

Elder Abuse – More Common than You May Think

By Laila Pera, CSA

What is meant by the term “Elder Abuse”? This is how it is defined by the World Health Organization –

“It is generally agreed that abuse of older people is either an act of commission or of omission (in which case it is usually described as “neglect”), and that it may be either intentional or unintentional. The abuse may be of a physical nature, it may be psychological (involving emotional or verbal aggression), or it may involve financial or other material maltreatment. Regardless of the type of abuse, it will certainly result in unnecessary suffering, injury or pain, the loss or violation of human rights, and a decreased quality of life for the older person. Whether the behaviour is termed abusive, neglectful or exploitative will probably depend on how frequently the mistreatment occurs, its duration, severity and consequences, and above all, the cultural context.”

As the above points out, elder or senior abuse can be carried out by acts of omission as much as by commission and these are the acts I see the most with our clients and out in the community. While most people are happy to take the time to help and respect their elders, many in society are annoyed by being slowed down and quickly will rush by a senior struggling with a heavy door or trying to reach a high shelf. When out with my senior clients, we encounter many people that are smiling and patient but we are saddened by how many we see that display frustrated impatience.

My clients tell me about landlords that put off repairs in their home and brush off their problems as unimportant complaints, handymen that perform shoddy workmanship assuming that these senior residents won't be able to see the flaws or will feel unable to complain. Sadly, they are often right. When I ask my seniors if I can intervene and talk to a landlord or maintenance person, they quickly ask me not to as I am sure to “make things much more difficult for them.”

The subject of elder abuse is very large and my intention today is only to concentrate on what we can do to help our seniors not be taken advantage of and not be overlooked. Please take a moment to be aware and open your eyes and heart to giving a helping hand. Your moment can brighten their whole day and believe me – you won't be any later in the grand scheme of life. Also be aware of your neighbours and those that you see in your business – do you notice a pattern of difficulties? Encourage those around you to do their best for our elders – it's not out of fashion – in fact, I think it's one of the “coolest” things we can do.

Most of all, don't tolerate abuse of any kind. We must respectfully stand up for those that are vulnerable. I cannot go ahead and phone a lazy landlord when directly asked not to, by a worried senior, as this would not respect my client's wishes. However, I can use this forum to point out how acts of omission can cause unnecessary discomfort to those in our society that have earned respect and consideration.