

PREVENTION

Module 9: Root causes of violence

In this module:

- **Why does violence against older persons happen;**
- **Power and control as the underlying factors in violence;**
- **Common control tactics;**
- **The Cycle of Violence;**
- **The myth of caregiver stress as a primary cause of violence;**
- **Being a supportive helper for an older person;**
- **Restoring power and control to the older person;**
- **Stories from the front lines;**
- **Questions for reflection;**
- **Power and Control Wheel; and,**
- **Advocacy and Empowerment Wheel.**

Why does violence against older persons happen?

Violence is the abuse of power and control. Violence involves patterns of behaviour and actions intended to gain power and maintain control over others. Violence results in a violation of a person's rights and may also be a crime punishable by law.

Violence is rooted in inequality. It takes many forms. Older persons in our province may experience physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual and cultural violence. They may also suffer verbal and financial abuse, and neglect. All forms of violence are wrong, and all can be equally damaging. Treating older persons with respect, fairness and equality goes a long way to prevent violence.

There is a need to increase awareness of the problem of violence against older persons in Newfoundland and Labrador. Understanding the causes can help to reduce the problem.

Interventions should focus on the safety and empowerment of the older person. Education and awareness are the first steps in violence prevention.

Power and control as the underlying factors in violence

Violence often involves ongoing - and sometimes escalating - patterns of power and control over another person's thoughts, feelings and actions. Power and control tactics may involve physical violence, but just as often they do not. They can also include humiliation, fear, or emphasizing one's superiority over another. Isolation can be used to exert control in many ways, including limiting contact with others, jealousy, and limiting outside activities.

The Power and Control Wheel, on page 120, shows the types of violence and abuse that are inflicted on older persons. See Module 1 for more information on the types of violence.

Common control tactics

People who try to control other people do so to try to meet their own needs. They use control tactics to manipulate how others think, feel and act. These tactics may not always involve physical harm. They may include intimidation, coercion, isolation, and minimizing or denying violence. An example of a controlling tactic is the threat of something bad happening if the controlling person's demands are not followed.

Creating dependency is one common form of power and control. A perpetrator creates dependency when she or he isolates the older person, blocks access to the phone or visitors, or does not allow the older person to leave the home. Emotional violence or verbal abuse may also be used to create dependency: "You can't leave because you have no money of your own!" or "You know you'll never get along without me!"

Many victims of violence are not dependent on the perpetrator for care. The perpetrator often is dependent on the victim. For example, many

perpetrators are adult children who still live at home and rely on their parents' resources. The perpetrator's dependence may be financial, emotional or practical (i.e., having dinner cooked and clothes washed).

Other tactics used by controllers to abuse and mistreat older persons include:

- Shaping his or her own public image as a “do-gooder.” Controllers may do this by attending church, shoveling a neighbour's path or volunteering in the community;
- Portraying the older person as unstable, frail, depressed or troubled;
- Threatening to make a scene. This strategy is used by controllers to get their own way and keep all attention focused on their needs. They stay in control by appearing to lose control. (See the Cycle of Violence below);
- Surveillance and monitoring. The controller needs to know where the older person is at all times, and who the older person is with. The older person may not be allowed to speak with helping professionals unless the controller is present; and,
- Emotional blackmail. This takes many forms, ranging from the silent treatment when the controller does not get his or her way, to threatening suicide.

The Cycle of Violence

The Cycle of Violence is a pattern or process that occurs in relationships where there is violence or abuse. In most cases, the perpetrator is an intimate partner. However, the cycle of violence can sometimes occur in relationships with family members, employers, peers and others. The phases are:

1. Honeymoon phase;
2. Tension build-up phase;
3. Explosion phase; and,
4. Honeymoon or reconciliation phase.

At the beginning of the Cycle of Violence, during the *honeymoon phase*, the perpetrator is caring, loving and helpful, and there is the sense that all

is well. This phase may also be known as the “hearts and flowers” period of the relationship.

Eventually however, conflict begins to build within the relationship. During the *tension build-up phase*, tension rises at an uneven rate. At this stage in the relationship, one may feel as if they are walking on eggshells for fear of upsetting the other person in the relationship.

The situation worsens until it finally results in the *explosion phase* where the perpetrator commits violence or abuse. This may be in the form of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual or cultural violence as well as verbal or financial abuse or neglect.

Following the *explosion phase*, the *honeymoon or reconciliation phase* begins again. The perpetrator may express remorse and apologize for what happened. They may promise that they will never commit violence in the relationship ever again.

Despite the seemingly hopeful behaviour however, the Cycle of Violence usually repeats itself. In some cases, the *honeymoon phase* completely disappears over time, and the cycle is reduced to no more than the *tension build-up and explosion phases*.



Knowledge of the Cycle of Violence is useful for anyone in a position of helping older persons. It is important to note that the model is not indicating that the violent person cannot control her or his actions. The fact that the *tension phase* precedes violence does not mean that all perpetrators use

violence to release “built-up” tension. Many perpetrators use violence in a conscious and deliberate effort to control. Violence is a choice.

The myth of caregiver stress as a primary cause of violence

Caregiver stress is often described as a primary cause of violence against older persons. The caregiver stress theory describes perpetrators as well-meaning. They want to be caring, but lose control under stress. There is no doubt that caregiving can be difficult and stressful. The work is often hard, and the hours are long. Many caregivers work for low pay. Many are family members giving their time and resources.

As a result of these factors, many people believe that stressed caregivers sometimes “snap”. They may become violent or abusive, and say or do things they would not do normally. The bottom line is that **stress does not justify violence**. We all experience stress. Each of us makes choices about how to deal with stressful situations. Most people do not relieve stress by physically or emotionally abusing others. We all find ourselves in positions of power over others at some point in our lives, whether as a parent, manager, teacher or caregiver. Each of us needs to make conscious choices about how to use that power.

The problem is that when stress is seen as an excuse for violence, interventions tend to focus on helping the perpetrator get better, rather than on helping the older person who has been harmed. Perpetrator-centered interventions such as counselling or “stress management” may not make the victim safer. These interventions do not necessarily address the primary problem of the perpetrators’ faulty beliefs system and sense of entitlement. In fact, with a perpetrator-focused intervention, the belief system may be reinforced, the victim may be further isolated, and the violence or abuse may continue and even get worse. Further, the caregiver stress theory treats violence mainly as a social services issue rather than a crime.³⁸ Ultimately, the needs of the person who has been harmed must drive the response to violence.

³⁸ Brandl, B. “Power and control: Understanding domestic abuse in later life.” [The American Society on Aging](#). 24.2. (2000): 39-45.

Being a supportive helper for an older person

If you are a helping professional, caregiver or volunteer who works with older persons:

- Be aware of the power imbalance in the helping relationship. To reduce its effects, acknowledge this difference in power;
- Provide explanations and information about choices and options;
- See the older person as an active participant in the helping process;
- Tell the older person that she or he has choices, and can choose to opt out, proceed at her or his own pace, or take the lead on numerous decisions or actions; and,
- The older person should be seen as being an active participant in a mutual exchange. She or he should never be considered as a passive recipient of services.

The Advocacy and Empowerment Wheel on page 121 shows what it means to be a supportive helper for an older person. These principles offset the use of power and control in relationships.

Restoring power and control to the older person

Since violence involves the removal of power and control from an older person, then empowerment of the older person should become the focus of any intervention. An empowerment model restores, as much as possible, decision-making and control to victims. This perspective builds on older persons' strengths, skills and resourcefulness.

It is a big step for an older person to admit to being a victim of violence. Some older persons may not even realize that what they are experiencing is violence. (See Module 15, *Barriers and risks in reporting violence*)

Good interventions that take into account the dynamics of violence in later life focus on safety and ending physical or social isolation. Empowering older persons to empower themselves means providing them with information and helping them learn about their rights and their options.

Safety planning (discussed in Module 11) helps them prepare ahead of time for any encounters with the perpetrator.

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, 66, lives with her husband Wes. After retiring four years ago, Wes became depressed and started drinking. He had always been verbally abusive to her. It became a lot worse in recent years. Wes has also become very controlling. He will only let Elizabeth use the car for medical appointments. Elizabeth is having trouble coping, and the stress is affecting her health. She is worried that one day Wes will harm her physically. She does not know who to turn to.

Kay

Kay, 75, was having trouble getting around in her three-story home. She agreed to sell the house and move in with her son and daughter-in-law. Things have not been working out since Kay moved in. Her daughter-in-law has hit Kay more than once. She is also emotionally abusive. Kay's son managed the sale of the home and then put the money in his own bank account. He also takes her pension cheques. Kay feels trapped and sees no other option, but to stay where she is.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. See if you can recall a time in your life (at home, work, or school, for example) when you felt powerless. Now recall a time when you felt powerful and empowered. For each situation, answer the following questions:
 - Who was involved?
 - What were the events leading up to the situation (the “tension buildup”)?
 - What types of control tactics were used?
 - How did you respond?
 - How did you feel about your response?
 - How did it end (or is it still ongoing)?

2. If you were to draw a Power and Control Wheel for your own life, how would it look? Here are some ideas for creating your own “Wheel of Life”:
 - Include only the number of sections that have meaning for you. Your wheel may have as few as three or four sections, or as many as 15.
 - Add sections to reflect other things that have happened in your life.
 - Make some sections small and some larger. The size depends on their influence in your life.
 - Label each section. Add some words that have personal meaning.
 - Add any power or control tactics that have been part of your life experience.

POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL



ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT WHEEL³⁹



³⁹ Adapted from the Domestic Violence Project Advocacy Wheel, Kenosha, Wisconsin, USA