



Guiding Principles on Working with Older Survivors of Abuse

- Believe the victim. Even if the victim says other things that seem unlikely, begin by assuming the older individual has been harmed or has experienced trauma at some point. If you have concerns about dementia, depression, or delirium, contact a health care provider.
- Do not assume that stress, dysfunctional family communication, anger management, or substance abuse are the cause of the suspected abuse. Assume it is power and control unless/until proven otherwise. Focus on victim safety and avoid colluding with the abuser.
- Identify the victim's strengths and skills and build upon them.
- The victim should have an opportunity to talk about her personal beliefs and values and how these beliefs impact her decisions and ultimately her safety.
- Offer hope. Focus on offering strategies that promote victim safety; break isolation; support the victim's decisions; and provide additional information.
- Recognize and respect cultural and religious differences. Language barriers and value differences may create challenges. Understand and acknowledge the importance of holidays and rituals from a variety of traditions.
- Recognize that the victim may want to maintain the relationship and help the abuser.
- The victim may have previously reached out for help without success. Some victims may not trust workers or their suggestions initially. Take time to build a relationship with the victim.
- Offer as many options as possible, without overwhelming the victim. Give accurate information about services (e.g., waiting lists, eligibility requirements). Do not promise more than you can deliver.

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL)

A Project of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin

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- Support any decision the victim makes: staying, leaving, or leaving and returning to an abusive relationship.
- Understand that some proposed interventions may make things worse (temporarily or permanently) and could compromise the victim's safety (e.g., calling law enforcement if the abuser works for the police; talking to faith-community leaders if the abuser is a pastor/rabbi, or other spiritual leader; involving the legal system if the victim is undocumented).
- Do not make statements that blame the victim or imply the victim is responsible for the abuse or for not stopping it (e.g., "What did you do to cause him to get angry?" or "Don't you know that pushes her buttons?")
- Avoid labeling the victim as co-dependent, uncooperative, weak, or helpless. These labels do not promote victim safety or empowerment.
- When domestic abuse is present, couples or family counseling and anger management classes are not recommended by experts in the domestic violence field until the perpetrator has successfully completed a batterer's intervention program. Definitions of successful completion vary, although many older women consider increased safety and improved quality of life as indicators of success. If couples or family counseling is considered, a therapist or counselor highly knowledgeable about domestic violence in later life should be sought out.
- Treat older victims as adults, with respect and kindness. Do not treat them as children by doing too much for them, talking to others about them while they are present or making decisions for them.
- Acknowledge how difficult it is when older parents are abused by an adult child.
- Acknowledge how difficult it must be to consider ending a 40, 50 or 60-year relationship.
- Be creative.
- Take care of yourself.