

Supporter Article

Abuse and Neglect: It's Not Okay!

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Abuse and neglect cannot be tolerated. As a supporter, you are on the frontline with a responsibility to keep the people you support free from harm. Read on to find out what you can – and must – do, to **PREVENT** and **STOP** abuse and neglect.

Abuse and Neglect: *How Do I Know It's Happening?*

The first step to STOP abuse and neglect is to recognize it. Early awareness of abuse helps protect the person from additional harm. There are three ways to know when abuse and neglect happen: **you see it, you are told about it, or you suspect it is happening.**

1. *You see it.*

People can be hurt or made to feel bad in many ways: physically, emotionally, sexually, or financially. People can also be hurt by neglect. Here are some examples of abuse or neglect you might see:

- **Physical abuse:** You see a person being hit, slapped, shaken, shoved, choked, or otherwise harmed.
- **Sexual abuse:** You see someone being forced into sexual activity against their will.
- **Emotional abuse:** You see someone being yelled at, bullied, threatened, or isolated.
- **Financial abuse:** You see someone stealing money or credit cards or taking financial advantage of the person in some way.

- **Abuse by Neglect:** You see a person is not getting needed medical care or medications; the person is without adequate food or clothing; the person is not being taken care of; or, the person is abandoned.

2. *You are told about it*

When someone tells you they have been abused or neglected, **LISTEN!** Don't ignore or dismiss the person. It is often not easy for a person to come forward. They may:

- Be afraid to tell anyone.
- Think that it is their own fault and that they will be punished.
- Think they just have to put up with it.
- Not understand that they are being victimized.
- Not have the words to tell you what is going on.

Reassure the person they are doing the right thing by saying something.

3. *You suspect it*

You may not see or hear about it, but you have reason to suspect abuse or neglect. Be on the alert for these signs:

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, scratches, broken bones, or other injuries
- Inappropriate use of physical restraint or medication
- Torn or bloody clothing
- Vaginal or rectal pain or bleeding
- Frequent urinary tract infections
- Poor grooming, dirty clothes, and/or matted or unclean hair
- Malnutrition and dehydration
- Medical conditions that go untreated
- Clutter, filth, or bad smell in the home
- Sudden fear of a person or place
- Mood swings, depression, or withdrawal
- Inability to sleep or nightmares
- Missing money or credit cards
- Unpaid bills, eviction notices, or discontinued utilities
- Changes in spending patterns or ATM withdrawals

These are just some of the warning signs of abuse. Always be aware of any sudden or unexplained change in a person's health or behavior. It may be a sign of abuse.

Abuse and Neglect: *What Do I Do When I See, Am Told About, or Suspect It?*

You REPORT It! Don't Ignore It. As a supporter, whether paid or unpaid, you are mandated to report real or suspected abuse or neglect. Take immediate action to make sure the person is safe.

Then you must report it. Incidents must be reported to the regional center and one or more of the following agencies for investigation and resolution:

- **Licensing Agency, Adult Protective Services, and the Ombudsman** – for individuals living in a licensed home;
- **Adult Protective Services** - for dependent adults and the elderly;
- **Child Protective Services** - for children under the age of 18; and
- **Local law enforcement.**

Each of the above agencies has specific reporting requirements. Part of your job is to learn what must be reported, to whom, and by when.

DID YOU KNOW...

If the suspected abuse occurs in a licensed facility and results in serious bodily injury, local law enforcement must be notified IMMEDIATELY - no later than two hours after the reporter learns of the abuse.

Reporting abuse and neglect is one way to prevent it. By reporting you are getting the person the help they need to STOP the abuse and be free from harm. It may help protect others as well.

Abuse and Neglect: *What Else Can I Do To Help Prevent It?*

1. Talk to the people you support about it

Encourage the person to talk about things that concern them. If you don't understand, you might ask the person:

- To repeat what they are saying.
- To say it another way. For example, use or draw a picture.
- If someone else can join the conversation to help you understand.

When talking to the person you support, listen to what is being said. Be patient and respectful. Believe what is being said. Let the person know that what they have to say is important to you.

Make sure the people you support know that any kind of **abuse or neglect is NOT okay**. They:

- ✓ Don't have to put up with it.
- ✓ Shouldn't be ashamed or afraid to tell someone about it.
- ✓ Should not feel it is their fault.
- ✓ Should know what to do.

It's NOT Okay is a video about abuse designed to help you and the person you support have a conversation about abuse. Watch it together and share thoughts and experiences. The *It's NOT Okay* video, Poster and Tip Sheet on how to have a conversation with the person you support about staying safe can be found online at <http://ddssafety.net/safety/abuse-and-neglect/having-conversation-about-abuse-and-neglect-0>.

2. Talk to other supporters

Make abuse prevention a team effort. Don't think you have to go it alone. Don't be afraid to talk about abuse and abuse prevention. Educate yourself and others as to the causes of abuse and neglect. Start a conversation by sharing what you have learned by reading this article. Share the newsletter (<http://ddssafety.net/safety/abuse-and-neglect/fall-2015-newsletter-abuse-and-neglect>) and watch the *It's Not Okay* video (<http://youtu.be/KwRX0uEawC0>).

Each regional center and service provider must have a written *Zero Tolerance* policy. This policy requires that each employee be well-informed about their responsibilities:

- to protect people from abuse and neglect,
- and to report it when it happens.

Become familiar with your agency's policy. Help educate each other. Talk about what you can do as a team to create and maintain safe, healthy living and working environments. The more you work together as a team, the more you can do to STOP abuse and neglect.

3. Take care of yourself

Feeling down, frustrated, angry? Feeling exhausted – like you can't cope? These are all signs of stress or burnout. If you are having these feelings, you may be putting your own health at risk and the safety of the people you support. Stress can lead to anger and frustration that can lead to abuse and neglect.

If you are having these or similar feelings, do something NOW! Don't become part of the problem. Be a part of the solution. Here are some ways you can take care of yourself:

- **Talk to someone you trust** – like a friend or co-worker. Talk about your feelings and things that bother you. Just talking to someone can make you feel better and relieve your stress.
- **Regularly set aside time for yourself.** Call a friend, take a bath, take a walk, or listen to music. Do something big like taking a vacation! Taking care of yourself is not a luxury. It is absolutely essential!
- **Lighten up!** Use humor to deal with everyday stress. Get rid of the negative. Think positive thoughts! Laugh! Have fun at what you do.

Remember, you are responsible to protect the people you support from harm. The more you know - the more the people you support know - the better able you will be to keep abuse or neglect from happening to anyone.

To learn more about what you can do to manage stress, go to the Stay Healthy – Stress Less newsletter (<http://ddssafety.net/health/stress-management/summer-2015-newsletter-stay-healthy-stress-less>). Find out about ways to manage stress and reduce the potential for burnout.

Learn more about what burnout is and what you can do to protect yourself at <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642?pg=2>.

Other Resources

For tips on preventing physical abuse for administrators/managers, go to <http://ddssafety.net/safety/abuse-and-neglect/preventing-physical-abuse>.

Learn more about direct support professional special incident reporting responsibilities at http://www.dds.ca.gov/DSPT/Student/StudentYear1_3.pdf.