

Sexual Assault of Older Adults: Information for Family and Friends

What is Sexual Assault?

Sexual Assault includes any behavior of a sexual nature which:

- ❖ Makes the victim feel uncomfortable or afraid, OR
Is unwanted, OR
- ❖ Occurs without their consent.

This may include:

- ❖ Any unwanted touching such as, pinching, patting, embracing, rubbing, groping, kissing and fondling or being forced to touch someone.
- ❖ Someone showing private parts of the body or flashing genitals.
- ❖ Putting a penis, object or other body part in the victim's vagina or anus, or any contact between the mouth and genitals.
- ❖ Being made to look at, or pose for, pornographic photos/videos.
- ❖ Being watched while made to perform sexual acts.
- ❖ Being forced to watch anyone perform sexual acts.
- ❖ Rough or inappropriate cleaning or treatment of a person's genital area.
- ❖ Unwanted sexual talking or language suggestive of sex.

It is also Sexual Assault if:

- ❖ The person is too frightened to say "NO".
- ❖ There is confusion about the activity, such as believing it is a medical or care procedure.
- ❖ The person is incapable of giving consent for any reason.
- ❖ The identity of the sexual partner is not who the Older Person expected it to be.

Myths about Older People and Sexual Assault

- ❖ Older Adults are asexual because sexuality is only experienced in youth.
- ❖ Aging is a protective factor against sexual assault.
- ❖ Older Adults do not require the same level of privacy and care around sensitive issues.
- ❖ Older Adults make up stories, are confused or are demented.
- ❖ Sexual Assault is less traumatic for Older Adults with a cognitive impairment as they may not remember.
- ❖ Older Adults are not as impacted by sexual assault and don't need counselling.

Signs that may indicate that an Older Adult has been sexually assaulted

Verbal Indicators

- ❖ Full and direct statements about sexual assault
- ❖ Jumbled or indirect statements about sexual assault

Physical Indicators

- ❖ Bruising, bite marks or skin tears
- ❖ Redness or swelling
- ❖ Bleeding around the mouth and or genitals
- ❖ Itching inflammation or infection of the genitals
- ❖ Sweating or trembling
- ❖ Fractures
- ❖ Pain or internal injuries
- ❖ Unexplained STI
- ❖ Changes in functional status
- ❖ Weight loss
- ❖ New bladder or bowel incontinence
- ❖ General failure to thrive
- ❖ Non-fatal strangulation symptoms, including: pain in neck, bruising around neck, difficulty swallowing, husky or deep voice, nausea

Behavioral Indicators

- ❖ Fearful of a particular person or place or paying an unusual amount of attention to a person or place
- ❖ Fearful of some medical or care procedures
- ❖ Refusing to go to bed, going to bed fully clothed
- ❖ Refusing personal care
- ❖ Lack of interest in usual activities

- ❖ Social isolation and withdrawal
- ❖ Requesting a door lock
- ❖ Inability to concentrate
- ❖ Disturbances of sleeping, eating or bathroom habits
- ❖ Other changes that are out of the ordinary that are observed by family, friends or carer's

If you suspect that an older friend or relative has been sexually assaulted

If you believe an Older Adult may have been sexually assaulted, you or someone they trust should approach them with open ended questions that focus on their wellbeing rather than sexual assault.

Some useful questions to ask:

- ❖ "Has anything been bothering you lately?"
- ❖ "I've noticed a change in ___, can you tell me how/why this has happened?"
- ❖ "Is anything making you feel unsafe or uncomfortable?"
- ❖ "Has anyone been demanding or asking things of you that make you feel uncomfortable?"

Responding to a Disclosure

Your friend or relative may disclose a recent assault or an assault that has occurred earlier in their life. It is important to be aware that the way you respond to a disclosure can have a direct impact on an older person's ability to cope and recover.

Important tips:

- ❖ Set aside enough time to address their feelings and reaffirm their trust in you.
- ❖ Use open ended questions where possible.
- ❖ Try to stay calm and contain your emotions to avoid making them feel that they are upsetting you.
- ❖ Try to contain feelings of anger toward the alleged offender and suspend any discussion of taking further action allowing them time to talk.

What do I say?

- ❖ "Thank you for telling me"
- ❖ "What happened was not your fault"
- ❖ "You did the right thing by telling me"
- ❖ "I believe you"
- ❖ "What can we do to make you feel safe"

Deciding what to do next

You can provide your relative or friend with the support they need by contacting your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA). They can provide information about counselling, options for further action and further information and advice.

Ensure that the Older Adult understands that they will not be forced to take any action, and that the primary focus is on supporting them and their decisions.

It is also extremely important that you receive all the support and information that you need, as this can be a very stressful and emotional time. CASAs offer confidential and free counselling to friends and family of victims of sexual assault, as well as providing useful advice and information on how you can support friends or family who have experienced sexual assault.

CASAs can:

- ❖ Provide free and confidential crisis support and ongoing counselling for victims.
- ❖ Discuss options and provide information on contacting the police.
- ❖ Support victims who require forensic examinations.
- ❖ Provide information and counselling to yourself or other family or friends who require additional support.

What if the Sexual Assault takes place while receiving Aged Care

Older Adults who are receiving Commonwealth funded aged care services are protected by the Serious Incident Reporting scheme (SIRS) that mandates providers to report all sexual assaults to the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (ACQSC) and the Police.

Following a report the provider should ensure that immediate actions are taken to prevent further harm and provide regular updates and communications with victims and trusted family members or friends.

Other Support Services

- ❖ Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL): Call 1800 806 292 (Free call Victoria)
- ❖ 1800 Respect (1800 737 732)
- ❖ Elder Rights Advocacy Victoria 1800 700 600 (free call)
- ❖ Seniors Rights Victoria 1300 368 821
- ❖ Compass.org <https://www.compass.info/>
- ❖ Victims of Crime Helpline: Free call 1800 819 817
- ❖ Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission Complaints 1800 951 822

References

- ❖ Barrett, C and Lee, Y (2022) Ready To Listen MAP Guidelines.
- ❖ Barrett, C et al (2024) The [Un] Silencing of Older Women, a Life Stages Approach for the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children.
- ❖ Qu, L et al (2021) National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report.
- ❖ National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2024-2034. Public Consultation Draft. Attorney Generals Department.