

# Elder Abuse Presentations: Responding to Challenging Situations



Conducting elder abuse presentations can be rewarding. The presenter has an opportunity to provide participants with an understanding of elder abuse and practical strategies to make a difference in the lives of older victims of elder abuse and related phenomenon, such as self-neglect and abuse in later life. Effective presentations can improve identification and intervention and enhance prevention efforts. Communication among service providers and other professionals can significantly increase and improve outcomes for older adults. Your role facilitating a discussion among participants can enhance learning.

At the same time, conducting these presentations can be challenging. Case examples are often tragic and heartbreaking. Participants may be uncomfortable with the subject matter or be living with difficult personal situations. Others may be angry or confrontational. They may make challenging comments that must be addressed. Some examples include:

- > **Blaming the Victim:** Some participants blame the victim whether intentionally or unintentionally by asking questions about what the victim did to provoke the abuse or why the victim didn't "just leave." Other participants may have difficulty understanding why older victims may refuse services, return to an abuser, or recant. They may focus on victim behaviors rather than on what the abuser did or minimize the offender's actions.
- > **Ageist Comments and Assumptions about Victims:** Some participants may believe all elder abuse victims are frail, dependent, and/or have disabilities. In contrast, research indicates that in many cases it is the abuser who is financially and/or emotionally dependent on the victim. While some older victims have health issues and disabilities, many do not. Beliefs about dementia may result in assumptions that, in general, older persons are unreliable reporters or witnesses.
- > **Focusing on Punishment for the Perpetrator:** Some participants may focus on punishing the perpetrator to the exclusion of meeting the victim's needs.
- > **Focusing on "Fixing" the Perpetrator:** Sometimes attention given to the offender is based on inaccurate assumptions that anger management, stress reduction workshops, or substance abuse programs will permanently end abuse. While these types of programs are important and may address anger, stress, and substance abuse, often they do not hold offenders accountable and victims may not be safer as a result of these interventions with offenders. Sometimes people can lose sight of the of which person is the client. Remind the class that the victim is the older person or the adult with a disability and that that person wants/needs the abuse to stop.
- > **Diverting the Teaching Point:** Some audience members may ask questions that are significantly off-point or tell "war stories" that are irrelevant to the teaching point.
- > **Personalizing the Material:** Many audiences will include participants who have experienced family violence, are currently working on difficult elder abuse cases, or have an older family member who they may believe is a current victim of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Abusers may also be in the audience. These participants may respond from an emotional rather than a professional perspective.

## PRACTICAL TIPS TO RESPOND

Several effective strategies for overcoming these challenges include:

- > To the extent possible include learning about the participants as part of your preparation.
- > Consider team teaching with presenters from other disciplines. Team teaching is a particularly effective way to address challenging comments about other professionals or victim-blaming statements.
- > Consider setting training guidelines [or ground rules] at the beginning of the training. If guidelines are stretched or broken, sometimes participants can be brought back to the key teaching points by reminding them of the guidelines [e.g., listen to various participant perspectives; speak respectfully to presenters and participants].
- > Use a strong, respectful facilitation style.
- > Consider inviting participants to respond first to the comment. Other class participants may address the inappropriate comments and thereby “self-correct” the class.
- > Know the training points to bring the audience back if they go off topic.
- > Address victim-blaming comments by bringing the audience back to the resiliency and strength of victims. Victim blaming does not end abuse or resolve the situation.
- > Be prepared for personal reactions or disclosures from audience members. Have a plan to talk with individual participants on a break if needed or to direct them to another professional or agency representative after the presentation.
- > Close the discussion on a positive note. Do not end a session with responding to a question. Save the last three to five minutes to make a strong closing statement that brings the group back together and focuses on the key training points for the session.

*This “Tips for Trainers” section includes content from the curriculum “Elder Abuse: Training for Law Enforcement [2012] by the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life [NCALL] and the Office on Violence Against Women.*