Elder Abuse and Faith

Building Community Partnerships to Support Faith-Affiliated Older Survivors of Abuse

Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership
Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse

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Today’s Presenters

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Honoring Older Survivors
Have you worked with older adults for whom faith was critically important?

Building a Common Language

- Faith leader
- Faith/religion/spirituality/beliefs
- Advocate/service provider
- Victim/survivor/congregant/client
- Jargon, acronyms, and “insider” language
- Vocabulary that supports an interfaith, ecumenical, multi-religious movement
Older Adults and Faith Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
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<td>Baby Boomers</td>
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<td>Generation X</td>
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<td>Older Millennials</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>Younger Millennials</td>
<td>64</td>
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Religious Affiliation of Americans by Race

- Black: 82%
- Latin@: 80%
- White: 76%

“Religious affiliation is the most common form of organizational participation among older adults, with 50% reporting attending services weekly.”

American Psychological Association, Older Adults’ Health and Age-Related Changes: Demographic, Economic, and Social Issues.
Forms of Elder Abuse

- Physical Abuse
- Emotional/Psychological/Verbal Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Neglect
- Financial Exploitation
- Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual Abuse

“What comes to your mind when you hear “spiritual abuse?”
Faith: A Significant Resource

"Religion" from Latin "religare" to connect, to bind.
In the midst of isolation . . .

Religion, spirituality, or faith connects older victims and survivors to . . .

- Community and traditions
- Language and memories
- Family and culture
- History and country of origin
- Core identity, values, and beliefs
- Source of strength and courage
- Creator, G-d, Great Spirit, Higher Power

In the midst of confusion and chaos . . .

Faith, religion, or spirituality can provide the structure that helps survivors of elder abuse re-orient themselves, find their bearings, stay centered in their values and identity.
In the midst of loss and grief . . .

- Faith, religion, or spirituality may provide resources that faith-based survivors carry with them that no one can take away.

- Faith, religion, or spirituality may help survivors who are faithful grieve the losses.

Spiritual Connection

Older survivors of abuse tell us that a spiritual connection is critical to their identity, their decision making, and their healing.
Spiritual Suffering

“What has been most violated . . . are intangibles: love, faith, trust, and hope. The result is spiritual suffering, and a serious sense of loss and powerlessness.”

Older survivor of abuse, 2009

Not all older survivors identify with a particular faith or tradition.

However, many survivors identify spiritual as well as mental and physical needs.

All survivors need someone to bear witness to the story, someone to accompany them on the journey toward safety, justice, and healing.
Older survivors and victims of abuse are likely to turn to their faith communities for help.

Have you worked with faith leaders who were helpful in supporting an older adult?
“An Ontario study of the shelter needs of older Canadian women found that older women would seek help from a place of worship if they experienced abuse.”


“Respondents, especially minorities, often indicated that their ‘first stop’ would be a member of the clergy if they were to discuss their DV with anyone.”

Many women felt that they would be likely to seek the help they need in their places of worship.”

“More than many other formal care providers, faith leaders are in a position to identify, assess, and intervene in abusive situations because they see older people in their own context over time, and have ongoing access to their residences.”

Elizabeth Podnieks, 2003

Faith community members and leaders . . .

- know older members of community
- know individuals across time
- know families across generations
- visit in homes, hospitals, long-term care and assisted living facilities, rehabilitation hospitals, nursing homes
- provide ongoing worship opportunities in nursing homes and assisted living facilities
- are already trusted confidantes and important gatekeepers
A Significant Opportunity

“The paucity of studies that look at elder abuse in religious communities speaks to the presence of a significant gap in our understanding of elder abuse . . . . this important social support for seniors is not well tapped.”

Elizabeth Podnieks, EdD, RN and Sue Wilson, PhD,
“Elder Abuse Awareness in Faith Communities: Findings from a Canadian Pilot Study,”

Have you worked with faith leaders who were not helpful in supporting an older adult?
Faith: Identifying the Gaps

Without training and resources . . .

- Denial
- Silencing
- Blaming and judging
- Minimization
- Unsafe solutions and “quick fixes”
- Manipulation by abuser
- Couple’s or marriage counseling
- Dead end
“I told my priest about the abuse 27 years ago.

He told me to pray harder.

Now I have calluses on my knees and my husband still beats me.”

Older survivor, 1986

“I turned the other cheek, and turned the other cheek, until I ran out of faces.”

Survivor, 1985
“The thing we most want clergy to do is listen. It takes so much energy, strength, and courage to speak up. When a victim is ready to speak, clergy HAVE to listen. Clergy shouldn’t say, ‘we’re out of time,’ or ‘I have a meeting.’”

Older survivor, 2009

“One look [from a faith leader] that says, ‘I don’t want to hear this, or ‘I don’t believe you’ will shut a victim down for another 20 years.”

Older survivor, 2009
Faith leaders can . . .

- RECOGNIZE
- RESPOND
- REFER
- REACH OUT

With training and partnerships, a faith leader or member of a congregation could provide . . .

- Safe, compassionate, and confidential listening
- Acknowledgement of the abuse and trauma
- Assurance that the victim is not to blame
- Theological and spiritual support
- Material support
- Community connections and referrals
Additional Roles for Faith Leaders

- Intervention
- Prevention
- Long-term social change
- Accountability
- Community leadership

Next Steps for Faith Leaders

- Learn more
- Break the silence
- Gather resources
- Support survivors
- Build partnerships
- Provide information
- Speak out against elder abuse
Mandatory Reporting

Building Community Partnerships

Faith Community
DV & SA Service Providers and Advocates
Aging Services Network
Adult Protective Services
Health Professionals
Financial Services Professionals
Legal Services
Courts
Law Enforcement
Elder Abuse and Faith Toolkit

- Where Faith and Safety Meet Toolkit and Partnership Guide
- Handouts
- For more information
  - [www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org)
  - [www.ncall.us](http://www.ncall.us)

Ram Dass

We're all going to the same place, and we're all on a path. Sometimes our paths converge. Sometimes they separate, and we can hardly see each other, much less hear each other. But on the good days, we're walking on the same path, close together, and we're walking each other home.
What are your ideas for strengthening partnerships between APS staff and faith leaders and congregations?

Do you have concrete examples?

Strengthening Relationships between Faith Leaders and Adult Protective Services

- Building Trust
- Developing a Common Language
- Learning Roles
- Sharing Skills
- Partnering to Support Older Adults
- Community Resources and Education
- Moving the Conversation Forward
Contact Information

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Thank You!