

Sexual Violence & Older Adults:

Information for Service Providers

For those working in elder care settings, it can be common to hear about financial abuse, neglect, or even physical abuse of older adults. Sexual violence, on the other hand, is an issue in the older adult community that is rarely discussed.

It can happen to anyone

1 in 2 people in Alberta experience some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime. While people can and do experience sexual abuse in their adult years, it's also common for many older adults to carry experiences of sexual abuse from their childhood, youth, and early adulthood.

Why we don't hear about older adults' experiences of sexual abuse

- Fear they will be disbelieved or blamed for the abuse
- Fear they will get the person hurting them in trouble
- Fear of losing independence
- Lack of knowledge of their rights in regards to consent
- Culture and language might be barriers to disclosing
- Many of us hold ageist beliefs that make it difficult to recognize when elder sexual abuse is happening. For example, there's a common assumption that older adults do not have sexual and/or romantic desires and are therefore not at risk of being sexually abused

Definitions

Sexual assault is any sexual contact without voluntary consent.

Consent is a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. That means that no one is allowed to pressure, guilt, threaten, or blackmail someone into agreeing.

Sexual harassment is any unwanted comment, gesture, or action that is sexual in nature, that makes someone feel afraid, embarrassed, ashamed, or any negative feeling.



Core facts

- 85% of the time, sexual violence happens between people who know each other and who may have trusting or caring feelings for each other. This could be a friend, spouse, or care worker
- Most people (up to 97%) find it difficult to report an experience of sexual violence
- Sexual assault is about power and control not sexual desire

Supporting an older adult who has experienced sexual violence

Listen

- Provide a safe, non-judgmental space for someone to disclose their experience
- Validate their feelings; let the person know that they are entitled to their feelings, and that there is no wrong way to feel following an experience of sexual violence
- Allow the person to set the tone and pace of the conversation
- Respect and mimic the language someone uses. Consent laws have changed drastically since the 1980's, and it's possible that older adults might not identify their experiences as sexual abuse, even if they felt uncomfortable or harmed by the behaviour

Believe

- Show that you believe the person through both your words and actions
- Try statements like "I believe you," "This was not your fault," and "I'm sorry this happened to you"

Be mindful about questions

- Avoid asking too many questions, as this can create overwhelm, or communicate doubt or disbelief
- Avoid "why" questions (including "Why have you never told anyone about the abuse?"). Why questions often sound judgemental or accusatory
- Only ask questions that are needed to better support the person, or to help identify whether someone is at risk of continued abuse

Respect privacy & confidentiality

When someone experiences sexual abuse their power and autonomy is temporarily taken away; whenever we are supporting someone we want to look for opportunities where this person can have control over their life and their healing. This includes deciding who they share the information with, when they share it, and being able to share it in their own words.

Explore options

All people deserve support that centers their voice, needs, and experiences. Rather than advice, provide options:

- Accessing counselling or community supports
- Connecting with friends, family, or work for support
- Not accessing any additional supports

Reporting abuse

If someone is over the age of 18 there is no legal obligation to report known or suspected abuse, unless you know or suspect that an adult who receives publicly funded care or support services is at risk of abuse. If you have questions or concerns about reporting abuse of an older adult, contact the Protection for Persons in Care Info & Reporting Line at **1.888.357.9339**.

Resources

Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence:
1.866.403.8000

SAGE Seniors Safe House:
780.702.1520

Seniors Abuse Helpline:
780.454.8888

Sexual Assault Response Team (SART): [Access from any ER in the Edmonton Zone](#)

STI Clinic: **780.342.2300**

For additional resources, and to learn more, visit www.sace.ca/learn/older-adults