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## DESCHENE: Practical ways to spot, stop abuse of elders

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Posted: Sunday, November 17, 2013 12:00 am

**BY ROBERT DESCHENE** | 0 comments

Elder abuse, both reported and unreported, is one of the most overlooked hazards as we age.

It can be self-neglect, or done by family members, paid caregivers or nursing homes. Types of abuse include physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual, financial and neglect, including self-abuse.

Caregivers report that 20 percent of them fear they might become violent with the vulnerable elders for whom they care. Estimates of caregivers abusing elders with dementia range from 34 to 62 percent. Sadly, in almost 90 percent of elder abuse cases, the abuser is a family member, usually an adult child or spouse.

Although this is a grim reality, the good news is that anyone can learn to recognize signs that might mean an at-risk elder needs help to remain safe and respected, and how to report suspected abuse to authorities.

The two keywords for understanding the root of much elder abuse are "stress" and "isolation." Many Baby Boomers are sandwiched between caring for and supporting their parents' increasing needs and those of their own adult children. A family caregiver may be chosen because there aren't the financial resources to hire a paid caregiver, or because that family caregiver is perceived to be the least burdened by the role.

For example, they may not be employed, may already live with the elder, or have room and accessibility at their own home to accommodate the elder's needs. Caring for the elder may become a full-time, at-home job. As the stress mounts and seems relentless, a caregiver's anxiety, constricted social contacts and perceived burden may cause unsuspected or unanticipated bad behavior.



If your family needs in-home support for an elder, contact the National Family Caregiver Support Program ([www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA\\_Programs/HCLTC/Caregiver/](http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/AoA_Programs/HCLTC/Caregiver/)) to find practical ways to ease this burden before it becomes a problem.

How might you detect and prevent elder abuse?

Isolation and stress for the caregiver can be relieved by visiting the elder and the caregiver for friendly chats, by offering to take the elder to doctors' appointments or the elder's pet to the vet, or by delivering prepared meals. These informal visits also provide a way to observe signs of possible abuse. Obvious red flags are the caregiver yelling at or ignoring the elder. But subtler signs of abuse may include: poor hygiene, dramatic weight loss or dehydration, unexplained mood changes, bruises or other injuries, missing belongings, or the elder's refusal to answer questions in front of the caregiver. Consider also whether the elder's standard of living seems inconsistent with their financial resources, which may indicate financial exploitation. Even if no caregiver is involved, these same signs may indicate that an elder is abusing themselves through self-neglect.

What should you do if you think you detect abuse or self-neglect? In most cases, if you are not a medical or elder-care professional, you aren't legally required to report abuse, but as a society, we ought to feel some moral obligation to report. Reporting suspected abuse is a powerful weapon, however, and you may not be sure whether the evidence you see is reportable. If you are in doubt, call and seek the guidance of an elder law attorney or the Massachusetts Elder Abuse Hotline (800-922-2275). Protective services will investigate to confirm if abuse or self-neglect is occurring, and may draft a care plan to remedy the situation. If criminal behavior occurred, protective services may report the case for possible prosecution. If the elder is competent, they will be free to accept or reject the recommended care plan. If not, protective services may petition the court for appointment of a guardian to act in their interest.

If we remain vigilant to the signs of elder abuse, we can make sure all of our elders maintain the dignity and safety they deserve.

Robert Deschene is an attorney who does estate and elder law planning in North Attleboro. Contact him at 508-316-3853 or [www.deschenelaw.com](http://www.deschenelaw.com). The information provided in this column is for informative purposes only.

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