

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE MISTREATMENT OF OLDER ADULTS

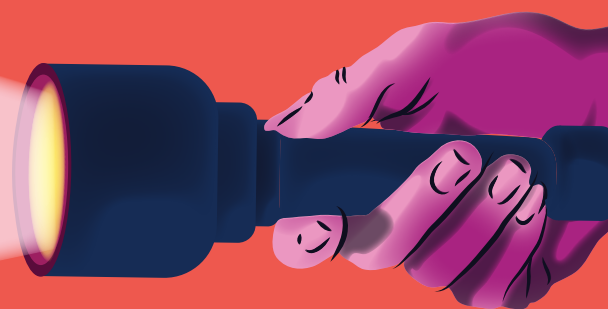


Centrale des syndicats
du Québec

Mistreatment is an act, a word or some words, an attitude or the lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older adult. It may be a one-time occurrence or a recurring event, whether intentional or unintentional, and can affect older adults living at home, in residential facilities, or in any other type of living environment. Two types of mistreatment are recognized in Quebec: violence and neglect.

That being said, it is not limited to individual actions. It may also result from organizational practices or procedures, or take place within a social context marked by ageism, which trivializes violations of older adults' rights, dignity or independence.

It is against this backdrop that the CSQ has decided to focus on this issue. As part of its *Together we see clearly. Let's act against violence* campaign, it sheds light on the mistreatment of older adults and, most importantly, suggests ways of tackling this issue.



RECOGNIZING MISTREATMENT

Mistreatment is a singular 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 adult.

The government of Quebec recognizes seven types of mistreatment: psychological, physical, sexual, material or financial, and organizational mistreatment, as well as ageism and violation of rights. Recognizing these types of mistreatment is often based on a set of tell-tale signs rather than a single piece of evidence.

Form of mistreatment	Example
Physical	→ Shoving → Hitting → Burning → Force feeding → Inadequate administration of medication → Neglecting basic hygiene care or safety
Psychological	→ Humiliating the person → Making threats → Infantilizing → Deliberate isolation → Emotional blackmail → Excessive monitoring
Sexual	→ Engaging in non-consensual sexual behaviour or making non-consensual suggestive remarks → Invasion of privacy → Sexual assault → Denying a person's sexuality

Form of mistreatment	Example
Material or financial	→ Doing unauthorized banking transactions → Exerting pressure to change a will, sign a lease or a contract → Misappropriation of money → Identity theft
Organizational	→ Providing unsuitable care → Applying overly rigid procedures → Limiting access to services → Providing unclear or insufficient information
Ageism	→ Making dismissive remarks → Exclusion → Making decisions based on age-related stereotypes
Violation of rights	→ Denying a person the right to choose, vote, receive visitors, be informed, make decisions or access the care to which they are entitled

Certain situations make older adults more vulnerable, particularly when they are socially isolated, have an underdeveloped social network, have a low income or rely on others. Sharing their living environment, tensions in their relationships with their informal caregiver or the mental health issues of the mistreating person can also increase these risks.

Warning signs that should alert family and friends

Certain signs may indicate that an older adult is a victim of mistreatment. The following signs should alert family and friends:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Physical: bruises, weight loss, poor hygiene, deteriorating health, unsanitary environment. → Psychological: fear, symptoms of depression, withdrawal, reluctance to speak, mistrust, fearful interactions. → Sexual: anxiety when receiving care, withdrawal, mistrust, genital infections or wounds, sudden use of highly sexualized language. → Material or financial: unusual banking transactions, disappearance of valuable items, lack of money for regular expenses, limited access to information on their own assets. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Organizational: undue delay for a place in a CHSLD or to receive initial home care services, excessive rigidity in the delivery of care, repeated complaints, deterioration of the person's health due to the dilapidated state of the care centre. → Ageism and violation of rights: isolation, loss of self-esteem. |
|--|--|



UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS

The consequences of mistreatment can be physical, psychological, social and financial, both in the short and long term.

Individual impact

The impact of mistreatment on older adults can be far-reaching, according to the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ). The INSPQ emphasizes, in particular, the following:

Physically, mistreatment can lead to:

- Decline in overall health;
- Functional decline;
- Increased morbidity;
- Mortality.

Psychologically, it can cause:

- Anxiety;
- Depression;
- Shame;
- Guilt;
- Mistrust;
- Sense of insecurity.

Socially, it can lead to:

- Loneliness;
- Conflicts;
- Loss of contact with family and friends.

Mistreatment may also result in the premature relocation to a residential facility.

Collective impacts

Mistreatment can impact family and friends, a neighbourhood, living environments and work teams. The collective effects are still barely documented, but they certainly do exist.

This type of violence is part of a wider social issue; it is not just a private or family matter. It is linked to power dynamics, isolation, social inequalities, ageism, the way in which care and services are organized, as well as institutional shortcomings.

It is also a matter of democracy and labour union rights, because it affects:

- the respect for people's rights and freedoms;
- the ability for older adults to have a say in decisions that affect them;
- the quality of and access to care and services;
- working conditions and the ability for staff to act in a way that promotes well-treatment in organizations that receive adequate support.

The extent of the phenomenon warrants our collective vigilance. A meta-analysis quoted by the INSPQ revealed that around 15.7% of older adults have been the victim of some type of mistreatment in the previous 12 months. That is roughly one in six people.

TAKING ACTION AGAINST MISTREATMENT

To effectively prevent and tackle mistreatment of older adults, a comprehensive approach is essential. It needs to mobilize institutions, living environments, communities, as well as each and every one of us to foster respectful, safe and caring environments.



What should you do if you witness something?

If you witness some type of mistreatment or suspect an older adult is being mistreated, it is important to take action. Your action can help change the course of events.

Here are a few things you can do and some that you should avoid:



- Take signs and confidences seriously
- Ask questions, respectfully and without jumping to conclusions, especially when signs may suggest health issues
- Document your observations (dates, situations, comments, changes you have noticed, etc.)

- Respect the older person's pace and ability to act, provided their safety allows it
- Quickly look for specialized support to assess the risk and take the appropriate next steps



- Downplay signs and confidences

- Disrespect the older person's pace and ability to act, provided their safety allows it

How to prevent mistreatment and take action

We can take action against the mistreatment of older adults. Here is a non-exhaustive list that could inspire tangible actions in your workplace and community:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Promoting well-treatment, i.e. an approach that values respect for an individual, their requests and their choices, including their refusals.→ Informing people about risk factors, particularly ageist perceptions and harmful organizational practices.→ Adopting, in your work environment, a clear mistreatment prevention policy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Promoting positive attitudes toward older adults.→ Implementing intergenerational programs or projects.→ Creating spaces for dialogue and developing awareness-raising tools tailored to your workplaces. |
|--|---|



USEFUL RESOURCES

Here are some useful resources to better understand, prevent or take action against the mistreatment of older adults:

Centres d'assistance et d'accompagnement aux plaintes

[\(fcaap.ca/en/the-caap/\)](http://fcaap.ca/en/the-caap/)

Regional community organizations providing assistance and guidance to individuals (or their loved ones) who receive care or services from health and social services network resources and institutions and who believe that their rights have not been respected.

Telephone: 1 877 767-2227

Research Chair on Mistreatment of Older Adults

[\(maltraitancesaines.com/en/\)](http://maltraitancesaines.com/en/)

A resource website offering tools, latest insights, research papers as well as scientific watch activities in this field. It also provides links to available resources should you become concerned about a situation.

Gouvernement du Québec – Recognizing mistreatment of older adults and vulnerable people

Website providing information on the mistreatment of older and vulnerable adults, as well as useful resources on the subject.

L'Appui proches aidants [\(lappui.org/en/\)](http://lappui.org/en/)

Information and resource website for informal caregivers, providing a list of resources across Quebec as well as a telephone and online chat support service.

Telephone: 1 855 852-7784

Mistreatment Helpline [\(lignemaltraitance.ca/en\)](http://lignemaltraitance.ca/en)

Confidential provincial service offering a helpline for listening, reference and support, specialized in the mistreatment of older adults and adults in vulnerable situations.

Telephone: 1 888 489-2287

