Written to call attention to October is Domestic Abuse Awareness Month. We are called by scripture to act in this regard:

Matthew 25:42-45

“For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

We who live in and around Deerfield do not like to think about the existence of elder abuse. While elder abuse may not occur as frequently as in less affluent communities, even one instance is too many.

The realities of the statistics of non-institutionalized elder abuse are stark. Approximately one in ten Americans aged 60+ have experienced some form of elder abuse. Some estimates range as high as five million elders are abused each year. This is probably an underestimate since one study found that only one in 24 cases is reported.

Who is most affected by elder abuse?

Like other forms of abuse, elder abuse is a complex problem, and it is easy for people to have misconceptions about it. The truth is that:

Most elder abuse and neglect takes place at home. The majority of older adults live in the community, either on their own or with their spouses, children, siblings, or other relatives, rather than in institutional settings. As a result, the home is where most abuse happens. Sadly, according to the National Council on Aging, it is estimated that family members commit 60% of the abuse.

How can you discern signs of elder abuse?

Consider: Elders who have been abused have a 300% higher risk of death when compared to those who have not been mistreated.

Physical signs might include unexplained bruises, burns, cuts, or scars. Lack of basic medical aids, such as glasses, hearing aids, teeth or walkers, or unexplained weight loss are common signs.

Psychological signs might include dismissive attitudes or statements about injuries, unreasonable fear or suspicions, or unexplained or uncharacteristic changes in behavior.

Social signs might include a lack of interest in social contacts.

Financial signs might include insufficient care, unpaid bills despite adequate resources, or large withdrawals from bank accounts or ATMs.

What you can do as someone 60 and older (or so) to prevent becoming abused:

Take care of your own health. Also, get professional help for issues such as drug or substance concerns or depression. You can also encourage family members to do so.

Stay active in the community and connected with family and friends. Attend support groups for spouses and learn about domestic violence services.

Take care with personal information, including posting and opening your own mail, having your own phone, and not giving personal information over the phone. You should seek independent advice from someone you trust before signing any documents.

You should plan for your own future with a power of attorney or a living will to address healthcare decisions now to avoid family problems later.

Resources for Help

The domestic abuse awareness ministry of Holy Cross maintains a website where you can find a variety of resources: <https://domesticabuseholycross.org/ministry> The ministry at Holy Cross is partnered with A Safe Place For Help. You can get comprehensive assistance from this organization:

<https://asafeplaceforhelp.org/> <https://asafeplaceforhelp.org/programs/> 847-249-4450 or 800-600-SAFE

If you suspect elder abuse, call the statewide, 24-hour Adult Protective Services Hotline: 1-866-800-1409 or Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline 24 hours, 7 days a week (877) 863-6338

Village of Deerfield Police Department Social Services Division: <http://deerfield.il.us/216/Investigations-Social-Services>

Sources: <https://www.apa.org/topics/aging-older-adults/elder-abuse> <https://www.ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-elder-abuse>

Helen LaVan, PhD is a member of Holy Cross Church since 1977 and a licensed professional counselor in the State of Illinois. This column is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Alicen McGowan, founding member of Domestic Abuse Awareness Ministry and an inspiration to us all.