



TERTIARY PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE

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WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE?

Sexual assault in later life refers to sexual victimization perpetrated against an older adult who is typically aged 60 years or older and involves a series of hands-off and hands-on behaviours. These behaviours include voyeurism, being left undressed, having photos taken without consent, unwanted touching, physical molestation, unnecessary genital or rectal care practices, forced oral or genital contact, forced penetration, etc. [1-3]. Although we have a limited understanding of how often this type of abuse occurs, we know that when it does occur, older victims/survivors are not readily achieving justice. As a result, in order to increase access to justice for older victims/survivors of sexual assault, we must try to prevent it.

PREVENTING SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE: A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

The public health approach to violence prevention distinguishes prevention efforts based on the timing in which they apply. Whereas primary prevention occurs before a sexual assault occurs, both secondary and tertiary prevention occurs after a sexual assault has occurred [4]. This factsheet focuses specifically on the most common suggestions and recommendations for the tertiary prevention of sexual assault in later life. Please refer to our other factsheets for information specific to the primary and secondary prevention of sexual assault in later life.

WHAT IS TERTIARY PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE?

While secondary prevention aims to identify sexual assault and immediately halt further victimization, **tertiary prevention focuses on thwarting long-term impacts and consequences of sexual assault in later life.** Specifically, tertiary prevention aims to reduce, mitigate, and lessen the negative consequences of violence through treatment, rehabilitation, and prevention of future victimization/perpetration [4-7].

PREVENTION THROUGH SPECIALIZED PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES FOR OLDER VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

To support recovery and lessen the consequences of sexual assault in later life, supports and services must be specifically designed for and tailored to older victims/survivors [8, 9]. However, such specialized supports and services are lacking in Canada (and elsewhere), where older victims/survivors of sexual assault typically receive fewer services and interventions than younger victims/survivors [10, 11]. Supports, services, and programs for older victims/survivors should be distinct from programs offered to younger victims/survivors by taking a trauma-informed approach which considers the needs, abilities, and desires of older victim/survivors [8]. Underscored by a trauma-informed approach, practical suggestions and recommendations for specialized services for older victims/survivors of sexual assault include [8, 10, 12-16]:

- **Creating welcoming and accessible spaces** for older victims/survivors in domestic violence centres, sexual assault centres, and community programming and services. Informational and educational materials, posted advertisements, décor, and environmental design should be accessible to, and inclusive of, older persons' unique needs and backgrounds. For example, shelters should be accessible, including the installation of railings and grab bars in bathtubs, as well as quiet spaces for older victims away from younger families and children.

- **Providing accommodations that encourage access to, and participation in, supports and services.** This may include travel assistance, reimbursement, bus/taxi fare, and/or access to a telephone, especially for community-residing victims/survivors who require travel.
- **Restricting programming to only older victims/survivors of sexual assault** so that age-specific services can encourage recovery and healing with others in similar situations. Programs and services should focus on long-term and age-relevant topics and concerns (e.g., visiting grandchildren, participation in faith-based activities, dealing with pets, loss of friends or death of a spouse, isolation, changes in health and well-being, decrease in independence, and financial issues) [8, 15].
- **Developing and providing specific supports and services for victims/survivors with mobility restrictions.** Supportive telephone counselling or mobile counselling, both in-home and in-care facilities, can be especially helpful for victims/survivors who have mobility restrictions. For example, the Ontario's Seniors Safety Line (SSL) assists older victims/survivors of abuse through safety planning, counselling, and referrals to other appropriate services and supports.

- **Peer support groups and specialized survivors' groups for older victims/survivors** that can help meet the unique needs of older victims/survivors. This may include specialized services for sexually assaulted older men, dedicated services for gender-diverse older victims/survivors, and ethnocultural programs for older victim-survivors.
- **Therapies that involve music and art** to aid in recovery and help older victims/survivors with long-term coping strategies and long-term healing in the aftermath of sexual victimization.

TERTIARY PREVENTION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE RESPONSES

A collaborative and coordinated community response, attentive to the unique long-term needs of older victims/survivors of sexual assault, can help older victims achieve justice in the aftermath of sexual assault [8, 17-20]. Collaborations should include stakeholders from aging services and organizations, health care providers, social workers, geriatrics specialists, sexual abuse and domestic violence advocates and practitioners, criminal justice professionals, and elders. Examples of collaborations that foster a holistic approach to sexual assault in later life include [12]:

- **Agency cross-training and referrals** to foster pathways to supportive services for victims/survivors. These can help ensure older victims/survivors are provided with appropriate supports and services, whether they are victimized in the community or care facilities.

- **Cross-agency training and education for criminal justice personnel** on trauma-informed responses to sexual assault in later life can help service providers understand the complex and unique issues relevant to the progression of cases of elder sexual abuse through the criminal justice system, including the best practices and approaches when victims and/or perpetrators have cognitive impairments [16, 21, 22].
- **Dedicated and specially trained crowns, police, social workers, geriatric counsellors, and consultation teams** that respond to and prosecute cases of sexual victimization of older adults in the community and care facilities.
- **Criminal justice legislation, criminal justice sanctions, and institutional policies in care facilities must hold perpetrators accountable** and send messages that convey denunciation, punishment, and the need for rehabilitation in the aftermath of sexual assault of older persons.
- **Preventing future perpetration and increasing opportunities for rehabilitation of perpetrators** also requires a collaborative approach. Identified perpetrators of elder sexual assault, as well as those at-risk for perpetration, require targeted interventions and programming [7, 14]. For instance, case law on elder sexual assault indicates that, especially in cases of stranger-perpetrated sexual assault, perpetrators have a history of similar offences, highlighting the need to address the root causes of perpetration in order to prevent future abuse [23].

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It is one of three factsheets focused on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention of sexual assault in later life.

For more information about this project and to access other project materials and additional resources, visit www.cnpea.ca

