

Interpreting Elder Abuse Among Alaska Natives

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When we hear about elder abuse, we usually think of a phone scammer defrauding vulnerable elders or a caretaker physically mistreating a bedridden senior. Public health care workers are less likely to hear stories such as these when working with elderly Alaska Native people. This does not suggest that there is an absence of abuse but instead means that Alaska Natives may be reluctant to address the issue.

Key informants reveal views

Because elderly Alaska Natives report little abuse to health officials, little is known about the scope and nature of abuse and neglect among Alaska Natives. In order to understand elderly Alaska Natives' view of abuse, the authors interviewed 15 recognized Alaska Native Elders from each of the five major ethnic groups (Tlingit/Tsimshian/Haida, Aleut/Alutiiq, Yupik/Cupik, Inupiat, Athabascan) about abuse of elderly Alaska Native people. (The status of an Alaska Native Elder is not solely a function of age, and not all elderly Alaska Natives are viewed as Elders.) Additional recognized Elders served as cultural consultants and assisted the researchers in every phase of the research process. The interviews, conducted with the assistance of the cultural consultants, revealed a number of key points.

The value of balance and harmony in Alaska Native culture.

Traditionally, many Alaska Native communities had restorative justice systems, which have been severely disrupted by the dismantling of traditional structures, languages, ceremonies, spiritual beliefs, and values. These Native systems moderated unacceptable social behaviors through shunning, banishment, counseling, and rewarding positive behaviors.

The systems promoted a balanced, harmonious, and interconnected relationship with others and with the natural environment. In this traditional framework, disrespect exists when there is a lack of balance, harmony, and connection with others and with the natural world. From the elderly's point of view, abuse is equivalent to disrespect, and the importance of reporting it is secondary to the concern with maintaining balance and harmony.

Elders refer to abuse as a lack of respect.

The use of the term *abuse* seemed to offend the Elders, making it more difficult to talk about. They preferred terms such as *respect* and *disrespect* rather than abuse. Emotional disrespect was one of the most common types of disrespect mentioned.

The elderly are reluctant to report abuse.

Elders reported a reluctance to report abuse by a family member to law enforcement for fear of compromising the longevity of the group, a possible outbreak of suicide among at-risk youth, and the withholding of financial or personal support.

The elderly believe that they are disrespected by non-Natives.

One of the most widespread forms of disrespect experienced by Alaska Native elderly involves the disrespect of lifestyles and traditions by the non-Natives who come into their communities. Some Elders reported that health care professionals treat them in a disrespectful manner by assuming that the elderly do not understand their own bodies.

The elderly perceive a loss of respect by some younger Alaska Natives.

As younger Alaska Natives adopt non-Native ways, the traditions that protected Alaska Natives in the past are threatened. The Elders reported a belief that Native youth sometimes don't value traditional wisdom and therefore treat the elderly as though they lack intelligence.

Emotional needs of the elderly are sometimes neglected by families and service agencies.

The Elders frequently mentioned that nursing staff and family members ignore elderly Alaska Natives' physical and emotional needs. Some Elders mentioned the emotional abuse caused by families who place their elderly in extended care facilities and don't visit them. When caregivers, family members, and friends, either consciously or unconsciously, communicate to the elderly that they are a burden, the elderly are emotionally injured.

The elderly are overburdened with caregiving responsibilities.

Many Elders reported that elderly Native Alaskans are providing full-time care for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, while

the parents are unavailable due to substance abuse or lack of parenting skills. A common intergenerational practice is for extended family members to care for young children for short periods of time. This traditional arrangement for short-term care appears to have expanded to extensive caregiving responsibilities. When the elderly are overburdened with caring for youth, they may experience physical, emotional, and financial strain.

Elderly Alaska Natives experience financial exploitation.

Financial abuse of Alaska Native elderly by family members was the most frequently mentioned form of disrespect. The elderly are at risk for financial disrespect from those in control of their finances. Family members may take advantage of the elderly who depend on the younger generation to care for them.

Recommendations for health care workers

Health care workers encountering elderly Alaska Native patients whom they suspect are suffering abuse can feel frustrated when attempting to elicit information. Patients avoid eye contact, do not talk about themselves, and may even deny being in an abusive situation, despite the worker's strong suspicion that they are being abused. Health care professionals should always take the time to look beyond the initial silence displayed by the Alaska Native elderly when abuse is suspected.

Become informed about Alaska Native cultural communication practices.

Understand and communicate respect for protocols, values, and ways of life. When uninformed health care providers visit an Alaska Native in his or her home or community, they may unknowingly violate cultural communication practices and disrespect the elderly Native. An elderly person who does not feel respected will give superficial information or not respond at all. Begin the visit by asking for advice from the elderly client about the appropriate Native protocols in the situation. If the client is not comfortable explaining the protocols, he or she might refer you to someone who can explain them. Allow yourself to be corrected and ask the elderly to teach you the proper ways of respect. In some Alaska Native cultures, offering a small gift, such as a jar of salmon or jam, will help to communicate respect to the elderly client.

Slow down your pace of speech to match the pace of the patient.

Health care workers need to understand Alaska Native communication patterns. Many Alaska Native elderly have a slower cadence in their speech. Rushing the elderly who speak slowly

may lead them to withdraw instead of opening up. Mirroring the cadence of the elderly person is one way to increase communication as well as show respect. Health care professionals also need to be sensitive to nonverbal communication patterns. Because health care providers are held in high regard, it is customary, for example, for the elderly person not to look directly at health care providers while listening intently to what they are saying.

Listen more than talk.

Health care workers should listen more than talk, giving the elderly total attention. It is vital to allow the elderly ample time to express themselves without interruptions. When Native people are silent, they may be showing respect rather than incomprehension. And finally, keep in mind that the elderly often speak indirectly, in metaphors and stories.

Understand local reluctance to implicate relatives.

Be aware that Alaska Native elderly do not always trust non-Natives. They may be reluctant to implicate others, particularly family members, in reports of neglect or abuse that may result in jail time or fines for the perpetrator and may threaten individual or community activities such as subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Avoid addressing individual issues and take a family or community systems approach.

Prevention and intervention of elder abuse requires a focus not only on the individual but also on the family or community. Develop and strengthen community networks that can raise awareness and provide outreach, detection, and encouragement to report abuse. Although urban areas have a variety of programs and systems in place to address the needs of the elderly, health care workers in rural areas need to engage the village-based elders' councils to organize forums to focus on elder priorities.

Each group of Native Americans has its own cultural values and communication protocols. However, many of the suggestions for improved communications with elderly Alaska Native people could be considered by health care workers as a starting place for better understanding the health issues of other Native Americans. Health care workers who have Native American patients should take the time to learn their values and protocols. Without this understanding communication may be incomplete, and the quality of care may be compromised.

With an awareness of the cultural aspects related to defining and describing abuse, as well as to communicating about it, health care workers and community advocates can work together with Alaska Native elderly and their communities. As in most areas of life, respect is the key. ■

Authors

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