

PERSONAL & HOME SAFETY CROSSROAD

CONNECTION FOR CAREGIVERS

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Definition

This CrossRoad will discuss the overall vulnerability of emotional, physical, sexual and financial harm to older adults. To accomplish this you as the caregiver and the older adult must constantly be aware of the environment and plan for all potential risks of harm and injury that may occur to the older adult.

Glossary of Terms

A list of terms you may come across while researching this topic.

Search Our Database

On the Navigating the CrossRoads main page you will find a drop down menu of pre-populated search terms that will bring you to a list of Central Massachusetts agencies and programs that relate to this topic. You may also [CLICK HERE](#) to go to our Guide to Elder Services, an online searchable database, to do more extensive searches or for results in a specific zip code, city/town or Central Massachusetts geographic region. ***If you are unable to find a keyword on the pre-populated list and it consists of two terms, transpose the order of the terms i.e. to search for Safety Education use the keyword Education, Safety.*

Helpful Links

A list of outside websites to visit for further information.

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Please remember as you read the following material and have further questions we strongly encourage you to contact the resources listed below.

- Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA) Elder Abuse Hotline
 - Call 1-800-922-2275 (V/TDD)
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the FEMA website
 - Call 1-800-621-3362 (FEMA) or 1-800-462-7585 TTY
- Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA)
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the MEMA website.
 - Call 508-820-2000
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the MEMA website to find your local Emergency Management's contact information
- The American Red Cross
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the American Red Cross website
 - For the Central Massachusetts region call 508-595-3700
 - [CLICK HERE](#) for more contact information for the American Red Cross Of Central Massachusetts
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention(CDC)
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the CDC website
 - Call 1-800-232-4636
- The Alzheimer's Association
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the Alzheimer's Association's Caregiver Center page
 - Call 1-800-272-3900 for the 24/7 Helpline
 - [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the Alzheimer's Association Massachusetts and New Hampshire Chapter Local Resource page
 - To contact the Central Massachusetts Regional Office call 508-799-2386

This information was written with older adults in mind and is meant to provide a general overview of personal and home safety planning for older adults. The information provided does not discuss every aspect of this topic. This information does not constitute legal nor medical advice. We encourage you to consult with competent professional and/or legal representatives for advice.

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Introduction

As a caregiver, a major ongoing concern is the physical, mental, and financial safety of the older adult in your life. If you take the time to address the safety of an older adult, hopefully you can prevent unnecessary harm from coming their way. Monitoring for safety concerns that the older adult might experience is important. Helping an older adult live safely, despite their challenges, requires creativity and ongoing assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Addressing developing safety problems may prevent accidents that lead to injury or financial hardship. Many older adults face personal and household dangers that can be avoided with a little knowledge and preparation. Having an open line of communication with the older adult that you care for is vital in avoiding these safety threats. As a caregiver you should also communicate with neighbors and others who observe the older adult in the community.

Keep in mind that you are not alone in your mission to keep the older adult you care for safe at home and in the community. For many of the situations you encounter, there are agencies and organizations that can advise you about specific safety problems and their solutions. Seeking help from area agencies and organizations is an effective way to improve the safety of the older adult you care for and can relieve some of the stress of doing it by yourself. Make sure that you actively involve members of your CareTeam in the creation of the necessary safety plans. As you create these plans you may recognize the need to involve new professionals and non-professionals on the CareTeam.

Emergencies

As a caregiver, you need to prepare yourself and the older adult for emergency situations such as health-related crises and natural and man-made disasters. You should first research any type of existing community-wide emergency plans that are appropriate for the older adult. Then determine how the older adult can best access the services these community plans offer. You must create a specialized plan if there are gaps between what is being offered and the older adult's individual needs. Every community in Massachusetts has its own designated emergency management department who will create plans for various emergencies that could affect the community at large. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the MEMA website to find your local Emergency Management's contact information.

Natural And Man-Made Disasters

Emergency situations like hurricanes, snowstorms, flooding, chemical spills and/or power outages may leave older adults vulnerable and unsafe. Developing an emergency plan with an evacuation route, meeting place, and plans for alternative shelter is important. Keeping emergency supplies and equipment available in the older adult's household is also helpful in decreasing their vulnerability in an emergency. Most communities have specific instructions on how to proceed during the event of certain natural and man-made disasters. It is important that you ensure the older adult is able to access information during such emergencies. This may include keeping a radio, cellular phone, or small television in the home that can work when telephone lines and electricity are not functioning. This will help the older adult be aware of ongoing dangers as well as resources available to them as an emergency situation persists. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the FEMA website for a family supply list of what should be kept in a household emergency kit.

Medical Emergency Kits

It is important that you put together a Medical Emergency Kit for the older adult. This kit should include all information that could be useful in a medical emergency. At least two people should be told of its whereabouts and it should be put where it can easily be found. The kit must have a list of people to be notified in case of a medical emergency, including their names and contact information. It should also contain a list including the older adult's primary care doctor and specialists, important medical history, current medications, and both food and drug allergies. All of this information is

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helpful to an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) or any other medical professional involved in the older adult's care. You should also be sure to include copies of the older adult's medical insurance, Medicare, and MassHealth (Medicaid) cards. Instructions on where to find the older adult's health care proxy and living will should also be included in the kit. Lastly, it is important to store a piece of paper with the older adult's birth date written on it, as it may be required in order to access medical information and verify identity.

Personal Emergency Response Systems (PERS)

An increasing number of older adults are utilizing technology to help themselves in emergency situations. One example is the use of Personal Emergency Response Systems (PERS). PERS technology allows older adults to connect to emergency personnel by activating a device (bracelet, necklace) that they wear at all times. Upon activation of the device, emergency personnel will try to make contact with the older adult and if there is no direct response, then the older adult's pre-established emergency contacts will be notified or local emergency personnel will be dispatched to the older adult's home. Costs and services will vary by provider. There are some community services that will offer financial assistance in paying for PERS.

Are You OK?

"Are You OK?" is a program designed for older adults who live alone. It is a telephone reassurance program where the older adult's welfare is checked daily. Telephone calls are made to the older adult's home at the same time each day. If there is no response after multiple attempts, a designated emergency contact will be alerted. These programs are community-based and are usually run by police departments or volunteers. Programs vary by community and some use automated telephone calling systems where others utilize volunteers to make the telephone calls.

Wandering

Wandering from home is one of the most emotionally wrenching and life-threatening behaviors exhibited by older adults with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD). Developing a care plan for an older adult who wanders can be challenging. There are many resources available to those who are caring for an older adult who wanders. One good way of making sure an older adult does not wander from the home is to install a door alarm. If for some reason you are unable to install a door alarm, hanging bells on doors is a good alternative. Some caregivers have found it helpful to disguise exits. Hanging a picture of an item, such as a bookcase, to completely cover a door exiting the home may help to deter the older adult from using it. Many older adults with ADRD have an altered perception and because of this will think the bookcase is real and will not attempt to go through the door. There are many technological devices available to help monitor the whereabouts of an older adult who wanders. You may decide to have the older adult wear a device on their person such as a necklace, bracelet or anklet. These types of products may utilize personal global positioning system (GPS), internet or radio frequency technology to locate a missing older adult. The most common programs require someone to notify the local police and fire departments that the older adult has gone missing. There are systems where you are able to establish a perimeter that allows the older adult to freely move about in the home and in designated areas of the property. These programs offer a caregiver the security of knowing that if the older adult goes beyond the established perimeter, they or local authorities will be notified and the established safety plan will be implemented.

You should inform local police about any older adult who has a history of wandering. It is vitally important that you always have a current picture of the older adult who wanders. This is helpful for search and rescue personnel when attempting to locate an older adult who has wandered. We suggest you sign up for Safe Return, a program available to those in Massachusetts and across the country. This national program locates and recovers older adults who have wandered and become lost. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the Alzheimer's Association's website for more information about Safe Return. In the event that an older adult wanders from home, the important thing is not to panic but rather to implement your established safety plan.

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Household Safety

It is important to keep the older adult's household safe, whether they live alone, with friends, with a spouse, or with a caregiver. If the older adult you care for has a disability, it is especially important to make sure a safe household is maintained. There are many ways for you to make the home of the older adult safer. Information to create a safer home environment is available to you from many agencies and organizations.

Falling

Falls are a common cause of injury for older adults. It is not unusual for falls to occur in the older adult's home. It is extremely important for you to set up the older adult's home in such a way to best prevent falls. Older adults may fall due to a lack of physical activity, impaired vision, osteoporosis, or certain medications. All of these possible causes should be examined. If an older adult has fallen before, it may be more likely to happen again. One way to set up the home safely is to arrange furniture so that there are clear pathways for the older adult to walk. The most common ways to ensure safety in the home is to address the proper placement of scatter rugs, clearing stairways and ensuring proper lighting is installed. Older adults who need mobility aids, such as walkers, canes or wheelchairs, should be encouraged to use them even in the home. The careful placement of handrails and grab bars around the home may help prevent falls.

Fire

Fire is a concern for all households. You may be afraid that the older adult could mistakenly start a fire and be unable to get to safety. The leading causes of fire related injuries among older adults are unsafe cooking, incidents related to smoking cigarettes, and accidents as a result of poor home heating practices. To keep older adults safe from fire, caregivers should encourage older adults to adopt safe habits while cooking, as well as when using wood stoves and space heaters. Equally important is to ensure the older adult is always attentive when smoking nicotine products, especially while using home oxygen. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) for more information.

Hoarding

Hoarding is defined as the excessive acquisition and inability, or unwillingness, to discard large quantities of objects that would usually be regarded as useless or without value. In other words, an older adult with a hoarding problem is someone who collects an extreme amount of things that create clutter in the home, car, garage, or outside storage units etc. The clutter can become a hazardous sanitation problem that jeopardizes the older adult's health and well-being. If this type of situation is reported to certain public authorities, an older adult may be threatened with eviction from their home. If you suspect that the older adult has a hoarding problem, you should direct them to two types of professionals who can help them work through their hoarding problem. The older adult will need first and foremost psychological counseling to address the problem and then assistance to actually clean out the collected materials. All too often people think they can just go in and clean up an older adult's property and things should be better. Unfortunately it is widely known that without counseling support hoarding situations will return. In times when the older adult is in immediate danger the first priority may be to remove them from the home and/or clean the property. Professionals who may assist an older adult in addressing and cleaning up a hoarding issue are their primary care physician, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, professional organizers and rubbish removal companies. Many communities have a Hoarding Task Force, a group of professionals including therapists and public officials dedicated to helping those with a hoarding problem. [CLICK HERE](#) for a list of Hoarding Task Forces located in Massachusetts. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit The Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services for more information.

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Incontinence

While it can often go unacknowledged due to the embarrassment and shame associated with it, incontinence, the loss of bladder and/or bowel control, is a personal safety issue for many older adults that should be assessed and discussed immediately. A failure to address the older adult's bladder and/or bowel issues can lead to various safety and health hazards. Incontinence increases the older adult's risk of slipping and falling and in cases such as hoarding, contributes greatly to unhealthy living conditions. Incontinence can be a symptom of many different medical conditions or a side effect of some medications. However, there are a wide variety of options available to treat incontinence effectively, and sometimes it can even be cured. Methods for continence management include various products and supplies, medical intervention such as a change in diet or prescriptions, or a change in the older adult's routine that establishes a consistent bathroom schedule.

Elder Abuse

There are many forms of abuse for which older adults are at risk. These risks are exceptionally high when an older adult is suffering from cognitive or physical disabilities, and isolation or loneliness. The types of abuse include psychological or emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and self neglect or neglect by another. Family, friends, members of the CareTeam, the older adult him/herself and/or strangers may all be potential abusers. Anyone who has reasonable cause to believe that an older adult has been abused or neglected may report elder abuse directly to Elder Protective Services at the local Aging Service Access Point. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs oversees the protective service program for older adults. Be aware that any older adult may rightfully choose to refuse services if he/she can understand the consequences of not accepting help. To report any suspected case of emotional, physical, sexual, financial abuse or neglect of an older adult please call **1-800-922-2275**. You will be redirected to the local Protective Services Department provided by the Aging Service Access Point (ASAP) in the older adult's area. ASAPs are responsible to provide services necessary to prevent, eliminate or remedy the effects of abuse by another or self-abuse of an older adult. Anyone can make a report of abuse or self neglect. Police officers, licensed psychologists, coroners, registered podiatrists, occupational therapists, osteopaths, probation officers, emergency medical technicians, firefighters, and executive directors of homemaker and licensed home health agencies are mandated to report elder abuse/self neglect under the law. Any mandated reporter failing to report elder abuse/self neglect may be subject to a fine. The types of elder abuse are emotional/psychological, physical, sexual, passive and active neglect, and financial.

Emotional/Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse is defined as the willful infliction of mental or emotional anguish by threat, humiliation, or other verbal or nonverbal conduct. It is suspected that one in every four dependant older adults is a victim of psychological abuse. Types of emotional abuse include insults, threats, intimidation, bullying, or forced isolation. Family members, not staff who care for older adults, are the most common to inflict emotional abuse. Usually this is a result of caregiver stress due to the required ongoing attention to the physical and mental needs of an older adult.

Signs that the older adult may be experiencing emotional abuse include:

- Being nervous, anxious, hopeless, helpless, passive, ashamed, depressed, confused, disoriented, agitated, evasive, and withdrawn
- Trouble sleeping
- Trembling, rocking, mumbling to him/herself, refusing to make eye contact
- Exhibit signs of fear when in the presence of the abuser

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is defined as inflicting, or threatening to inflict, physical pain or injury to a vulnerable older adult on purpose. This includes hitting, slapping, kicking, or beating the older adult. It can also

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include unnecessary forms of physical restraint, like tying or chaining an older adult to a bed. Those who abuse are most likely to be unmarried and to live with their victims.

Signs of physical abuse include:

- Physical trauma/injury such as bruises, broken bones, or fractures, cuts, welts, scars, burns, hair loss, tooth loss, choke marks, rope marks or other signs of restraint
- Repeated injuries such as fractures
- Unexplained injuries
- Injuries whose explanations do not make sense or do not seem realistic
- The explanations of injuries are not consistent-it is explained differently by different people or at different times
- Delay seeking medical care for injuries
- Seeking treatment from different medical professionals or facilities in order to avoid professionals from noticing patterns of abuse
- Broken glasses or glass frames
- A sudden change in behavior by the older adult
- Any member of the CareTeam refusing to let the older adult talk to others without being present
- Significant overuse or underuse of medications

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes any level of sexual behavior that the older adult does not agree to. In some cases, older adults are not capable of consenting to any sexual activities, in which case any sexual behavior is considered abusive. Both women and men are victims of sexual abuse. Those with cognitive or physical disabilities are especially at risk.

Signs of sexual abuse include:

- Trauma, bruising, pain or bleeding in genital area or on breasts
- Venereal diseases or genital infections that cannot be explained
- Undergarments or clothing that are torn or bloody
- Signs of emotional/psychological abuse

Passive And Active Neglect By A Member Of The CareTeam

If a member of the CareTeam fails to provide the care that the older adult needs, this is neglect. There are two kinds of neglect, active, and passive. Active neglect is when a member of the CareTeam is purposefully not meeting the needs of the older adult.

Passive neglect is when the abuse is not done on purpose. This occurs when a CareTeam member is unable to fulfill his or her caregiving responsibilities as a result of illness, disability, stress, ignorance, lack of maturity, or lack of resources. Whether it is active or passive, neglect is dangerous to the older adult and it needs to be reported.

Signs of passive and active neglect by a member of the CareTeam include:

- Malnutrition, dehydration, poor hygiene, significant weight loss
- Unhealthy or unsafe living conditions
- Untreated bed sores
- Chronic health problems that could have been prevented
- Medication not given

Self Neglect

Self neglect is when the older adult is at risk in the community because of failure to take action in meeting his/her own needs. The older adult may refuse care, not know that they need care, or do not ask for care. An example would be if an older adult with dementia is not taking his/her medications

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because he/she is not capable of taking them properly. However, an older adult has the right to make decisions regarding his/her own care as long as he/she is capable, including decisions that may negatively affect health outcomes. The older adult can continue to make his/her own decisions even if members of the CareTeam disagree unless the older adult has been deemed incompetent. If competent the older adult has the right to fail. If a case of abuse is reported the older adult has the right to refuse any services offered as long as they are able to understand the consequences.

Signs of self neglect include:

- Malnutrition, dehydration, poor hygiene, significant weight loss
- Unhealthy or unsafe living conditions
- Untreated bed sores
- Chronic health problems that could have been prevented
- Medication not taken

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse is the exploitation or misuse of the older adult's money or possessions. Financial scams are among the most common types of abuse that older adults encounter. This includes an individual using the older adult's money when he/she is not authorized to do so. An individual threatening or tricking the older adult into giving him/her money that has not been earned is also considered financial abuse. People closest to the older adult, such as friends and family, may be financially abusing the older adult. These individuals may be taking funds from the older adult without their knowledge or taking advantage of the relationship they have with the older adult in order to convince the older adult to give them money. Financial abuse can also include scams that are directed at older adult by strangers. There are many financial scams that try to take advantage of older adults by collecting money for fake charities or making up elaborate stories in order to receive money.

Scammers may contact the older adult via the telephone, mail, internet, out in public places, or while visiting the older adult at home. These scammers sometimes call older adults, posing as a loved one in need of emergency funds, and ask that money be sent to them immediately. Advise the older adult to never send money if this occurs until verifying the situation with other family members and authorities if necessary.

It is important to understand, as a caregiver, the older adult may feel embarrassed or ashamed of being caught in a financial scam. If this happens, assure the older adult that scammers defraud many people with convincing stories and coercive tactics. Help the older adult understand that there is no shame in being caught in a financial scam. Assist the older adult in reporting the financial scam to the appropriate authorities.

Signs of financial abuse include:

- Unusual or sudden changes to the older adult's finances
- ATM withdrawals that the older adult did not make or could not have made
- Money or valuables missing from the home
- Suspicious or sudden changes in the older adult's legal documents regarding money such as changes to wills and deeds
- Bills that are not paid even though the older adult has the money to pay them
- Forged signatures
- The older adult stops receiving statements for bills, such as credit cards, for no explained reason
- A member of the CareTeam seems overly concerned about money, wills, and other financial matters rather than about the health of the older adult

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- The older adult makes sudden changes to banking accounts such as adding another individual to the account

Crisis Intervention

The Crisis Program provides short-term, problem focused casework, and counseling to at risk older adults. In cases where the older adult is not suffering from abuse but is still at risk and living in an unstable situation, such as a threat of eviction, termination of utilities, mental health concerns, and/or are resistant to services, you can contact the local Crisis Intervention Program. These older adults do not usually have the physical, mental, or financial resources to cope with their situation. The goal of this program is to alleviate the risk through coordinating community resources and reducing barriers to care. Intervention workers provide immediate short-term support that is necessary to meet the long-term needs of the older adult. This program is offered in Central Massachusetts through the ASAPs and allows an older adult to be helped by a Crisis Worker without having to meet State Home Care eligibility.

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