

What is it and how can you prevent it?

Elder abuse doesn't have to come in the form of physical abuse or neglect. In its financial form, elder abuse is the *exploitation of senior citizens to gain access to their property, investments, cash, or real estate*. As many as one in five cases of financial elder abuse remain undetected and unreported, often because the perpetrator is a family member of the victim. What are some warning signs for you to look for if you suspect an older person is being exploited?



Isolation

The number one tactic used by perpetrators is to separate the victim from family and friends who would stop the abuse. Watch for victims to stop attending social events or even disconnect their phone line.

Changes in spending habits

Drastic changes in account balances or unusually flamboyant purchases like cars and real estate are a sign that the senior citizen is not the person in charge of their finances. Keep a close eye on lavish "gifts" to new friends or acquaintances.

Unfamiliar names on joint accounts

Sometimes perpetrators convince their victims that they will help them organize their finances by creating a joint account. In reality, this gives the perpetrator unlimited access to the victim's funds. If a senior citizen wants another person to manage their finances, they should use a Power of Attorney (POA) account instead, which puts a legal obligation on the co-signer to protect the elderly person's interests.

If you notice these warning signs, what should you do about it? The first step is to talk to the suspected victim. Often, financial elder abuse victims are afraid or ashamed. They can be hesitant to seek help because they don't want to admit they've been scammed. Many are afraid if they admit they've been taken advantage of they'll be put in a nursing home. This can be especially true if the alleged perpetrator is a family member, because the victim may not want their relative to get in trouble.

Another option is to report the suspected abuse to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Wisconsin's elder adults-at-risk help lines can be found listed by county here: <http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/aps/Contacts/eaaragencies.htm>. However, the best thing to do is educate your elderly family members and friends about how they can protect themselves from becoming victims in the first place.