

Division of Aging and Adult Services

Issue Brief - Vulnerable Adult and Elder Abuse Awareness

Building a Livable and Senior-Friendly North Carolina

"Living Wise and Aging Well"

Self-Neglect

Self-Neglect is a controversial category in relation to elder abuse. At the heart of the controversy is the individual who is competent, but chooses to neglect his/her personal health or safety. Is this abuse? Adult Protective Services at your County Department of Social Services can assist you with your questions/concerns regarding someone you know who may be self-neglecting.

Self-neglect, represents the highest percentage of cases of elder abuse. In North Carolina, 69% of all reports are for allegations of self-neglect. There are many factors which may lead one to self-neglect, including the following:

Long-Term Chronic Self-Neglect: These individuals have engaged in self-neglecting behaviors periodically or consistently throughout adulthood. The individual may have an undiagnosed and/or untreated mental health problem. The problem may escalate when paired with physical impairment, social isolation, malnutrition, substance abuse, cognitive impairment, and/or limited financial resources.

Dementia: Those who may be in the early stage of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's Disease), may be undiagnosed and susceptible to self-neglect.

Illness, Malnutrition, & Overmedication: Many illnesses (e.g. low grade infections such as urinary tract infections) may result in dementia-like symptoms. These symptoms may interfere with the older adult's ability to care for himself/herself. For many reasons, an older adult may be malnourished (poor nutrition, physiological changes). Also, overmedication, which unfortunately is common in the elder population, as well as age-related changes in the older person's physiology, may result in dementia-like symptoms and associated self-neglect.

Depression: Depression can be an issue for older adults as much as it can be for individuals of any age. Two symptoms particularly relevant are difficulty maintaining self-care and dementia-like behaviors.

Substance Abuse: Substance abuse can also be an issue for older adults. Some older adults suffer from long-term addictions. Not only may the older person self-neglect as a direct result of the addiction, but he/she may also self-neglect as a result of disorders from long-term addiction. In addition, some older adults develop substance abuse problems in their later years possibly in response to depression, stress, loss, or anxiety.

Poverty: Many older adults live on the edge financially. Often, these individuals are forced to choose among food, housing, and medication. It may appear that the individual is choosing to self-neglect (e.g. he/she neglects to take heart medication or is undernourished), but the individual simply cannot afford to adequately care for himself/herself.

Isolation: There is a clear cut correlation between lack of social support and self-neglect. Isolation is a risk factor for all forms of elder abuse.

Prevention/Intervention

- Maintain close ties with aging relatives, neighbors and friends
- Find sources of help
- Interventions must begin small with a high degree of respect for the older adult and his/her decisions. As trust increases, so can the amount of intervention or help provided.
- Diagnosis and appropriate medical treatment are imperative
- Intervention entails the creation of trust, increased involvement of the older adult in the community, and the creation of social supports. This, of course, may be problematic for those individuals who have had little social support throughout their life.

To find out more about Vulnerable Adult and Elder Abuse Awareness, go to: www.ncdhhs.gov/aging/eaday