

Elder abuse and people from an Aboriginal background

People of Aboriginal background aged 50 years and over are considered to be older. This is reflective of Aboriginal peoples' lower life expectancies.

In the context of Aboriginal culture, the term 'older people,' 'elder' and 'Elder' are used. 'Elders', with a capital 'E', are recognised community representatives and custodians of culture, history, the Dreaming and storylines.

Elder abuse risk factors for Aboriginal people

Anecdotal evidence suggests abuse of older Aboriginal people is on the increase. Risk factors such as the rising prevalence of substance misuse across Aboriginal communities and poor social and emotional wellbeing have meant that the actions young Aboriginal people may often be the cause of harm, mistreatment and elder abuse. Financial abuse is most commonly reported, and is linked to issues such as entrenched poverty, substance abuse, and breakdown of strong family structures. More risk factors are listed below.

Historical and cultural

- > dispossession of land and cultural dislocation
- > intergenerational grief and trauma
- > dislocation of families through child removal policies
- > impact of institutionalisation
- > imposed shame
- > impact on healthy functioning of community kinship systems
- > changes in gender roles
- > socio-economic:
 - > economic exclusion
 - > unemployment and welfare dependency
 - > income management
 - > entrenched poverty
 - > multiple caring roles for younger generations.

Health and social and emotional wellbeing

- > low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness
- > marginalisation as a minority
- > societal attitudes and stereotyping
- > individual, direct, indirect and institutional racism
- > destructive coping behaviours
- > poor health outcomes
- > lateral violence.

Sourced and adapted from Tasmania, Responding to Elder Abuse 2012



Elder abuse in Aboriginal communities

- > Elder abuse takes different forms across Aboriginal communities. Living in a discrete rural community means many people know each other's business. This includes family and community tensions which exist in the everyday life of that community. Tensions can exist for years or can be transient.
- > Tensions can shift from individual to individual, family to family. This can make the help seeking process more challenging for the older person living in an abusive situation. Knowing what these tensions are is important if the community is to be engaged as part of the solution to ending elder abuse.
- > Elder abuse raises fear and concerns of being judged as an inadequate parent or grandparent by others. For Elders living in remote and rural locations, abuse may be more difficult to address. The Elder may not want the community to know their family business and shame about the abuse may keep the abuse hidden or prevent it from being addressed.
- > Family obligation in Aboriginal cultures is very important and may have both positive and negative effects on the outcome of an intervention taking place. Family obligation can positively help families to work together to keep the individual safe. On the other hand, loyalty towards family and fear of loss of family may be a barrier to help seeking behaviour of individuals and families, even when abuse is occurring. If the older person being abused has a strong family network or is respected in the community, other community members may feel compelled to speak up and step in.
- > People of Aboriginal background accustomed to living in rural communities, may feel more isolated and challenged in seeking help when living in metropolitan environments. Lack of family support and community connection living in metropolitan regions means abuse can go unnoticed and people may be unaware of how or where to access services.
- > A range of community services are available for people of Aboriginal background however, they may be reluctant to access these. Our past and contemporary history with poor treatment of Aboriginal people, including the Stolen Generation, is a major barrier to feeling safe to access mainstream services, especially when abuse is the issue. Other barriers to accessing a service whether rural or metropolitan might include language (oral and written), poverty and lack of access to transport, family obligations (children/grandchildren), racism and lack of respect from service providers.

Response to elder abuse of people from Aboriginal background

- > The strength of the Aboriginal community means that often the method of elder abuse prevention and response is found within the community. The community often has the capacity and is best placed to deal with the issue, utilising existing community networks and strategies.
- > Each case of elder abuse is unique and assumptions should not be made based on what you know and understand of another situation. Asking questions, understanding and clarifying cultural influences and listening to the wishes of the older person/Elder living with the abuse is important. Awareness of Aboriginal culture and the different communities should be a major consideration if you are considering how to respond to elder abuse.
- > Getting help and support of trusted and respected family members or community is critical. This can lead to short and long term positive outcomes. Sometimes, seeking outside support may be the better option if a community does not have the capacity to work together.

- > Bringing together respected and safe community leaders, Elders and family members is the best way to achieve cultural respect and ensure any planned strategies are considered and implemented. Where there is cultural and or language differences for staff working with the abuse issue, it is vital to have a trusted community person or group to work through all issues of safety and wellbeing for the older person.
- > If you are a service provider, using a partnership approach where possible, can improve actions to safeguard an older Aboriginal person, and is an effective and more culturally respectful approach. For example, the older person, the agencies, the family and Elders of the community are invited to sit together to look at what strategies would best keep the older person safe.

Resources:

[Protecting our Elders: Abuse of older people is not part of Aboriginal Culture](#)

[A Little Yarn Goes a Long Way – Aged Care Complaints Scheme](#)

[Abuse of an Aboriginal Elder is real dog act – ARAS and the Council of Aboriginal Elders of South Australia.](#)

[Ngadluku Purkana, Tirra-apinhi – protecting our Elders: Service Provider Handbook. Domiciliary Care](#)

<http://www.dcsi.sa.gov.au/services/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>

For more information

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