



Tool 1.7: Risk factors for abuse

Understanding the factors that contribute to abuse of older people supports agencies in identifying, responding and preventing abuse. Research refers to compounding factors such as the personality and individual circumstances of the abuser, family dynamic, medical, social, environmental and situational factors as well as understanding domestic violence theories, gender, ageism and social rights perspectives and the views of older people themselves.⁸

Risk factors can be present for both the older person at risk of abuse and the abuser. These factors are articulated in the NSW Interagency Policy as:

Risk factors for the older person:

- Social isolation is a key risk factor for the abuse of older people as older people experiencing abuse often lack social connection from neighbours, family and/or community and define abuse in “societal terms including social exclusion, the belittling of their views and contribution, and violation of their rights”.⁹
- Confused about their property, belongings and/or surroundings.
- Vulnerable to other persons taking advantage of them because of deteriorating health, cognitive decline, dementia and capacity issues.
- Physically or verbally violent/aggressive because of progressively worsening conditions such as dementia.
- A history of family dysfunction, domestic and family violence and abuse.
- Insecure accommodation.
- Substance abuse and gambling.
- Financial difficulties.
- Personality and/or behaviour changes due to illness and/or other progressively worsening condition/s.
- Relative powerlessness because of diminished ability to advocate effectively for themselves or to modify their environment.
- Women who have experienced (often unreported) domestic violence for many years.
- Limited English.
- Cultural issues and dependency, e.g. for all financial and communication matters.

Some of the risk factors for people that abuse older people are:

- Domestic and family violence involving violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour carried out by a partner, carer or family member to control, dominate or instil fear.
- Carers and family members play a crucial role in caring for older people and while not all perpetrators of abuse are carers, carers may become abusive in certain situations.
- Cultural/settlement issues (multiple carers, over-dependency, lack of understanding of resources, services and systems, refugee background, isolation from cultural activities or interaction).
- Other variables such as mental health, a history of drug and alcohol abuse, gambling or other behaviours.

8 Bagshaw, D., Wendt, S., Zannettino, L., *Preventing the abuse of older people by their family members*, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House, Stakeholder paper 7, 2009.

9 Family & Community Services, *NSW Interagency Policy*.