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Elder abuse must be confronted; awareness is where to start | Column

Ericka Von Salews, Valley Views | June 12, 2018



Courtesy photo: Ericka Von Salews

Data analytics and statistics are all the rage these days. Yet for more than 34 years, the Index that runs each month at the front of every issue of [Harper's](#) has been compiling astounding data on the human condition. As someone who works with [senior citizens](#) every day here in Poughkeepsie, I found a recent *Harper's* Index stat particularly striking: 200,000 British people over the age of 65 haven't spoken with a friend or family member in more than a month. In response, *Harper's* reports, the UK government recently established a [Minister for Loneliness](#), whose sole purpose is to find ways to address the loneliness endured by the elderly and others who are isolated from society.

Clearly the British government recognizes that preventing loneliness is not solely an act of compassion but a way to quell a burgeoning health epidemic. Indeed, loneliness poses a greater risk of premature death to seniors and other adults than cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety, according to a *Harvard Business Review* article by Dr. Vivek Murthy, former surgeon general of the United States. It also significantly increases the risk of elder abuse.

The different causes and types of elder abuse

The most common form of elder abuse is psychological, followed by physical and sexual abuse. Lastly, seniors are often subjected to financial exploitation, such as theft of money or property, when the perpetrator misleads seniors to gain access to their bank accounts, credit cards or power of attorney. Despite ongoing misperceptions that seniors are primarily victimized by strangers, almost 60 percent of elder abuse is perpetrated by a family member, followed by friends and neighbors (16.9 percent). If seniors feel pressured by family members to turn over their financial accounts or regularly get verbally or physically abused by an adult child or sibling, perhaps it's not that surprising that many seniors interact less and less with loved ones as they age.

Living in isolation or having a limited social support group to rely on increases the risk of elder abuse, which is why in many cases, seniors who opt to transition to senior residences after the death of a spouse generally fare better than those who opt to stay in their own homes alone. Particularly senior residences that have a warm, homey feel where residents have plenty of opportunities and time to interact with fellow seniors and other community members.

Dementia is also a huge risk factor for abuse, as nearly 50 percent of adults with dementia experienced some kind of abuse, and just as is the case with children and younger adults, older women are at a highest risk for abuse than men.

In New York, approximately 141 out of 1,000 residents have experienced [some form of abuse since turning age 60](#). This is in keeping with national statistics that found that 1 in 10 older Americans have been the victim of elder abuse. Sadly, only 1 in 14 cases of elder abuse are reported to authorities according to [a report](#) by the National Research Council Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect.

How to help? Recognize the early signs of abuse before they escalate

The laws protecting the elderly from abuse are similar to and related to laws protecting dependent adults from abuse. The challenge in both cases lie in the ability to identify the early signs of abuse before it escalates into serious violence and in convincing victims, as well as doctors, nurses, social workers, caregivers and others who might interact regularly with the victim, to come forward.

June 15 marks [World Elder Abuse Awareness Day](#), a date designated by The United Nations to focus global attention on the problem on physical, emotional and financial abuse on elders. Considering 30 percent of Dutchess County residents are 60 years of age or older, it's critical to turn our attention to an issue that affects the health, well-being and human rights of so large a population of our community. When we put awareness of the issue at the forefront, our community will be better equipped to prevent such instances from happening.

Ericka Von Salews is executive director for the Vassar-Warner Home, the only non-profit senior residence in Dutchess County.

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