DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ELDER ABUSE FOR CNA's & HHA's

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence and elder abuse are frightening problems, but these issues seldom make the news – except when the situation is particularly terrible or gruesome. And although they are actually very common, no one knows exactly how many cases of domestic violence and elder abuse occur every year. One of the unfortunate aspects of domestic violence and elder abuse is that the victims very often do not report their abusers, so the cycle of violence and injury continues.

Certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and Home Health Aides (HHAs) are very often the health care professionals who have the most substantial, intimate contact on a daily basis with the most vulnerable members of our society – and these are the people who are most at risk for being victims of elder abuse or domestic violence. And because CNAs and HHAs see their clients and patients so often and for so many hours, they are in a unique position to be able to detect the signs and evidence of domestic violence and elder abuse. As a medical professional and a patient advocate, it is one of your duties to know how to recognize, help prevent, and report domestic violence and elder abuse.

OBJECTIVES

When the student has finished this module, he/she will be able to:

1. Identify three types of elder abuse.
2. Identify three signs of elder abuse.
3. Identify two reasons why elder abuse may go unreported.
4. Identify three signs of domestic violence.

ELDER ABUSE

The Scope of the Problem

Our population is aging; people who are 65 years and older now account for approximately 15% of the population. It is not surprising then that the incidence of elder abuse has been growing in recent years. For various reasons, no one knows exactly how many people in this age group are victims of physical and emotional violence, but a 2003 report from the National Research Council suggested that as many as 2 million elderly Americans are abused each year, and that might be a conservative estimate. And aside from the fact that elder abuse is a serious problem because of the pain and trauma that is caused, elderly people who are abused are three times as likely to die as those who are not. Unfortunately, a large number of these cases go unreported – perhaps as many as 85%.

What is Elder Abuse?
What is elder abuse? That may seem like a question with a simple answer; most people would say that elder abuse involves some sort of physical harm and/or violence. That can certainly occur and is one of the aspects of the problems, but elder abuse can take many different forms.

- Sexual abuse: Actual sexual contact does not have to occur. The victim may be forced to undress, watch pornography, etc.

- Neglect: This is perhaps the most common form of elder abuse. In these cases, relatives or caretakers ignore or deliberately neglect to provide for the basic emotional, comfort, safety, health care, or nutritional needs of the victim.

- Emotional abuse: Emotional abuse involves behavior that cause psychological pain and trauma but doesn’t involve physical injury. This can include threats, ridicule, insults embarrassment, intimidating or manipulative behavior, non-verbal threats, deliberately withholding attention, or forced isolation.

- Financial abuse: An elderly person may find that people close to them are exploiting them financially.

- Physical abuse: This can involve actual physical contact and injuries or threats to cause physical harm.

Learning Break: Elder abuse can be defined as a situation in which someone is deliberately endangering the physical or emotional health of an elderly person.

How Can You Recognize Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse can be easily detected, or it can be subtle. Some of the signs and symptoms of elder abuse are easy to see, but others can only be noticed by someone who knows the victim very well. An abusive situation may continue for many years before someone notices.

Unfortunately, a large number of these cases go unreported – perhaps as many as 85%. There are many reasons why this happens. Many elderly people who are abused are, for various reasons, completely dependent on the people who are abusing them, and along with that dependence comes fear – fear that if the abuse is reported that much worse will happen and that the abuse will continue. Elderly people who are abused may also feel shame that the abuse is happening to them. They may be unaware of their rights, or be made to somehow feel that they ”deserve” such treatment. The abused elder person may be forcibly prevented from contacting anyone who could help. And finally, in these difficult economic times, social service agencies that could help may simply not have the money or personnel to devote to investigate cases of elder abuse in their communities.

As a can or HHA, it is important that you understand how to recognize when an elderly person is being abused.

- Unexplained injuries: Does the person you are caring for have burns, bruises, scars, or welts that can’t be explained? Do they have injuries that are obviously
very old but are just being recently reported? Do they have an injury, and the explanation for its cause – the explanation given to you by either the victim or his/her caretaker or relative – just does not make sense? Does the explanation for an injury given to you by the victim contradict the explanation given to you by the person who cares for them? The elderly person who is being physically abused may also show evidence that they are being overmedicated, or not receiving the medications they need.

- Sexual injuries: Does the elderly person have a sexually transmitted disease? Older adults can certainly be sexually active, but if this person has no partner, or has been living alone, etc., this would a strong indication of sexual abuse. Other signs would be injuries to the genital areas or torn or bloodstained underclothing.

- Emotional trauma: Is the elderly person fearful or withdrawn? Is the person depressed, do they avoid eye contact? Have they been cheerful and outgoing and now they don’t seem to be as friendly or talkative? These could all be signs of emotional abuse.

**Learning Break:** There are many reasons why someone could be depressed or withdrawn; these emotions in an older person don’t necessarily mean someone is being abused. But if these changes happen to an elderly person who is dependent on someone else and you notice that the elderly adult seems frightened or subdued when the caretaker/relative is present, you should start to suspect the possibility of abuse.

- Physical neglect: Elderly people may have multiple medical problems that affect their health and their ability to care for themselves. However, even if they are dependent on someone for their basic needs, there is no reason why, if they are given proper care and attention, they should not be healthy, clean, well groomed, well dressed, adequately dressed, and well nourished. If a dependent elderly person is dehydrated, dirty, poorly or inadequately dressed, living in unclean or unsafe conditions, or obviously malnourished, they are probably victims of elder abuse.

- Financial abuse/exploitation: It would be difficult for someone who is not legally responsible for the financial affairs of an elderly person to know if this type of abuse is taking place. Evidence that this is occurring would be drastic and sudden changes in someone’s financial status, an unexpected and unexplained inability to pay bills or buy the necessities of life, valuable items that go missing, or purchases of items the elderly person would be unlikely to buy, want, or need.

**ELDER ABUSE: WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

Elder abuse is a serious problem. It is important to remember that the types of abuse that were outlined above are not only cruel and immoral, they are illegal. It appears that
different states have different laws about who is required to report elder abuse, but it is almost certain that no matter where you are working, as a CNA or HHA, you must report elder abuse if you know or suspect it is happening. Private citizens with no medical training may not be, in some states, required to report elder abuse. But as a medical professional you are legally obligated to report such situations. How is this done?

- If someone is in immediate danger or a crime has just been committed, call 911 or the local police.

- If you suspect some form of elder abuse is occurring, but the danger is not immediate, call or notify your immediate supervisor.

- If a supervisor is not easily reached, you can call The Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116. This service is sponsored by the U.S. Administration on Aging. It is available Monday through Friday, 9 am to 8 pm, Eastern Time. They can help you locate the appropriate agency in your area that is involved in managing cases of elder abuse. Also, the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) has a website that is an excellent source of information. The website has state by state listings of the names and telephone numbers of the appropriate agencies that can help prevent, treat, and report elder abuse. The website address is: www.ncea.aoa.gov Another source of information is the blue pages of your local telephone directory.

If elder abuse is occurring, it is your duty and your legal obligation to report it. It is very important, however, that you have a reasonable suspicion that abuse is actually happening. Don’t decide that an elderly person is being abused on the basis of feelings or intuition. Make sure that your suspicions are based on objective information that can be observed, documented, and verified.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Scope of the Problem

Domestic violence is similar to elder abuse: it is a huge social problem, but it very often seems to be ignored. It is also very similar to elder abuse because it is a huge social problem that goes unreported. It has been estimated that the police in the United States spend approximately 33 percent of their working hours responding to calls involving domestic violence, and approximately 25% of the population has been affected by domestic violence. Millions of women – and a surprisingly large number of men – are subjected to physical violence, sexual assaults, and psychological and emotional abuse from their partners. But only a tiny fraction of all of the cases of domestic violence are reported or prosecuted. The abuse just keeps on, and it has serious consequences. Victims of domestic violence often suffer from depression, substance abuse, chronic mental illness, and poor overall health. These victims can also suffer serious injuries or even be killed.

Domestic violence has traditionally been thought of as men abusing women. However, there is strong evidence that a very large number of men are abused by their female
partners. No one knows for sure how common this is, but there many experts who feel that the incidence of females abusing their male partners may be almost equal to that of men abusing women.

Learning Break: Domestic violence will be defined here as physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse committed by someone who is intimately related to the victim.

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence has traditionally been thought of as physical; someone is struck, injured, or killed. This is certainly one type of domestic violence, but there are many other ways that someone in an intimate relationship can be abused.

- Physical abuse: The physical abuse that characterizes domestic violence can involve seemingly minor types of harm such as pushing, pinching, rough touching, etc., or it may involve dangerous and injurious behavior such as slapping, choking, punching, kicking, or even physical contact that causes injury or death. The victim may be forced to engage in dangerous behavior such as excessive use of alcohol or the use of dangerous and illegal drugs.

Learning Break: Physical violence as a form of domestic violence is very common. No one knows exactly how many people are struck or injured by a partner each year, but recent surveys suggest that in any given year over 5 million women and 3 million men are physically abused by their intimate partner.

- Sexual abuse: Domestic violence that involves sexual abuse can take many forms. It may involve the threat of unwanted or forced sexual contact or intercourse; it may involve sexual contact or intercourse that is humiliating, painful or dangerous, such as unprotected intercourse with someone who has a sexually transmitted disease. In its most severe form it may involve physical harm that occurs during sexual contact, or rape.

- Emotional/psychological abuse: Emotional and psychological abuse always accompanies the other forms of domestic violence; it is impossible to suffer physical or sexual abuse without being injured both emotionally and psychologically. But there are millions of cases of domestic violence in which the victim does not suffer physical or sexual harm. An abusive partner may constantly subject the victim to bullying, harassment, or criticism. The victim may be subjected to daily threats or intimidation. The abuser may be overly controlling and prevent the victim from enjoying normal freedom of movement and normal social relationships, and will do so by the use of threats, screaming, or abusive language. Stalking or uninvited visits to someone’s home or workplace. The person who is being terrorized may, in the end, find that she/he has become totally dependent on the abuser – which of course is the abuser’s intent.
The emotional and psychological abuse that each victim experiences are unique to her (or his) situation. But regardless of how someone is being abused, whether it is physically, sexually, or psychologically, there is one feeling that is common to all abusive situations: fear. The victim of domestic violence lives in a constant state of fear. Fear is the environment in which the victim lives on a daily basis because it is well known that domestic violence occurs over and over. If someone is being abused, it is rarely an isolated incident.

What is that fear like? One way to know is to look at what women who are being victimized say about their relationships. The Women’s Experience with Battering Scale is an assessment tool that is used to determine if a woman is involved in an abusive relationship. The victim is given a sheet with these statements and asked whether or not they characterize her relationship.

- He makes me feel unsafe even in my own home.
- I feel ashamed of the things he does to me.
- I try not to rock the boat because I am afraid of what he might do.
- I feel like I am programmed to react in a certain way to him.
- I feel like he keeps me prisoner.
- He makes me feel like I have no control over my life, no power, no protection.
- I hide the truth from others because I am afraid not to.
- I feel owned and controlled by him.
- He can scare me without laying a hand on me.
- He has a look that goes straight through me and terrifies me.

It is easy to see that if someone is intimately involved with a partner who through words, actions – or both – makes him or her feel this way, life would be very, very frightening. Also, it is well known that people in abusive relationships are more likely to suffer from poor health, chronic health problems, chronic psychiatric problems (depression, low self-esteem, etc.) and are more likely to commit suicide.

How Can You Recognize Domestic Violence?

Recognizing domestic violence can be difficult. If the violence is psychological/emotional or sexual in nature, there will not be any visual signs of violence. Even the effects of physical violence can be difficult to spot because injuries can be hidden or explained away. And the problem of recognizing domestic violence is made worse by the fact that only a small percentage of those who are being abused by their partner will report the abuse. Many victims of domestic violence are ashamed or embarrassed about their situation. Many are made to feel as if the abuse is “their fault.” Many are frightened that if they report the abuse, the law will not protect them and the abuse will get worse. (Note: This fear is understandable. The level of violence in an abusive relationship often escalates dramatically if a woman reports the abuse and the risk of being murdered is the highest when a woman attempts to break off the relationship). And unfortunately, domestic violence can be undetected and unreported because medical professionals are often inadequately trained to understand the problem or have not been trained to look for the signs and symptoms of domestic violence.
However, although recognizing domestic violence is often not easy, there are definitely ways to know if physical, sexual, or psychological abuse is going on in an intimate relationship.

- **Physical injuries:** Some of the signs of domestic violence are obvious: lacerations or bruises around the throat or on the face, scratches that suggest fingernail marks, slap marks, bite marks, etc. What is even more suggestive are injuries that occur time and again; if the same woman or man is being injured in the same way in the same area of the body and this has happened several times, this strongly indicates the presence of domestic violence. Also, if someone has one of these injuries, but the person’s explanation just does not make sense – or they don’t want to talk about how the injury occurred – then you should suspect domestic violence.

- **Sexual injuries:** Obviously this can hard to detect. Many of the signs and symptoms of sexual abuse cannot be seen unless you have very intimate contact with the victim. But you should suspect sexual abuse if someone has injuries to the genital area, rectum, or breasts.

- **Emotional/psychological abuse:** People who are abused by an intimate partner are often fearful, withdrawn, or hesitant when the abuser is present. They may seem overanxious to please this person. They may not speak unless they have “permission” from the partner. They may report that the partner frequently yells, threatens, or humiliates them.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

Intervening in a situation of domestic violence can be very complicated and potentially very frightening. There are medical, legal, and safety issues, and your job is not to try and solve these. Your job is to recognize domestic violence, and to report it so that people with the experience can start a coordinated plan to stop the violence and make sure the victim is safe. You need to know that as a medical professional, you have a legal obligation to report physical, sexual, and/or emotional/psychological abuse. If you feel hesitant to do so, that is understandable. But remember: there are many resources available, and even if there were no legal obligation to do so, reporting abuse should be done because, a) **there is no excuse for domestic violence**, b) **nobody deserves to be abused**, and c) **the abuse is not the fault of the victim**.

- If someone is in immediate danger or a crime has just been committed, call 911 or the local police.

- If there is no immediate danger, call or notify your supervisor immediately.

- As previously mentioned, there are a lot of resources available to help the victims of domestic violence. The National Violence Domestic Hotline is 1-800-799-
7233. This is a 24 hour, seven day a week service that can provide advice and assistance for people who are suffering from domestic violence.

It is very important, however, that you have a reasonable suspicion that domestic violence is actually happening. Don’t decide that someone is being abused on the basis of feelings or intuition. Make sure that your suspicions are based on objective information that can be observed, documented, and verified.