

RECOGNITION

Module 6: Dynamics of family violence

In this module:

- Violence against older persons as a family violence problem;
- What is “family violence”;
- How is family violence defined in Newfoundland and Labrador;
- The roots of family violence;
- Who is at risk of family violence;
- Who are the perpetrators;
- Intimate partner violence;
- Violence committed by adult children;
- Older persons may be reluctant to admit that violence is a problem;
- A holistic approach to preventing violence in later life;
- A social and life skills approach to preventing family violence;
- Stories from the front lines; and,
- Questions for reflection.

Violence against older persons as a family violence problem

In recent years, family violence against older persons has become a growing social problem in Newfoundland and Labrador. Reasons include:

- The rising numbers of older persons in the total population;
- The related increase in disabling illnesses and injuries that come with longer life;
- A large majority of older persons in this province (approximately 93 per cent) live in the community and not in residential care facilities;³⁴
- Isolation and lack of supports in rural regions; and,
- The increased family role in caregiving for older persons.

Very little family violence research focuses on violence against older persons. What we do know is that actions of power and control exist across

³⁴ Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (no date). *Provincial Healthy Aging Policy Framework*. Retrieved from: http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/publications/ha_policy_framework.pdf.

the lifespan. Violence does not suddenly stop at some older age. Nor does it necessarily begin with the vulnerabilities sometimes associated with older age.

Violence against older persons can also be viewed in the context of family violence. This is because such violence can often be found in families touched by other forms of family violence, such as child abuse.

In this module, we explore the basics of family violence. We will define it and look at its roots. We will examine who is most likely to experience violence. We will also consider some of the reasons why older persons may not want to admit that they are victims of family violence. Finally, we will propose a holistic response to prevent violence in later life.

What is “family violence”?

Family violence refers to violence that takes place within the family where there are relationships of kinship, dependency and trust. This can mean violence between:

- Intimate partners;
- Parents and children;
- Siblings; and/or,
- Extended family members.

Family violence also includes witnessing violence in the family. It tends to get worse over time. With the first act of violence, the risk of further violence grows.

Most of the violence that is inflicted on older persons is committed by family members.³⁵ Of course, violence against older persons can also be carried out by neighbours, friends, paid caregivers or strangers.

Family violence can take many forms, including:

- Physical violence;
- Psychological violence;

³⁵ Statistics Canada. (2013). *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2011*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.

- Emotional violence;
- Verbal abuse;
- Sexual violence;
- Financial abuse;
- Neglect;
- Spiritual violence; and,
- Cultural violence.

How is family violence defined in Newfoundland and Labrador?

The ***Family Violence Protection Act*** defines family violence as **physical violence or the threat of violence; or actions that are threatening or abusive**. This includes withholding food, shelter or medical care. This *Act* protects older persons who are or were in a conjugal relationship with the perpetrator, or who have a child with the perpetrator and the child is under age 19. The *Family Violence Protection Act* can be found online at www.justice.gov.nl.ca.

Section 3(1) of the *Act* further defines family violence as:

- a) An assault that consists of the intentional application of force that causes the person to fear for his or her safety, but does not include an act committed in self-defense;
- b) An intentional, reckless or threatened act or omission that causes bodily harm or damage to property;
- c) An intentional, reckless or threatened act or omission that causes a reasonable fear of bodily harm or damage to property;
- d) Forcible physical confinement without lawful authority;
- e) Sexual assault, sexual exploitation or sexual molestation, or the threat of sexual assault, sexual exploitation or sexual molestation;
- f) Conduct that causes the person to reasonably fear for his or her safety, including following, contacting, communicating with, observing or recording a person; and,
- g) The deprivation of food, clothing, medical attention, shelter, transportation or other necessities of life.

The *Family Violence Protection Act* provides for Emergency Protection Orders which makes emergency help available to adult victims of family violence and their children.

The roots of family violence

Family violence involves an abuse of power and control in a relationship. One person uses power to control another in a hurtful way. It is violence by the *more* powerful against the *less* powerful. Family violence is widespread.

Violence persists in our society because of:

- Unequal power between groups, such as women and men;
- Stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice;
- Sexism, ageism, ableism, racism, heterosexism;
- Discrimination against persons with disabilities;
- Colonialism with respect to Aboriginal peoples; and,
- Societal tolerance for violence as a way to solve problems.

Who is at risk of family violence?

Anybody can be a victim of family violence. It can happen regardless of:

- Sex;
- Gender;
- Ethnicity;
- Race;
- Culture;
- Religion;
- Socio-economic status;
- Geography;
- Ability;
- Education;
- Sexual orientation; and,
- Age.

Those most likely to experience violence in relationships are members of groups that are seen by some as weaker and having less power. This includes:

- Women;
- Children and youth;
- Older persons;
- People living in poverty;
- Immigrants and refugees;
- Aboriginal persons;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons;
- People living in rural regions; and
- Any group outside the dominant culture.

Who are the perpetrators?

Those family members who are most frequently in contact with an older person are the most often responsible for the violence. Intimate partners and adult male children commit the most violence against older women.³⁶ See Module 8 for more information about the risk factors involved in violence against older persons.

Intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence is violence that occurs within an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating or common-law. The violence can extend into later life, and can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples. It can range from a single episode to long-term, severe violence.

Many cases of violence against older persons involve long-term intimate partner violence. This violence does not stop with age. Violence that is intimate partner violence “grown old” is mostly carried out against women by male partners.

³⁶ Statistics Canada. (2013). *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2011*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.

Violence may get worse with age as challenges or resentments grow. Sometimes, it takes on new forms (for example, emotional violence may become physical). A new partner may be violent, but a long-term partner rarely begins to commit violence in old age. If a long-time partner becomes violent, it may be due to some other reason such as dementia.

Violence committed by adult children

An older person who does not require care may still be at risk of violence from a relative. Adult children are the most frequent family abusers of older persons at home. The typical perpetrator is an adult child under the age of sixty, who lives with or near the older person. There is often an aspect of dependency in the relationship. The adult child may depend on the older person for money, shelter or care. Or, it may be the older person who is dependent on the adult child.

Older persons may be reluctant to admit that violence is a problem

Older persons may not want to admit that they have been harmed by a family member. There are many reasons for this:

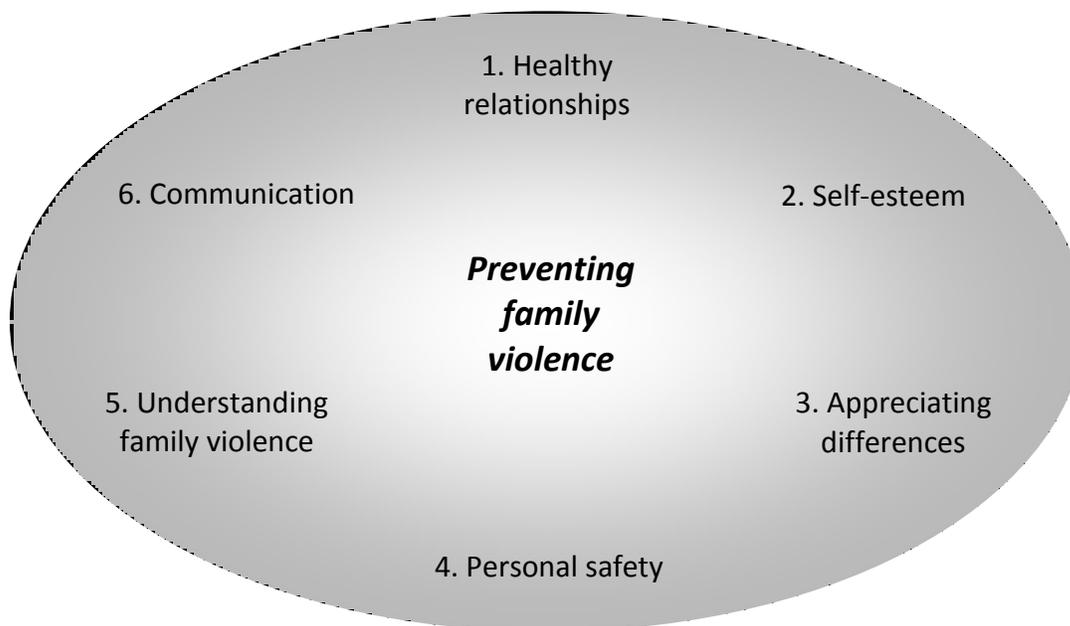
- Shame, embarrassment or family loyalty;
- Believing that victims “get what they deserve”, victim blaming;
- Lack of awareness that what they are experiencing is violence;
- Fear of being sent to a “home” or a residential care facility;
- Fear of the perpetrator;
- Dependency on the perpetrator for care;
- Fear of being left alone;
- Believing that a relationship is “for better or for worse”;
- The “normalization” of violence after experiencing it for many years;
- Lack of money;
- Trouble finding work;
- Trouble finding alternate housing and/or emergency shelters; and,
- Not aware of options.

You can find additional information on this topic in Module 15, *Barriers and risks in reporting violence*.

A holistic approach to preventing violence in later life

A holistic approach to preventing violence in later life addresses many elements of this complex social problem. Aboriginal values teach that all life is connected. This suggests that the problem of violence cannot be healed by working only with individuals. Families and communities also have an important role to play. To address violence, the whole social system must be restored to balance. The following diagram shows a holistic model for the prevention of family violence. It uses education, awareness and development of social and life skills in individuals, families and communities.

A social and life skills approach to preventing family violence



1. Healthy relationships

- Understanding the factors that affect and support healthy relationships.

- Understanding how healthy relationships support personal needs and feelings of self-worth.
- Knowing that respect for others promotes healthy relationships.
- Developing good interpersonal and social skills.

2. Building self-esteem

- Knowledge of the factors that affect and support self-esteem and self-understanding.
- Understanding and valuing personal empowerment.
- Developing strategies to feel competent (including taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions).

3. Appreciating differences and diversity

- Developing skills to examine stereotypes and assumptions about others.
- Learning how to examine cultural and gender biases.
- Appreciating, valuing and celebrating differences.

4. Personal safety

- Knowledge of personal safety.
- Developing skills to identify risky situations and responses to ensure safety.
- Knowledge of resources and how to access and use them.

5. Understanding family violence

- Increasing awareness of the problem of family violence.
- Knowledge of factors that contribute to family violence.
- Developing empathy for those who are touched by family violence.
- Understanding the use of power and control in violent relationships.
- Understanding that violence is never okay.

6. Communication

- Developing skills in active listening.
- Raising awareness and skills in managing anger.
- Knowing that good communication skills are needed to deal with interpersonal conflict.

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Dorlene

Dorlene, 77, recently moved from another city to live with her daughter Rachelle and her family. Dorlene had often felt a little uneasy around her son-in-law Melvin, but she adored her daughter and grandchildren.

Melvin was pleasant to Dorlene when other family members were present. But when they were alone, Melvin would call Dorlene senile and stupid. He would make fun of the way she talked and her lack of education. Melvin threatened her that he could have her “put in a home” if she said anything to Rachelle.

Rachelle could not understand why her mom had become so withdrawn. Dorlene was spending almost all of her time in her room, except for meals. She did not eat much, and seemed sad and depressed. Rachelle wondered why her mother would shut down like this in such a loving home. She made an appointment to see a social worker that specialized in working with older people to discuss her concerns.

The social worker asked if Rachelle could bring her mother to her office so she could speak with her alone. The social worker and Dorlene worked together to find an accommodation solution that would be more suitable for Dorlene. They found a lovely personal care home about two kilometres from Rachelle’s home, where Rachelle and the grandchildren could visit as often as they liked. Dorlene made friends with several of the other residents and even became a volunteer at the local Fifty Plus Senior Citizens Club.

Sam

Sam, 82, lives with his grandson, Ned. Sam has not been answering his phone and does not go out much. His granddaughter, Alice, goes to visit him. During one visit, she accidentally spills juice on Sam’s shirt. Alice asks him if he would like a clean shirt. Sam refuses and seems upset. Alice gets him to remove the shirt. She is shocked to see bruises and welts on Sam’s

chest and arms. In time, Alice learns that her brother Ned has been beating Sam. Ned has threatened Sam not to tell. Sam seems very afraid of Ned.

John

John is an active 60-year-old. He sees friends and family regularly. John is close to his nephew, Frank. John is helping to pay for Frank's education. Frank recently asked John for a large sum of money to get him started in business. John keeps paying Frank, but tells no one because he does not want his nephew criticized. He has used up much of his savings.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- For each story above, list the names of the participants and their relationships. Then indicate the types of violence that are occurring and any risk factors that may be present.

a) Dorlene's story

Name	Relationship to Dorlene	Type(s) of violence	Risk factors

b) Sam's story

Name	Relationship to Sam	Type(s) of violence	Risk factors

c) John's story

Name	Relationship to John	Type(s) of violence	Risk factors

2. Is there a history of family violence in any of these stories? Who is the victim in each case? Who are the perpetrators? Which types of violence do you suspect? (For more information, refer to Module 1, *Types of violence*.)
3. In each of these stories, who is at high risk of violence? List the risk factors that you see. (For more information, refer to Module 15, *Barriers and risks in reporting violence*.)
4. These stories show that older adults do not fit neatly into definitions. Every situation is unique. Each individual reacts differently. What approach would you take in a situation where there are high risk factors but the older person, for whatever reason, does not want to leave?
5. Do you know an older person who may be in a family violence situation similar to any of those above? Do you need to assess, intervene or alert someone else?