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Coping with Older Adult Bullying in Senior Living Communities

Bullying is an increasingly common problem among seniors. While the communal nature of senior living communities can open the door for the formation of cliques and similar social behaviors, even seniors living in their own homes independently can be subject to bullying within their social circles.

The [American Psychological Association](#) defines bullying as “a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort.” But bullying discussions often center on children and school settings, largely overlooking the fact that bullying can – and does – occur within many social circles and environments, and it’s a problem that spans every age demographic.

A 2020 issue of the [Certified Senior Advisors Journal](#) reports that 39 percent of senior living community tenants witness bullying, and 29 percent experience bullying themselves. Unfortunately, this behavior often goes unreported. Slowly, psychologists, sociologists, and gerontologists are beginning to shed light on bullying behaviors that aren’t isolated to kids and don’t suddenly disappear once there’s a diploma in hand.

What Does Older Adult Bullying Look Like?

In an article for [KevinMD.com](#), Frances Shani Parker describes one of her first experiences witnessing a bullying situation in a senior living community: “The first time I witnessed older adults bullying others was at a senior center where, after a great deal of resistance from members, the age for joining the center had finally been

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Author and social gerontologist [Dr. Robin Bonifas](#) notes that bullying in senior living communities can come in many different behavioral forms, including name-calling, bossing others around, hounding individuals for money and other items, or releasing physical aggression. Bullying can be as simple as residents saving preferred seats in the dining room for their friends, ensuring that the “outcasts” are stuck with the less-desirable, leftover seating – and sure to feel isolated. Other bullying behaviors common in the senior population include:

- Criticizing or ridiculing another person who does not meet the individual’s accepted standards for clothing, social status, religion, sexual orientation, economic background, or virtually any other characteristic or status.
- Verbal or physical abuse of victims, which may include yelling, hitting, pushing, or kicking. In some cases, the attacker brushes these incidents off as accidental.
- Stealing or destroying property, and/or lying about the victim in order to assert power or authority. For instance, a bully may lie to the administration in a senior living community regarding the victim’s actions in order to cast the victim in a poor light.
- Saving seats or reserving spaces for clique members in dining rooms, restaurants, or during outings or other events. These behaviors seem innocent enough, but can actually be quite hurtful to those outside of the clique who may be isolated or left to dine alone.

The fact is that we all grow up and gain some level of maturity, but we also learn that we don’t have to – and won’t – like everyone with whom we come in contact in our lives. Yet, as adults, we also have social skills and know how to be respectful of other individuals within our community.

Why Bullying Occurs in Seniors

According to Dr. Linda Rhodes, a former Secretary of Aging and author of “The Essential Guide for Caring for Aging Parents,” in a [special to PennLive](#), “Elder bullies might have likely exhibited this behavior during a lifetime, but as they age factors such as loss of independence, relationships, valued roles, and feeling powerless in a controlled setting can exacerbate the need to exert control and ignite a late-life round

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- Insults or belittling jokes
- Spreading rumors or whispering when the victim enters a room
- Invading a victim's personal space
- Criticizing or ridiculing physical or mental disabilities
- Offensive gestures and facial expressions

In social situations, particularly communal living situations, in which staff are responsible for the health and well-being of all residents, the goal is to create a nurturing, home-like environment in which residents feel welcome and comfortable. Naturally, that's difficult to achieve if a resident is being outcast and ridiculed by others. And when we, as older adults, enter communal living or social situations, we do bear some responsibility for getting along with others.

Coping with Older Adult Bullying of a Loved One

The solution, of course, is not an easy one. "A former school principal, I know bullying is a problem that only gets worse when it's ignored. Too often the victims are vulnerable and defenseless," Parker says. "Some, such as those targeted for sexual orientation, become so frustrated they commit suicide."

She suggests a multi-faceted approach that combines clear expectations and policies with targeted staff training and rapid intervention to reduce the negative impacts bullying often has on victims:

- Setting clear expectations and boundaries within the community that make residents and staff aware of the community's commitment to a respectful environment.
- Having ongoing discussions among staff, residents, and families, as well as formal needs assessments to identify potential problems early.
- Evaluate and implement changes that can "decrease the power of bullies." If residents are being isolated in the dining room, for instance, eliminate reserved seating.
- Implement clear and easy reporting processes to encourage victims to report bullying, and instate a no-tolerance policy for bullying in your community. Include a standard process for resolving bullying incidents once discovered.

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with seating arrangements in the dining room, for instance, consider joining your loved one for a meal to assess the situation. Talk with community administration to find out what policies are in place and make them aware of incidents.

Many communities have residents sign a code of conduct agreement, committing them to the appropriate treatment of others and outlining the steps taken should bullying or other inappropriate behavior be identified. Typically, staff conducts an assessment to determine if there's an underlying cause for the bullying behavior, such as dementia or side effects from medications, before determining a course of action.

Coping Strategies for Victims of Senior Bullying

In the meantime, Dr. Rhodes suggests a few coping strategies for victims:

- Ignore the behavior in order to remove the bully's perceived power.
- Share your opinion without aggressiveness or implied hostility.
- Avoid interrupting or provoking bullies.
- Maintain eye contact with bullies.
- Try to understand the bully's position or circumstances that may be contributing to these behaviors.

Like instances of bullying in other age demographics, coping with senior bullying is a long and sometimes complex process. Identifying coping strategies to help seniors cope with bullying and fostering appropriate behaviors and responses among senior bullies is the best approach, but it takes ongoing effort and careful consideration to dissolve situations in a positive manner. In senior living communities, setting expectations and healthy boundaries, and providing clear rules and policies from the start helps to ensure a positive living environment for all residents.

Need Help? Our Senior Living Consultants are Standing By

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