

Seniors and Sexual Assault/Abuse

Definitions:

Sexual Assault: Any unwanted or forced acts of a sexual nature (i.e. kissing, touching, intercourse etc.). Sexual Assault is an act of violence. It is not about sex.

Sexual Harassment: Any behaviour, comment or gesture of a sexual nature that is considered to be offensive. It is unwanted behaviour that makes the receiver feel uncomfortable. It can be coercive or subtle in nature.

Criminal Harassment (Stalking): Any activity such as repeatedly following someone, calling them, engaging in threatening conduct directed at a specific person or anyone connected to that person that causes a person to fear for their safety or the safety of anyone connected to him/her.

Elder Sexual Abuse: is defined as coercing an older person through force, trickery, threats, or other means into unwanted sexual activity. It includes sexual contact with elders who are unable to give consent as well as unwanted sexual contact between service providers and their elder clients.

The Laws:

- Sexual Assault is a criminal offence.
- If a victim of sexual assault is age 16 or older, it is up to them to file a complaint with the police. There is only a duty to report adult sexual assault if the adult is under Adult Protection.
- It is a criminal offence for a husband to rape his wife.

Factors Regarding Elder Sexual Abuse:

- The research about sexual violence against seniors is limited. Often it is overlooked and not considered an issue for seniors. This is partly due to ageist assumptions about older adults by the general public and/or service providers; and because of lack of reporting by seniors who are victimized.
- Sexual Assault can occur throughout the ages, however, there are some factors that impact on how seniors may experience sexual violence and how service providers respond to elder sexual abuse:
 - Rape myths, gender stereotypes, and generational perceptions of men and women.
 - Perceptions regarding aging, the elderly, and sexuality.
 - Generational perceptions about what is acceptable topic of public discussion – some seniors may be uncomfortable talking about sexuality, sexual abuse, and/or personal or family matters with helping professionals, authority figures (i.e. police, doctors, ministers etc.) or with anyone younger than them.

Factors That May Make Seniors Vulnerable to Sexual Violence:

- Dependent financially, physically and/or emotionally on Caregiver(s) or family member(s) who may be the abuser(s).
- Physical and mental effects of aging, (i.e. dementia, memory loss, physical limitations, etc.).
- Generational beliefs about sex and sexual abuse may increase feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and embarrassment.
- How other people view the victim/survivor based on personality, life circumstances, mental health, racial/ethnic background, etc. (i.e. if the person is considered an attention seeker they are less likely to be believed and therefore more vulnerable to predators).

Examples Of How Seniors Experience Sexual Violence:

- Approximately 3.5 million women over aged sixty are survivors of childhood sexual abuse. However, many may have never reported or disclosed their abuse or may not identify it as they age. However, the impact of aging may affect how victim/survivors cope with sexual assault trauma.
- Many seniors experience sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in nursing homes by other seniors and/or by staff. 98% of sexual abusers of seniors are male; but women may also be perpetrators.
- Sexual abuse or harassment by older men may be viewed as a behaviour brought on by aging, dementia, and other illness and not treated as a criminal act. Regardless for the reason for the behaviour, the impact on the victim is still traumatic and often ignored.
- Some seniors have been victims of sexual assault during home invasion or robbery.
- Some older women report unwanted sexual advances by male acquaintances at social events, or indicate that they feel pressured into sex by their husbands or male companions.

How Helping Professionals/Support Providers Can Help:

- Become informed about sexual violence issues and elder sexual abuse.
- Become more informed about issues pertaining to aging and to seniors.
- Familiarize yourself with support services available in your community.
- Learn the signs that may indicate that someone is a victim/survivor of sexual violence.
- Take complaints about sexual assault/elder abuse seriously.
- Take action if you see someone committing elder sexual abuse/assault/harassment
- Become involved in awareness campaigns to address senior sexual abuse in your community/place of work.
- Find out about laws, duty to report, adult protection, and the various Acts that protect seniors.