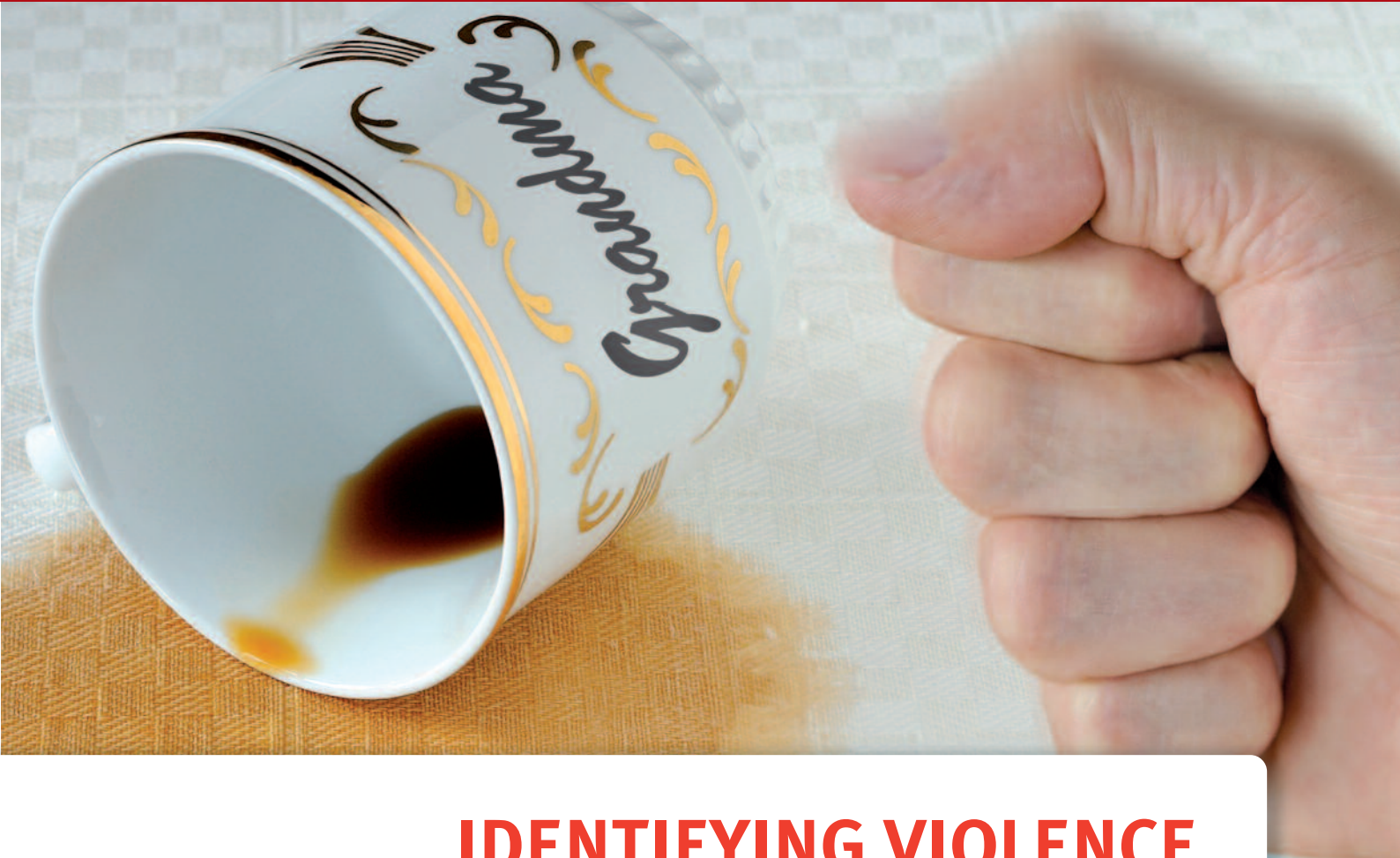




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FEDERAL MINISTRY OF
LABOUR, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION



IDENTIFYING VIOLENCE

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
CONCERNING VIOLENCE AGAINST OLDER PEOPLE



Taboo Topic: Violence

“Violence can exist because it is not conceived possible by decent people.”

J.P. Sartre

It is not easy to talk about violence against older people because it is often felt inconceivable that they should be exposed to violence at all. However, violence directed at older people is not an exceptional occurrence but on the contrary is ubiquitous, assumes many different forms and may affect anyone.

Violence against old people constitutes a violation of human rights!

Looking aside, belittling or tolerating violence means contributing to its more widespread use.

What do you think when you read the following stories?

- While Mrs. S., 92 years old, is hospitalized because of a fractured hip her son obtains for her a place in an old-age home without having informed her or having obtained her agreement, and cancels the rental contract for her apartment because in his opinion living in a care facility would be safer and more convenient for her.
- Mr. M., 80 years old, was formerly a caretaker at a school, now living in an old-age home. He is still very mobile and feels the urge to

keep the house tidy by “disposing of” all food and medical supplies prepared on the respective trolleys by throwing them into waste paper baskets. By smacking him on his fingers, the nursing staff “remind him” that he should not do this.

- Remarks like “Old folk should stay at home during rush hours” are directed at Mrs. R., 79 years of age, when she gets off the tram slowly and cautiously, using her walking stick and carrying her shopping bag. The impatient pushing and shoving off the other passengers add to her sense of insecurity.
- Mr. T., 86 years old, has been in need of care since he suffered a stroke 10 years ago. As he believes that care is a matter concerning only the family he does not allow any external help into the home. His 83 year-old wife is busy looking after her husband round the clock and has no opportunities for leisure.

The above and similar examples demonstrate in how many different ways violence can manifest itself. Violence may emanate from either side: in a relationship each person may perpetrate violence or suffer from it. But not all such actions are identified as violent or considered as transgressions.



“Elder abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person.”

WHO, 2002:
The Toronto Declaration
on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse

What is violence against older people?

Older people may be thereby physically, psychologically or financially impaired, hurt, offended and permanently harmed.

Where does violence against older people occur?

Violence can occur everywhere where old people live: in their homes, in the public domain, in old-age or nursing homes, but also in day-care facilities or hospitals. In most cases it remains hidden, does not affect only people in need of care and permeates all population strata.

What prompts violence against older people?

Violence does not arise randomly and rarely as a spontaneous reaction. Nor can it be explained by simple cause-and-effect relationships. A variety of conditions lead to situations which trigger violence.

- ➔ The social climate and the prevailing value system contribute significantly to the perpetration of violence against older people.
- ➔ Negative prejudices and degrading attitudes toward the older people permit developments in our society which put older people at a disadvantage and constitute the breeding ground for tolerating disrespectful behaviour, humiliation and transgressions.

- ➔ Very old people are often physically frail or have a poor sense of orientation, and, as a rule, they can defend themselves only inadequately against intimidation, cruelty or physical attacks.
- ➔ Conflict-ridden family relationships lasting many years, financial dependency or moral pressure for home care may prepare the ground for the perpetration of acts of violence.
- ➔ Organizational rules in care facilities and mobile services which are incompatible with the residents' wish for individuality and affection, in addition to time pressure and the seemingly excessive needs and demands of old people and their families, constitute stress factors for care-giving staff that contribute to violence.
- ➔ Caregivers also come under pressure owing to insufficient information on support options and a lack of opportunities to exchange experience with persons of trust.



Violence against older people assumes many forms!

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

It ranges from the “slipped hand” to intentional harassment and repeated infliction of pain. Black eyes, bruises on the upper arms, the temples and the neck, red marks or weals on the wrists and ankles, repeatedly broken glasses – all of these signs may be indications of physical attacks.

Old people thus suffer pain and injuries which may even lead to death.

- ➔ Gripping the upper arms
- ➔ Vehement pushing down on to a chair or into a bed
- ➔ Slaps on the face or beating
- ➔ Pulling the hair hard during combing
- ➔ Offering food in larger than bite-sized pieces, or serving dishes that are too cold or too hot
- ➔ Hasty or impatient offering of dishes or beverages
- ➔ Tying up to a chair or a bed
- ➔ Unauthorized overdosing of medication to sedate the patient

IMPOSED PHYSICAL CLOSENESS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This is any type of unnecessary touching and direct or indirect sexual contact without consent. This phenomenon results in a careless or intentional invasion of the privacy of old people.

Such acts elicit feelings of shame and helplessness in the person treated this way.

- ➔ Patting and stroking
- ➔ Unnecessarily touching private parts during personal hygiene
- ➔ Invading privacy by leaving doors open during personal hygiene
- ➔ Showing pornographic material
- ➔ Harassing old people by telling indecent jokes or talking obscenely

Transgressions and physical abuse are frequently motivated by extreme stress and helplessness.



FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION

As old people are mostly willing to assist those around them, their relatives or family sometimes exploit them or make excessive demands or force them to give financial support. Other forms of financial exploitation are the activities of tricksters. In such cases, the respect of older people for public officials or persons exercising control authority is exploited with a view to depriving them of their property by means of deception.

- ➔ Forced transfer of pension payments
- ➔ Theft of jewellery
- ➔ Forging signatures
- ➔ Use of items without the owner's consent
- ➔ Assigning real estate property / flats
- ➔ Demanding money for collecting purported winnings or prizes
- ➔ Obtaining "money aid" via fraud through false "relatives"

CURTAILMENT OF FREE WILL

Old people are deprived of their right to choose their way of life despite impairments or restrictions. Other persons decide over their heads "what is good for the individual concerned". Accordingly, old persons in such situations lose their independence and integrity.

- ➔ Curtailing individual life habits and routines by imposing strict organizational rules
- ➔ Restricting mobility because "something could happen"
- ➔ Sorting out clothes, "clearing" the bedside-table without informing the person concerned
- ➔ Liquidating a household or closing a passbook without consent
- ➔ Withholding favourite dishes or beverages

According to a wide-spread belief, violence is tantamount to physical attacks, but it manifests itself also in many other forms.



PSYCHOLOGICAL OR EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE

This is the most common type of abuse, but it is the least visible for the surroundings. Mostly it remains hidden and can hardly be distinguished from everyday conflicts in relationships.

Psychological abuse gives rise to a sense of helplessness, anxiety and shame. Threatening or critical words hurt the addressee, agonizing and shameful acts trigger fear and dependency. They destroy an individual's self-esteem and mental health, render old people insecure and convey the feeling of "being only a burden".

ISOLATION

- ➔ Withholding information
- ➔ Continuous supervision and checking
- ➔ Moving the telephone or calling device out of reach
- ➔ Preventing contacts with relatives or other persons of trust
- ➔ Refusing personal discussions

HUMILIATION

- ➔ Impatient shouting
- ➔ Ridiculing mistakes of old persons
- ➔ Treating old persons like small children
- ➔ Disrespect, such as calling old persons by their first names, using nicknames, talking over their heads
- ➔ Using personal items without having asked for permission
- ➔ Exposing old people by talking publicly about their physical weaknesses
- ➔ Holding old people responsible and scolding them for the consequences of their disease, such as, for example, forgetfulness or incontinence

TORMENTING

- ➔ Instilling fears and feelings of guilt through threats
- ➔ Verbally abusing or insulting older people
- ➔ Instilling fear through wrong information and threatening announcements

Psychological violence often has a long history, the actors change and it cannot always be clearly defined who is the aggressor and who is the victim.



NEGLECT

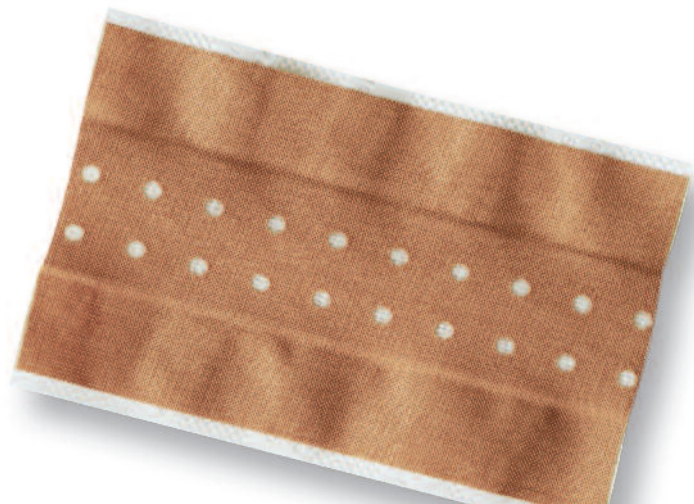
Neglect is the repeated refusal or omission of necessary assistance or indispensable care. The consequences may be grave.

Inadequate intake of fluids results in dehydration and dizziness which may provoke more frequent states of confusion and falls. Undernourishment or malnourishment due to inadequate intake of food or a lack of vitamins aggravates the risk of developing pressure sores (decubitus ulcers).

A lack of physical exercise results in a contraction of muscles and tendons which like pressure sores causes intense pain. Inadequate or absence of personal hygiene gives rise to skin damage and aggravates the image of dependent old people in need of help.

If health problems are belittled as age-related symptoms and not treated properly, this may in extreme cases lead to the death of old people.

- ➔ Negligent positioning in beds or chairs
- ➔ Inadequate physical hygiene
- ➔ Belittling health problems and complaints as well as restrictions in medical care
- ➔ Inappropriate or insufficient administration of medical drugs
- ➔ Improper wound care
- ➔ Restricting the living space to an armchair or bed
- ➔ Omitting walking or other physical movement exercises
- ➔ Offering mashed foodstuffs in order to save time
- ➔ Neglecting instructions to make the patient drink enough fluids
- ➔ Using incontinence materials instead of toilet training



Neither private personal problems nor even the most difficult situations justify attacks or assaults on older people!

If you observe such acts, first of all seek an open dialogue with all those concerned.

If you are exposed to violence yourself, address yourself to a person you trust.

What can you do?

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE CAN NOT BE SOLVED BY ANYONE ALONE.

- ➔ If violence occurs in your professional environment, discuss this with your colleagues and seek an interdisciplinary exchange of views.
- ➔ If you notice any signs of violence in care institutions housing old people, address yourself to the managers of the facility, the organization responsible for operating it or contact the supervisory authority in the respective Federal Province.
- ➔ If you fear that you could yourself encounter a situation in which you might resort to violence, because you feel overburdened, seek help from the mobile services, attend self-help group meetings or contact a consulting centre.
- ➔ If you have any questions, phone the association Pro Senectute Österreich on +43 (0)1 479 61 61 or the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection on +43 (0)1 711 00 – 3285.



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