

The face of elder abuse

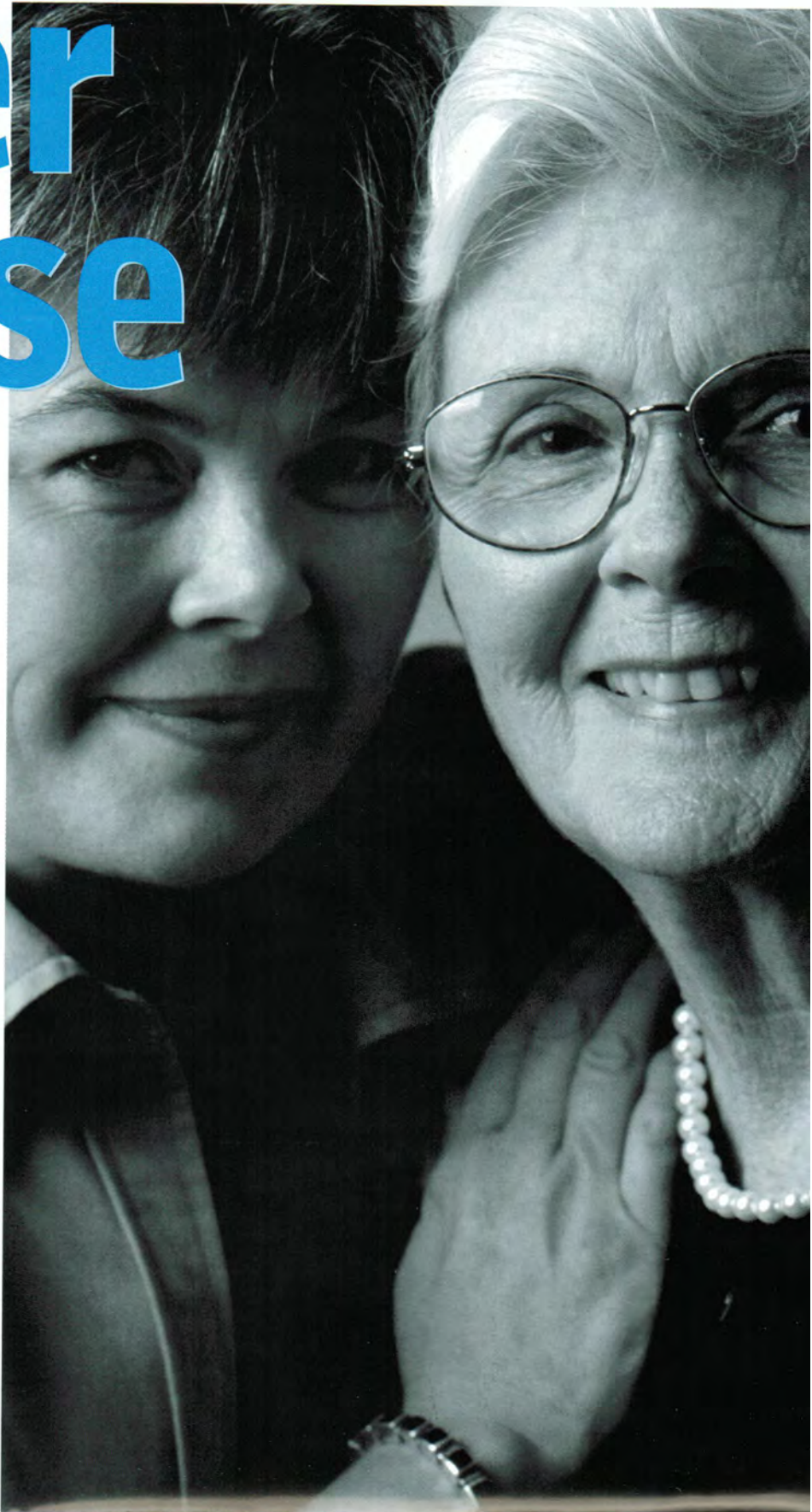
Susan has been worried about her friend, an elderly widow named Mary.

Lately Mary doesn't seem very well. She has grown thinner and looks frail. Mary has difficulty walking and she finds it hard to get around on her own. She seems to trip and bump into things a lot – she frequently has bruises on her arms and legs.

Mary used to be quite friendly. But she rarely visits since her adult daughter Joanne moved back home. Mary rarely goes out of the house now; she depends on Joanne to get groceries and run errands. When Susan does see her friend, Mary seems quieter and sad.

Mary's daughter Joanne has been having a tough time herself. She has been dealing with depression following the break-up of her marriage and just last month she lost her job due to downsizing.

Mary was so happy when Joanne first suggested moving home. Mary was looking forward to the company and the help maintaining the house.



Also, she was glad to know her daughter would have a comfortable home until she could get on her feet again.

But it just hasn't worked out that way. To Susan, both women seem unhappy. And there are those nasty bruises on Mary's arms...

Mary, Joanne and Susan are fictional characters created to help readers understand a problem most people would rather not think about - elder abuse. Unfortunately, elder abuse is a very real problem.

"Incidents of elder abuse in Toronto are rising," says Lisa Manuel, Ph.D.

Lisa manages Family Service Association of Toronto's Seniors and Caregivers Support Services unit. Approximately 25 % of cases taken on by the unit this fiscal year have involved abuse.

According to the Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, the problem is not just local. They cite a national survey that indicated 1 in 25 people over the age of 65 and living within a community have suffered some form of abuse. The network advises that elder abuse occurs within all economic, social and cultural groups

Anyone can be involved in an abusive situation, regardless of such factors as gender and economic status. However, based on patterns discovered during their work, counsellors compiled a list of attributes often found in abused older adults.

Many of the abused older adults seen by FSA counsellors are over the age of 75, female, and widowed or single. They tend to be frail with

physical or mental impairments and are often socially isolated and increasingly dependent on their caregiver. They frequently feel they are powerless to control their situation. They may suffer from low self-esteem, feeling that the abuse is deserved. They are often reluctant to report incidents of abuse.

Their abusers may misuse alcohol, medication or other drugs. Many have a history of marital or family conflict and poor relationships.

Elder abuse can include any act that harms or threatens to harm the health or welfare of an elderly person. Older adults may experience a range of abuse types:

1. Physical abuse - pain or injury that is willfully inflicted, unreasonable confinement that results in harm
2. Sexual abuse - sexual contact that results from threats, force or inability of the older adult to give consent for sexual activity
3. Financial abuse - theft or misuse of money or property; misuse of powers of attorney
4. Psychological/verbal abuse - willful infliction of mental anguish or fear of violence or isolation
5. Neglect - the failure of any person having care or custody of an older adult to meet her need when she is unable to meet those needs herself
6. Medication abuse – over or under medicating a senior

Family Service Association of Toronto's Lisa Manuel explains that, "Isolation is one of the major signs of elder abuse." She elaborates, saying that older adults are often cut off from

telephone contact and are not allowed to speak individually with counsellors. Abusive individuals may discontinue an older adult's telephone service, turn the ringer down, or move the phone out of reach. At appointments and meetings, the abuser may talk over a senior. They may also speak about a senior as if she were not present. These signs are red flags that should trigger the concern of counsellors, friends and family members.

What to do if you see signs of Elder Abuse

If you suspect an older adult is being abused, please do not ignore the warning signs. There are several courses of action you can take. You could discuss your concerns with a family doctor, visiting nurse, visiting homemaker, or trusted friend or family member. You may also wish to talk to your spiritual advisor or take your concerns to your faith community. Another option is to call Family Service Association of Toronto's Service Access Unit at 416-595-9611 and make an appointment to speak with a professional Seniors and Caregivers Support Services counsellor.

Please call 911 emergency services if you know a senior who is in imminent danger.

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