

Elder abuse in Australia: Psychological abuse

Findings from the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study

Research snapshot | August 2022



This snapshot discusses elder abuse and presents material that some people may find distressing. If you or someone you know needs assistance, please call 1800 ELDERHelp (1800 353 374). A list of elder abuse support services is available [at the end of this snapshot](#). If you are in immediate danger call Police on 000.

About the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (NEAPS)

As part of the [National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians](#) (Council of Attorneys-General, 2019), the Attorney-General's Department commissioned the **National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (NEAPS)** to investigate elder abuse. This snapshot provides the key findings of the Survey of Older People (2020), a nationally representative survey of 7,000 people aged 65 and over living in the community (i.e. they did not live in residential aged care settings). The full report on the NEAPS is available on the [AIFS website](#).

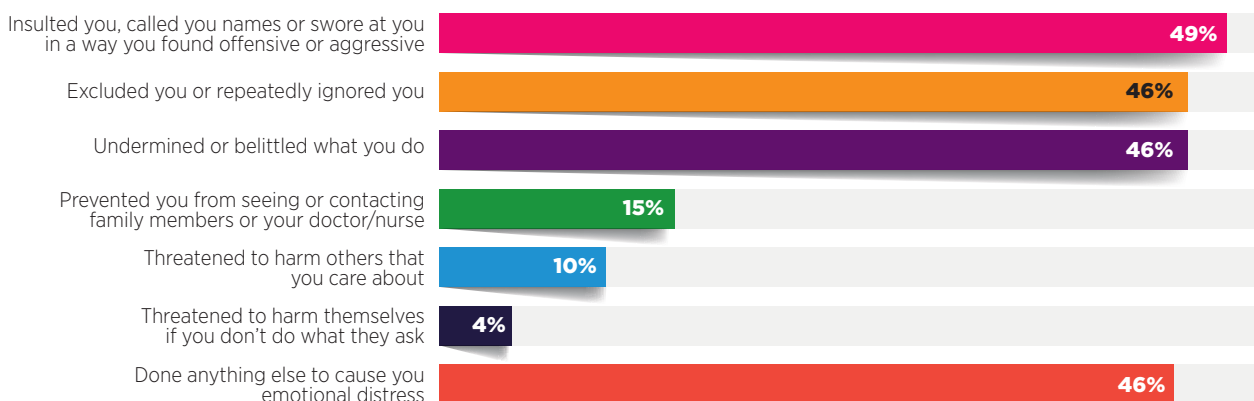
How common is psychological abuse?

The Survey of Older People indicated that **12%** of community-dwelling people aged 65 and older in Australia reported experiencing psychological abuse in the 12 months prior to the survey.

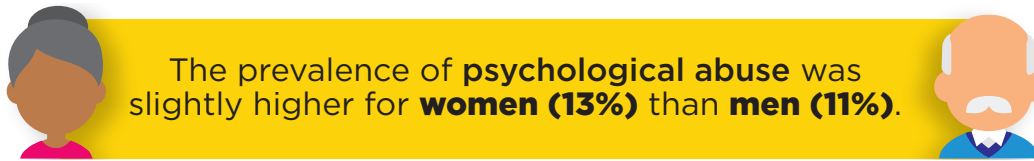
Figure 1 shows the specific psychological abuse behaviours that older people experienced. Of participants who experienced psychological abuse in the past 12 months:

- The most common forms of psychological abuse experienced involved being:
 - insulted, called names or sworn at in a way they found offensive or aggressive (49%)
 - excluded or repeatedly ignored (46%)
 - undermined or belittled (46%).
- Close to one-half (46%) reported experiencing other behaviours that caused them emotional distress (e.g. manipulated them, prevented their access to equipment such as hearing aids).

Figure 1: Participants who experienced psychological abuse in the past 12 months, proportion reporting each psychological abuse item



Low socio-economic status and being separated or divorced were factors associated with a greater risk of psychological abuse. An experience of psychological abuse was associated with poorer physical health, poorer psychological health and a lower sense of social connection.



The prevalence of **psychological abuse** was slightly higher for **women (13%)** than **men (11%)**.

Who commits psychological abuse?

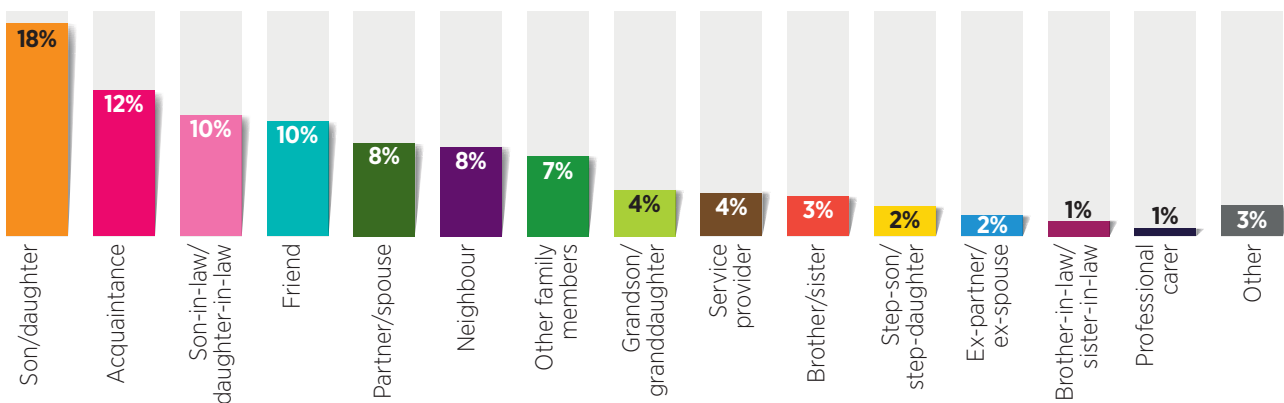
Participants who reported an experience of psychological abuse were asked about the ‘main perpetrators’ of the psychological abuse. The ‘main perpetrator’ referred to the only perpetrator of the psychological abuse or the perpetrator who affected the older person the most where more than one person committed the psychological abuse.

- Similar proportions of men and women were the ‘main perpetrators’ of psychological abuse.
- Sons were slightly more likely than daughters to be the ‘main perpetrators’ of psychological abuse (9% vs 7%).
- Over one-third (38%) of ‘main perpetrators’ of psychological abuse had mental health problems while one-fifth (22%) had financial problems.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the person who perpetrated psychological abuse and the older person experiencing the abuse. The figure refers to psychological abuse perpetrators (i.e. ‘main perpetrators’ and other perpetrators).

- Overall, one-third of reports of psychological abuse involved intergenerational relationships.
 - Children were the largest group of psychological abuse perpetrators (18%).
 - Step-children and grandchildren accounted for 2% and 4% of all perpetrators of psychological abuse.
 - Sons- and daughters-in-law accounted for 10%.
- After children, acquaintances were the second largest perpetrator group for psychological abuse (12%).
- Friends were another relatively large perpetrator group for psychological abuse (10%).

Figure 2: Relationship of perpetrators to the participants who experienced psychological abuse (as % of all psychological abuse perpetrators)



Note: An older person may report more than one person perpetrating psychological abuse.

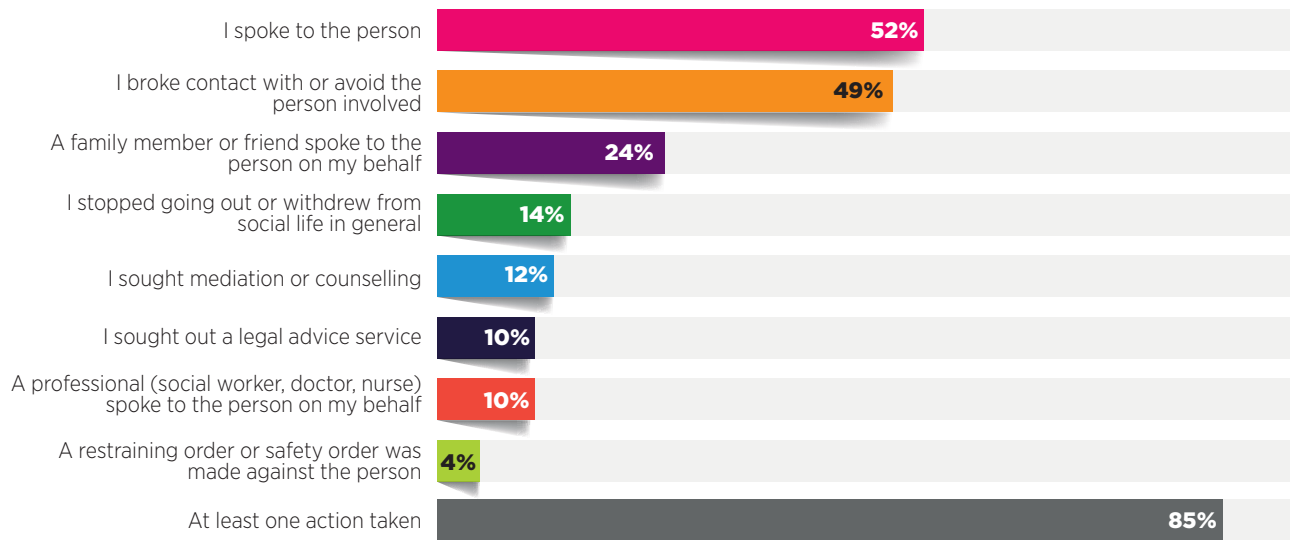
Do people who experience psychological abuse seek help?

Four in 10 participants who reported experiencing psychological abuse in the past 12 months indicated that they sought help or advice for their abuse experience. The most common sources of support were:



Regardless of whether they reported seeking help or advice from a third party, most older people (85%) said that they took action, or had action taken on their behalf, to stop the psychological abuse from happening again (Figure 3). The most common actions taken by older people who reported experiencing psychological abuse were speaking to the perpetrator (52%) and breaking contact with or avoiding the person involved (49%).

Figure 3: Action taken by participants who experienced psychological abuse in the past 12 months



Note: Multiple responses and sum may exceed 100%.

Support services/Helplines

- If you have any concerns about potential or actual elder abuse, please contact **1800 ELDERHelp** (1800 353 374) to be redirected to the existing phone line service in your state or territory (free call).
- If you or someone you know have experienced violence or sexual assault and require immediate or ongoing assistance, contact **1800 RESPECT** (1800 737 732) to talk to a counsellor from the National Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence hotline.
- For confidential support and information, contact Safe Steps' 24/7 family violence response line on **1800 015 188** or the Men's Referral Service on **1300 766 491**.
- For a confidential discussion with an experienced counsellor, call Lifeline on **13 11 14**.

Citation

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