



Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation: What to Look For

This handout defines physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, financial exploitation, neglect, and self-neglect, and includes a list of signs to look for with regard to each type of abuse. Often more than one type of abuse may occur at the same time. If you observe the existence of any one or more of these signs of abuse in the course of your work, it does not mean the individual has been abused. However, recognizing these “red flags” may help you protect the individual.

Physical abuse is an intentional act that results in physical pain, injury, or impairment. Abusers may inflict bruises, welts, lacerations, punctures, fractures, burns, swelling, scratches, or other injuries. Physical abuse includes not only physical assaults, such as hitting, strangling, kicking, shoving, and burning, but the inappropriate use of drugs, physical restraints, and confinement. Signs of physical abuse include, but are not limited to:

- Bruises (presence of old and new, shape similar to an object such as a belt or finger, bilateral on upper arms from holding or shaking, clustered on trunk from repeated shaking), black eyes, burns (unusual location, type, or shape similar to an object such as an iron or cigarette burn), lacerations, or pressure marks (rope burns).
- Broken bones, skull fractures, sprains, dislocations, internal injuries/bleeding.
- Open wounds, cuts, punctures, injuries that have not been cared for properly.
- Repeated, unexplained injuries.
- Broken eyeglasses, hearing aids, or other devices.
- Access denied to communication or mobility aids (talking boards, battery pack removed from wheelchair).
- Signs of confinement or restraint, such as being locked in a room or tied to furniture.
- Frequent use of the emergency room or hospital care; doctor hopping (so no one has an accurate record of injuries).

Emotional abuse is language or behavior intended to intimidate, humiliate, ridicule, threaten, frighten, harass, coerce, blame, or scapegoat, or otherwise cause emotional pain or distress. It can also take nonverbal forms, such as ignoring the individual or isolating him or her from friends or activities. Signs that an individual may be experiencing emotional abuse include, but are not limited to:

- Being passive, helpless, withdrawn, nonresponsive, or non-communicative.
- Being anxious, trembling, agitated, fearful, or scared of someone or something.
- Being overly worried that his or her conversation with you will get back to a caregiver or family member.
- Blaming him/herself for the situation or for the behavior of a caregiver or family member.
- Caregiver or family member yells, threatens, belittles, or calls the individual names.
- Caregiver or family member claims to be or appears to feel entitled to make all decisions; speaks for the individual at medical, financial, other appointments.
- Caregiver or family member denies or creates long waits for food, medication, personal care, heat, transportation; does not follow medical recommendations.
- Caregiver or family member tries to control what the individual does, who he/she sees, and what he/she does; denies access to phone or mail.



- Access denied to communication or mobility aids (talking boards, battery pack removed from wheelchair).
- Caregiver or family member threatens to institutionalize (place in nursing home or CBRF).
- Caregiver or family member threatens to abuse or kill service or companion animals.

Sexual abuse is nonconsensual sexual contact of any kind. Sexual contact with an individual incapable of giving consent is also considered sexual abuse. Sexual abuse includes “hands off” offenses, such as exhibitionism, sexually explicit photographing, and forcing an individual to watch pornography, “hands on” offenses, such as rape or sodomy, and “harmful genital practices,” which involve unwarranted, intrusive, and/or painful procedures in caring for genitals or rectal area. For several reasons, individuals with disabilities and developmental disabilities in particular, are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. Most identified sexual perpetrators of both men and women are men. Signs of sexual abuse include but are not limited to:

- Bruises around the breasts or genital area.
- Unexplained sexually transmitted diseases or genital infections.
- Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding, pain, or itching.
- Torn, stained, or bloody underclothing.
- Difficulty in walking or sitting.

Although you may not observe signs of sexual abuse because many of them are normally covered by clothing, an individual may tell you about an incident of being sexually abused. If you are told by an individual that he or she has been sexually abused, take what you are told seriously.

Financial exploitation is the illegal or improper use of the funds, assets, or property of an individual. It includes cashing checks without authorization or permission, forging an individual’s signature, misusing or stealing money or possessions, coercing or deceiving an individual into signing any document (check, contract, will), and abuse of guardianship or power of attorney. An elder adult is more likely to be a victim of financial exploitation than a younger adult because elder adults tend to have more assets. However, the exploitation of a younger adult with limited assets can be equally, if not more, devastating. Signs of financial exploitation include but are not limited to:

- Sudden changes in bank account or banking practice, including an unexplained withdrawal of large sums of money by a person accompanying the individual.
- Additional names on a bank signature card.
- Unauthorized withdrawal of funds using the individual’s ATM card.
- Unexplained disappearance of funds or valuable possessions.
- Sudden transfer of assets to caregiver or family member.
- Caregiver or family member suddenly spending money on something he or she cannot afford, such as a car or an expensive vacation.
- Unexplained changes in powers of attorney, wills, or other legal documents.
- Signature being forged on checks or other financial or legal documents.
- Unexplained charges or overpayment for goods or services.
- Caregiver or family member being more concerned about the cost of care than the quality of care.
- Substandard care being provided or bills unpaid although there are adequate resources.



Neglect is the refusal or failure to provide an individual with life necessities, such as food, water, shelter, personal hygiene, medicine, comfort, personal safety, and other essentials. Neglect can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional neglect may result from ignorance by the caregiver or family member or denial that an individual needs as much care as he or she does. However, be cautious about situations involving suspected neglect for which the caregiver or family member is making excuses. Signs of neglect include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of physical cleanliness, bedsores, soiled clothing or bedding.
- Inadequate food in the house or spoiled, rotten, or moldy food.
- Weight loss, physical frailty, weakness, or dehydration.
- Untreated health problems.
- Medications not given properly or not being given at all.
- Unsafe living conditions that increase the risk of danger, such as excessive heat or cold temperatures, compromised utilities, fire hazards.
- Lack of needed home medical equipment, such as a walker or bedside commode.
- Unsafe, unclean or cluttered home; fecal/urine smell; insect infestation, animals that are not being cared for; objects, garbage, or animals accumulating to the point of being unsanitary.
- Finances and bills neglected.
- Obvious indifference, anger, or an absence of assistance by the caregiver or family member.

Self-neglect differs from the other types of abuse discussed here because it does not involve an abuser. Instead, it occurs when the individual fails to obtain adequate care, including food, shelter, clothing, personal hygiene, medical or dental care, or safety precautions for him or herself, and that failure to obtain care results in significant danger to the individual's physical or mental health. Self-neglect can only occur with regard to care for which the individual retains responsibility. It generally excludes a situation in which a mentally competent person, who understands the consequences of his or her decisions, makes a conscious and voluntary decision to engage in acts that threaten his or her health or safety. However, such a person may be self-neglecting due to depression or some other mental health condition, which needs to be addressed. Although many of the signs of caregiver or family member neglect listed above can also be signs of self-neglect, the distinction between them is critical.