

## **Elder Abuse and Suicide Risk**

Elder abuse has been seen as a growing problem nationally for a number of years. Older elders have long been seen at high risk of suicide and there is concern that elder suicides will increase as the aged population grows in coming years. More attention must be given to how these two phenomena relate. While little research has been done here is what we know.

All forms of elder abuse are known risk factors for elder suicide. These include physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, financial abuse and exploitation, and neglect and abandonment.

The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (1998) noted that half the neglected elderly were unable to care for themselves. Correspondingly, many studies have found that suicide in elderly persons is more likely associated with medical illness and physical impairment. Frail or medically compromised elders may have dual risk.

Self-neglect is frequently encountered among impaired elders. It is characterized by any behaviors of an elderly person that threaten his/her own health or safety such as the failure to provide himself or herself with adequate food, water, clothing, shelter, safety, personal hygiene, and medication. This closely resembles “passive suicide” which is sometimes found in settings where elders have limited autonomy or access to lethal means (e.g., residential care facilities).

Elder homicide-suicide may also be linked to elder abuse. Victims are most often couples in their 80s with the wife most often murdered by the husband who then completes suicide. Elder homicide-suicides may be the outcome of a long-term abusive relationship or one that turned so when the health and care needs of one partner increasingly burdened the other.

Here are some recommendations for addressing this problem in the community:

- All staff involved with responding to cases of elder abuse or providing protective services to at-risk elders should be trained to identify possible warning signs of aged suicide.
- All aged individuals suspected or known to be victims of elder abuse should be screened for suicide risk factors and warning signs.
- All aged individual who manifest any type of suicidal behavior (i.e., ideation, threats, voicing a plan, seeking means, or making an attempt) should be assessed for signs of elder abuse.

Like all forms of suicide those associated with cases of elder abuse are preventable at some point. For more information about elder abuse contact the Montgomery County Department of Aging and Adult Services (610- 278-3601). Call 1-800-734-2020 to report suspected cases of elder abuse in Montgomery County 24/7. To help a suicidal elder call 610-279-6100 or 9-1-1.

