

**Commentary...**

# Verbal, emotional attacks are elder abuse

By **Betsy Leighty-Johnson**  
Columnist

*This is part of a series on elder abuse awareness, intended to raise community awareness and to provide resources for individuals who are themselves vulnerable or are caregivers, family or friends of vulnerable people.*

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) has Adult Protective Service (APS) offices statewide to coordinate and conduct abuse investigations and provide services to reports of neglect and abuse of vulnerable adults, including: adults over the age of 65, adults with physical and/or developmental disabilities, adults with mental illness, and children receiving residential treatment services.

Verbal or emotional abuse is the second leading type of elder abuse in Oregon, representing 26 percent of all substantiated cases in 2017. Verbal/emotional abuse often coexists with other types of abuse, including financial exploitation and physical abuse cases.

DHS' web page provides definitions and warning signs for the abuse of vulnerable adults. Verbal or emotional abuse includes threatening significant physical harm or threatening or causing significant emotional harm to an adult through the use of: derogatory or inappropriate names, insults, verbal assaults, profanity, or ridicule; or harassment, coercion, threats, intimidation, humiliation, mental cruelty, or inappropriate sexual comments.

Some of the warning signs of verbal or emotional

abuse include:

- Humiliating, insulting, or threatening language directed at the person.
- Being emotionally upset or agitated.
- Being extremely withdrawn and non-communicative or non-responsive.
- Unusual behavior usually attributed to dementia (e.g., sucking, biting, rocking).
- An adult's report of being verbally or emotionally mistreated.

Verbal and emotional abuse often takes the form of bullying and threats if the vulnerable person does (or does not) do something. An example would be if someone was to threaten or bully a vulnerable person into signing a document that would not be to the vulnerable person's best interest "or else..." Or, stating if the vulnerable person did (or did not) do something, they would be made miserable for the rest of their life. Or, stating if a vulnerable person does (or does not) do something, they will never see something important (i.e., their pet, grandchildren, or home) again.

Verbal and emotional abuse is particularly persistent in cases involving other types of abuse, such as physical or financial abuse, when the perpetrator tries to control the victim from reporting the abuse. Often, the victim is made to feel guilty or somehow responsible for the behavior and actions of the perpetrator, such that the vulnerable person becomes a reluctant or unwilling participant in the abuse investigation.

Physical abuse represents 15 percent of all substantiated abuse cases of Oregon's

vulnerable population in 2017 and is any physical injury to an adult caused by other than accidental means that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment.

Some of the warning signs of physical abuse include:

- Cuts, lacerations, punctures, wounds.
- Bruises, welts, discolorations, grip marks.
- Any unexplained injury that doesn't fit with the given explanation of the injury.
- Any injury incompatible with the person's history of unexplained injuries.
- Any injury which has not been properly cared for (sometimes injuries are hidden on areas of the body normally covered by clothing).
- Dehydration and/or malnourishment without illness-related cause.
- Unexplained loss of weight.
- Burns, possibly caused by cigarettes, caustics, acids or friction from ropes or chains.

Victims of physical abuse may excuse away their injuries by stating that they injured themselves. Regular check-ups

by medical professionals, including routine physical and vision exams, can assist in determining whether injuries are signs of abuse or reflect a need for changes in medication or other accommodations.

If you become aware of signs that a person over 65 (or a person with disabilities of any age) is being abused, report it and let the authorities investigate. Protect any evidence you may have and call the toll-free abuse hotline at 800-503-SAFE or by calling local law enforcement in the county where the abuse occurred. If you report elder abuse in good faith, the law will protect you from

being sued by the alleged abuser if you are mistaken.

*Dr. Betsy Leighty-Johnson has a PhD in Human Services with a specialization in Social and Community Services. In September 2014, the author and her husband discovered his (then) 96-year-old mother had been the victim of financial elder abuse. They were very involved in the collection of evidence assisting in the felony prosecution of the victim's daughter for the crime. Since that time, the author has become an elder abuse advocate, currently assisting the Deschutes County District Attorney's office with elder abuse cases.*



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