



CHALLENGES WHEN INVESTIGATING ELDER SEXUAL ABUSE

Victims with Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia

Working with victims of dementia can create special challenges. Some accounts of victims with dementia who report sexual abuse are dismissed because the older individual is not seen as a credible reporter. Keep in mind that an assault may have occurred, even if other things the person says are not likely or possible. Perpetrators often target victims they know will not be good reporters and will not be believed.

Another challenge when victims have dementia is consent. In some cases, spouses or partners will engage in sexual activity with an older individual who no longer has the ability to consent, especially those living in facilities. The spouse may claim it is his right to continue to have sex with his wife even though the law may disagree.

Perpetrator's with Dementia or Alzheimer's Disease

A person with certain types or stages of dementia may display inappropriate sexual behavior. The person may engage in inappropriate fondling of others or compulsive masturbation in public. This may appear to be a form of sexual aggression but may not actually be a power and control issue. The person may not know what he is doing. Regardless of the intent, victims of these behaviors are impacted, and steps should be taken to protect the victim from further attacks. It is also important to offer supportive services to the victim.

If an investigator is told that a suspect has Alzheimer's Disease or other dementia, contacting your local APS, Crisis Response Team or a Dementia Diagnostic Center may be more appropriate than arrest. These agencies can help assess the situation and identify interventions.

Investigators should be aware that standard intervention techniques may actually exacerbate a person with dementia's aggressive behavior. Avoid actions that could startle or be perceived as threatening – coming up from behind or touching when not in the person's view, loud noises (siren), physical restraint.

Adapted from: *To Live Without Fear and Violence: Sexual Assault and Domestic Abuse Against Older Individuals*, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Inc, 2004.

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Sexual Contact by Caregivers

In some states sexual contact by a nursing home employee with any resident is a crime. In general, sexual activity by paid caregivers may be a crime and should be investigated and reported to APS.

Elderly Victims May Not Want to Report or Assist with the Investigation

- Victims may be reluctant to talk about the attack, report it, or accept help because of the stigma or shame. Generational values may make it difficult for some victims to talk about sexual abuse and/or body parts.
- Memory loss and hearing and visual loss may limit a victim's ability to report episodes or be an accurate witnesses.
- Examinations may be much more difficult or even impossible as a result of physical conditions such as contractures (the victim's legs are contracted, limiting movement and repositioning).
- As a result of dementia, victims may not be able to understand that they were assaulted and may be unable to cooperate with exams.

Elder Sexual Abuse May Be Overlooked by Professionals

- Sexual assault is often overlooked and is less likely to be reported and substantiated than other forms of elder abuse.
- Professionals may fail to report because they do not know what to do.
- Professionals may believe that keeping the family unit or current caretaking arrangement is preferable to alternatives without the caretaker, including placement in a long term care facility.