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2022 Annual Conference and Trade Show - August 30 - September 1, 2022

LeadingAge

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# Bullying Among Older Adults:

## Not Just a Playground Problem

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## Objectives

1. Describe the incidence, characteristics and impact of bullying behaviors in senior living
2. Apply occupation-based interventions aimed at the organization, bully, and target that may help to minimize community bullying



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/senior-beautiful-woman-wearing-casual-t-shirt-1636544657>

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## What is Bullying?

- Unwanted aggressive behavior
- Observed or perceived power imbalance
- Repetition of behaviors or high likelihood of repetition
- Direct or indirect



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/elderly-woman-shows-fist-71568526>

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### Incidence of Bullying

- Between 10 and 20 percent of older adults living in senior living communities are bullied (AARP, 2012)
- In many ways bullying looks similar to that among younger age groups
- Bullying can happen in any number of places, contexts, or locations including online
- Most senior-to-senior aggression is verbal abuse
- Men and women are equally likely to be the victim as well as the aggressor

(Hazelden Foundation, 2008; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.; Senior Bullying, 2015)

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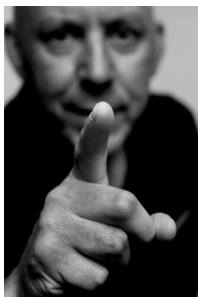
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### Types of Bullying Behaviors

- Verbal
- Physical
- Anti-social
- Relationship-centered



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/painting-finger-gm165867259-20854759>

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### Common Responses

- Reduced self-esteem, feelings of insecurity
- Overall feelings of rejection
- Depression, anxiety
- Suicidal ideation
- Functional changes
- Changes in eating and sleeping
- Increased talk of moving out
- Increased isolation
- Stress, anxiety, tension, anger, frustration, fear and worry
- Retaliation followed by shame
- Migraines, GI tract/stomach problems, HBP

(Frankel, 2011)

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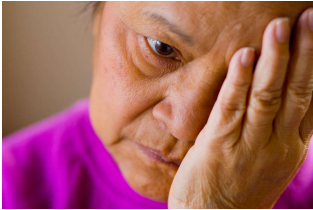
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The situation and type of behavior often determines whether or not problematic behavior is actually bullying. Some behavior violates community rules but might not be bullying.



Source: <https://www.iStockphoto.com/photo/bruised-gm1143952146-38164819>

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### Behaviors Causing Distress

- Loud arguments in communal areas
- Name calling
- Being bossed around
- Negotiating value differences
- Sharing scarce resources
- Being hounded for money or cigarettes
- Listening to others complain
- Experiencing physical aggression
- Witnessing psychiatric symptoms (Bonifas, 2011)



Source: <https://www.iStockphoto.com/photo/senior-woman-comforting-man-with-depression-at-home-gm1747286476-244363269>

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### Individuals Who Bully

Bullies are more likely to use power and control strategies at the expense of others



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/loveup-portrait-male-angry-upset-senior-182779322>

- Typical traits of individuals who bully:
- Lacks empathy
- Has few friends
- "Needs" power and control
- Struggles with individual differences
- Uses power and control at the expense of others
- Suffers from low self-esteem
- Empowered by causing conflict, or making others feel threatened, fearful, hurt (Hazelden Foundation, 2008)

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Types of Bullies

- Narcissistic bully
- Impulsive bully
- Physical bully
- Verbal bully
- Secondary bully



Source: <https://www.iStockphoto.com/photos/unhappy-woman-showing-disslike-sign-gm70381134-24489436>

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Gender Differences

Women

- Gossips
- Snipes
- Member of a clique
- Passive-aggressive behavior
- Manipulates emotions

Men

- Direct
- Spontaneous
- Verbally or physically aggressive
- Superiority complex
- Overly protective

(Bonifas & Frankel, 2012; NCAL, 2017)

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Why Do Older-Adults Bully?

- Some people who were bullies when they were younger
- Some people do not adjust well to the aging process
- Some people experience emotional problems
- Some people have an underlying need for power and control
- Some people feel the need to assert their will to intimidate others
- Some people have a difficult time transitioning
- Some people have difficulty tolerating individual differences
- Some people have insecurities about themselves
- Some people have dementia

(Bonifas & Frankel, 2012; Botek, n.d.)

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Passive Targets

- Be highly emotional
- Have difficulty reading social cues
- Experience a heightened sense of anxiety
- Do not read social cues very well
- Others often perceive them as shy and insecure
- Have racial/ethnic, spiritual beliefs, political, or sexual orientation, gender identity that is perceived as different from their target
- Immigrants & refugees



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/mature-couple-having-a-debate-in-the-public-park-gm1217403190-335353726>

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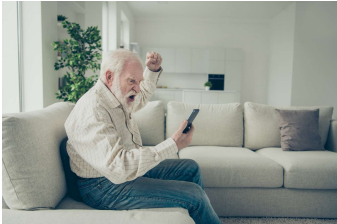
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Provocative Targets

- Annoying or irritating to others
- Quick tempered
- Intrusive into others' space



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/profile-side-view-portrait-of-mad-stylish-old-man-wearing-checker-gm1124416597-291518982>

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Warning Signs of a Bully

- Intimidates staff and others
- Tells others what to do using a bossy style/tone
- Criticizes others
- Lacks empathy
- Makes repeated complaints about others



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/domestic-violence-gm182174985-10196336>

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Warning Signs of a Target



- Self-isolation
- Avoidance of events and activities
- Take long and often out of the way routes to get to and from communal areas
- Vague complaints, "They don't like me" or "They won't let me \_\_\_\_\_."
- Depressed mood (acute onset)

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/domestic-violence-gm491916435-40056286>

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What is the Impact of Bullying?

- It is common for facilities to take a passive stance
- Bullying behaviors can escalate to physical violence
- Impact is not exclusive to the recipients of such behavior
- Individuals who witness bullying also experience negative consequences
- Bullying can also be targeted toward staff members of organizations serving older adults

(Bonifas, 2011)

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What Can You Do?

Get to know the people in your community and recognize when there is a change



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/senior-couple-with-consultant-gm143175793-10368366>

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Three-Tiered Intervention Model

Tier 1: Universal approaches


Tier 2: Targeted strategies for those at risk

Tier 3: Intensive, individualized services when bullying occurs

• Organization

• Bully

• Target



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/analyzing-business-growth-gm478065661-27883594>

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Organizational Interventions

• Develop clear rules and expectations for resident and staff behavior

• Consider adding language around bullying to admission agreements

• Hold regular group discussions about challenges of communal living

• Provide regular employee training

• Review policies for potential revisions

• Encourage staff and residents to report incidents of bullying and take complaints seriously

• Review state requirements to ensure compliance

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Organizational Interventions

• Create caring communities for all residents and staff members.

• Prohibit the use of obscene language, name calling, gossiping

• Use empathy as an antidote to bullying

• Creating environments that promotes empathy requires that:

• All members are treated with respect and dignity

• Everyone is held accountable and responsible for their behaviors

• Everyone is encouraged to stand up for what is right

• Publicly acknowledge members of your community that go out of their way to make others welcome

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Organizational Interventions

- Pre-move-in or new resident orientation
- Institute a "Caring Squad"
- Nominate "Kings and Queens of Empathy"
- Create a training program with role-playing
- Create a wellness program
- Help residents expand their social networks
- Host a mixer type event
- If all else fails, seek legal consult, have legal services send target a letter, and/or issue lease violation notices

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Organizational Interventions

Recommendations from residents

- Offer anger management classes
- Set limits with people who bully or "pick on" others
- Hold regular meetings to promote resident communication
- Develop rules and expectations for resident behavior
- Foster partnerships between residents and facility management

(Bonifas, 2011)

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It is important to recognize that developing a caring community is a process and organizational change is slow; improvements will not happen overnight, but gains can be made over time.



Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/reassurance-and-comfort-from-a-trusted-friend-gm362936805-200332221>

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Older Adult Coping Skills



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/caring-african-medical-nurse-comforting-senior-151335629>

- Just let it go or tune it out
- Avoid contact
- Walk away
- Bite your tongue
- Engage in positive self talk
- Pursue off-site activities
- Seek to see the other person's point of view
- Learn and use de-escalation skills
- Get a pet or spend time with pets
- Form relationships with other supportive individuals

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Strategies for Residents

- Let your emotions settle before you approach
- Walk away and regain your composure
- Approach the conversation firmly and confidently
- Maintain eye contact
- Call the bully by name
- Remember it's not your fault, it's the bully that has the issue
- Do not make any aggressive motions or innuendos
- Have a fact-based conversation about observations
- Don't attack the individual
- Address the specific behavior you want them to change
- Do not provoke or antagonize

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Strategies for Staff Members



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/group-happy-doctors-on-seminar-lecture-1312403329>

- Prevent bullying with education
- Create, implement, and disseminate zero tolerance policies and procedures
- Confront bully and inform them that their behavior may result in an eviction
- Intervene
- Support the target
- Encourage staff members and residents to report bullying behaviors

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Facility Responses

- Assess the extent of the problem within your community
- Create policies and procedures
- Train staff
- Establish ongoing bullying prevention programs
- Familiarize residents with an effective, confidential reporting process
- Provide anger management classes or counseling



Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/financial-health-check-cost-healthcare-concept>  
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Responding to Incidents

- Staff member observes or is told about a situation involving bullying behavior
- Staff member assesses whether there is a potential for immediate or imminent physical danger to anyone, and if so, takes immediate steps to de-escalate the situation
- Staff member notifies the appropriate leadership
- Leadership/management assesses potential for physical danger, and if steps have been taken to safeguard the victim
- If less severe, staff may be able to help resolve the situation
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Develop a corrective plan and implement
- If a resident is still exhibiting bullying behaviors staff should reassess solutions

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In Conclusion

- Current estimates misjudge the bullying problem
- Bullying among residents is likely to continue to rise
- Learning about the problem and adopting strategies provide elders and their families proactive and reactive solutions so that elders are no longer ignored

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