored her most of the time. When she wet herself, the care workers would shout at her and leave her for long periods in her wet clothes.*

Some abuse is deliberate – for example, theft:

**Example:** *Betty lived alone and was very lonely. Her next-door neighbours started to visit her regularly and offered to shop and pay her bills for her. They said that the shopping cost more than it did and they did not pay the bills.*

In other situations, the abuse is unintentional. It could come about through lack of knowledge, understanding or training.

**Examples:** *Leah worked in a busy care home. It took time to get residents out of bed but she was often in a hurry. She caused bruising on some of the residents because she moved too quickly and roughly and didn't ask for help.*

*Shaeda, a Muslim woman from Pakistan, goes to a day centre once a week. Her religion requires her to eat halal food, but this is never ascertained by the day centre staff, due to language difficulties, and so she goes without lunch every time she visits the day centre.*

Sometimes abuse happens though sheer frustration.

**Example:** *Mr Roberts was the sole carer for his wife, who had Alzheimer's disease. He refused help from anyone as he felt it was his duty to look after her. He never realised just how hard it was going to be. He got very tired and one day, after Mrs Roberts had asked the same question ten times in two minutes, he slapped her across the face.*

Discrimination is another way in which older people are made to suffer.

**Examples:** *Ella was 75 years old and a victim of domestic violence. She rang a local voluntary organisation for women to ask for advice and support, but was told that it did not deal with older people.*

*Jane, who was African-Caribbean, was regularly bathed at the care home, but the staff were never taught about her skin care. She developed sores as a consequence.*

Sexual abuse, too, can happen to older men and women – sometimes even within families – but compared to other forms of abuse, this is rare.

**Examples:** *John had always lived at home with his mother. Like his father before him, he always got drunk on a Saturday night and then came home to rape his mother.*

*Frank, who was in his eighties, had been in prison for years. He had been raped repeatedly by other inmates.*

### **Are you an older person who feels unsafe or is being harmed?**

Like every older person you have the right to live your life free from fear of harm or neglect. It is your right to feel and be safe.

If someone is harming you in some way, it is important to let someone else know. You do not have to put up with something being done or said to you that you don't like.

Have you got someone you can trust? If not, there are professional people who can offer you advice. You do not have to feel alone in your situation. There are options open to you and you can make choices.

Among the people who can help are these working for organisations listed on pages 8–9.

## How do you know if a person is being abused?

It can be hard to spot abuse. You might have a lot of doubts about what you see. You will start questioning yourself. The suspected victim may deny that anything is wrong. People who suffer abuse can be skilful at covering up and producing a good explanation. If the abuse has gone on for a long time they will have become used to making excuses: for example, a person with a black eye might say, 'I walked into a door', when really she or he has been hit.

People often have 'gut feelings': they know something is not quite right but can't quite put their finger on it. You may have such feelings yourself in relation to an older person, without being sure why. You need to watch for:

- changes in behaviour (e.g. becoming withdrawn, weepy, angry, depressed)
- changes in appearance (e.g. wearing same clothes, not washing hair or putting on make-up)
- changes in lifestyle/routine/circumstances (e.g. no longer going out; not welcoming visitors; saying they cannot afford things they could previously)
- injuries which occur regularly (e.g. black eyes, bruises, cuts, lacerations)
- unusual difficulty with finances (e.g. unpaid bills, debts building up)
- an over-emphasis on everything being wonderful
- seeking attention from numerous people (this may be an indicator that the person wants someone to pick up on the fact that something is wrong, or feels safer when other people are around)
- seeming frightened when a certain person comes into the room
- often becoming weepy, though they never used to be
- seeming off their food; weight loss.

Sometimes these things happen and have nothing to do with abuse. But they should never be ignored because they can be a sign of other type of problem.

## What should you do if you think someone is being abused?

How would you feel if you thought that someone was being abused? Maybe you wouldn't want to risk saying something and being wrong? You wouldn't want to upset or offend the person – but you *do* want to protect and help him/her.

It is important to think first about *why* an older person might not speak about what is happening to them. He or she may be feeling all sorts of emotions:

- scared of the abuser (who may have made threats) and fearful of the possible repercussions of speaking out
- embarrassed or ashamed
- guilty (people who have been abused often blame themselves for it)
- trapped – not least because they're unaware of what they can do or where they can go for help
- wary of change (better the person you know – someone else might be worse), or believing it is too late to change things
- mistrustful of people in general, and doubtful that anyone would believe them if they told their story.

Every one of us is different and we cope with situations in different ways. People who have been abused for a long time will have developed their own ways of coping. Nobody, whatever their age, finds it easy to talk about being abused. Many people prefer to keep things to themselves rather than discuss their problems with others.

It is likely to be really difficult for an older person to talk about abuse. Even so, that does not mean you should not try to help.

## How you can help

**Some people who are being mistreated will never talk about their situation, but it is essential to try to help if you believe something is wrong.**

- If you are worried about someone, be open and honest about it

- Give the older person the opportunity to talk. Make it clear you are willing to listen
- Some people may want to talk but may be worried about how you react. It is vital to stay calm if they start talking to you about being abused
- Some people may ask you to promise not to tell anyone else about the abuse. Whether you are a care professional or just a friend, always be honest with them and never make false promises
- You must remember that an older person is an adult, and should never be treated like a child, even if confused and disoriented (he or she can still react to what you are saying and how you say it). Try not to take over or be over-protective, but ask the questions you would ask anyone else in this situation
- Try to explain simply who might be able to help e.g. health or social care professionals (such as a GP), police, home carers, care-home employees, volunteers and advocates, and organisations such as those mentioned on pages 8–9. Perhaps offer to approach one of these on the person's behalf
- Ask what the person wants to happen.

Remember that many people do not make decisions overnight. Sometimes things are said in haste and then retracted. For the listener, just being there and being consistent is of value. It can sometimes take months, even years, for a victim to decide to take action. She or he needs time to think.

### **Are you worried that you could abuse someone?**

The most kind, devoted and calm people can sometimes find themselves stressed-out and utterly frustrated when caring for an older person. A carer pushed to the limit may be sorely tempted to lash out.

If you have ever felt like this, or have such feelings now, speak to someone about it.

Talking about your situation, your feelings and the fear that you might

hurt someone can help, and there may be practical support available, such as respite care to give you, as the main carer, a break.

## Where to go for help and support

Abuse can be prevented and stopped, but only if someone knows about it in the first place and does something about it.

Both older people who are being harmed and other people who suspect that abuse is happening need to speak out. People who are being abused are often scared that they will not be believed. Those who witness or suspect it do not want to be seen as ‘interfering’ or may be scared of ‘getting it wrong’.

If you suspect that someone is being harmed, always talk to the person first and tell them what you want to do.

If you are a care professional, you must report any concerns you have immediately to your own line manager. If you are unhappy with the response, report your concerns to someone higher up in the organisation. You can also refer to the organisations listed on the following pages for advice and information. (If you are a non-professional carer, afraid that you will harm the person in your care, you too can receive help.)

It is always hard to make that first move, and before you pick up the telephone or go to see someone, think about what you want to say. Be clear about:

- whether the person knows you are reporting your concerns
- whether the older person is confused or lacks the capacity to make informed decisions about his/her life
- who you think is being abused – name, address, age
- what you think is happening to that older person
- give reasons/examples to, illustrate why you think abuse is occurring: it helps if you can give dates and times of incidents, when you have been worried, when things have been said
- who you believe is harming the older person and that person’s relationship with the older person.

People who might be able to help are:

- **Action on Elder Abuse** Run by specially trained staff and volunteers, its helpline provides confidential support and advice for people who have been abused or know someone who may be suffering abuse. Available weekdays 9am–5pm on freephone 0808 808 8141.
- **social services/social work department** The central telephone number for your local social services department (part of the local council) is in the phone book. Staff will listen, take information and advise on next step.
- **police** If you think a crime has been committed, report it to the police immediately. In an emergency, call 999; otherwise, call your local station (see phone book). Police can also offer advice regarding safety at home and in the community, and may refer people to the linked Victim Support scheme (tel. 0845 30 30 900), staffed by trained volunteers.
- **social care inspection bodies** If you have concerns about bad practices or abuse in a care home, contact the appropriate organisation: in **England**, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (tel. 0845 015 0120); in **Wales**, the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (tel. 02920 825 111); and, in **Northern Ireland**, the Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – Social Services Inspectorate (tel. 0289 052 0500).
- **hospitals** For urgent medical attention, the local accident and emergency department should be the first port of call.
- **general practitioners/practice nurses** You can speak, in confidence, to your GP or practice nurse if you are being harmed. If you know an older person who needs medical attention or seems to be emotionally disturbed, talk to them about seeing their GP or, with their permission, talk to a doctor/practice nurse on their behalf. A GP may also notice physical signs of abuse.

- **Carers UK** UK-wide organisation run by carers and working to support carers. **CarersLine** tel. 0808 808 7777 (Wednesday, Thursday 10am–12pm and 2–4pm). Carers UK, 20–25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT, tel. 020 7490 8818 (office). Carers **Wales**, River House, Ynys Bridge Court, Gwaelod-y-Garth, Cardiff CF15 9SS, tel. 0292 081 1370; Carers **Northern Ireland**, 58 Howard Street, Belfast BT1 6PJ, tel. 0289 043 9843.
- **The Princess Royal Trust for Carers** also supports carers. Call (London) 020 7489 7788 or (North of England) 01257 234 070 for your nearest centre.

**Please note:** although Help the Aged runs an information service for older people called SeniorLine, this deals mainly with welfare benefit queries and cannot respond directly to enquiries about elder abuse.

Help the Aged produces a free leaflet on elder abuse based on the content of this booklet. It is available from Help the Aged Publishing (tel. 020 7239 1946 or email [publications@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:publications@helptheaged.org.uk)). P&p is charged on bulk orders.

