



Tool 1.2: Psychological abuse: behaviours and signs

Psychological abuse is the infliction of mental stress, fear or feelings of shame and powerlessness. It may be verbal or non-verbal, and is usually a pattern of behaviour repeated over time and intended to control the person. Psychological abuse includes social isolation.⁴

Behaviours

- Pressuring, bullying, intimidating and harassing a person.
- Verbal abuse, including name-calling.
- Frightening and/or threatening to harm someone, or break belongings.
- Threats to harm someone's pet.
- Threats of placing a person into an aged-care facility.
- Treating an older person as if they are a child.
- Engaging in emotional blackmail.
- Preventing contact with family and friends.
- Denying access to services, religious (spiritual) and/or cultural events.
- Misusing the function of Enduring Guardianship.
- Screening telephone calls, listening in to calls or disconnecting the telephone without the person's consent, or withholding mail.
- Taking control of the person's home without their consent.
- Moving a person far away from family or friends or otherwise socially isolating a person.
- Withholding affection.

Signs

- Feelings of helplessness, shame and powerlessness.
- Changes in levels of self-esteem.
- Sadness or grief at the loss of important relationships.
- Depression, withdrawal or listlessness due to a lack of social interaction.
- Worry or anxiety after a visit by a specific person.
- Confusion, agitation and social withdrawal.
- Unexplained paranoia or excessive fear and anxiety.
- Disrupted appetite or sleep patterns.
- Unusual passivity or anger.

Maria's story

Maria is an 80-year-old woman with limited English. She has a recent diagnosis of depression. Maria lives with her husband, Vincent and daughter, Theresa who moved in 4 months ago. Theresa notices that her father is very controlling, puts her mother down; he also refuses to take Maria to church, despite her asking repeatedly.

Theresa has concerns about her mother's safety and thinks she is becoming quite withdrawn. There is a history of domestic and family violence.

Behaviours – Vincent is verbally abusive, and is socially isolating Maria.

Signs – Maria is becoming withdrawn.
