

'Tis the season to be wary of elder financial abuse

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If this year's holiday period is anything like the last, seniors should be advised that, along with seasonal elevations of joy and good cheer, the risk of falling victim to elder financial abuse is also increasing. Older adults need to know the warning signals of financial abuse and exploitation, how to prevent it, and what to do if it does occur.

According to research conducted by Karen A. Roberto, director of the Center for [Gerontology](#) at Virginia Tech, of the 1,128 news articles on [elder abuse](#) published from November 2010 through January 2011, 31 percent dealt with abuse of a financial nature. Although slightly more than one-quarter of these events were identified as singular random acts incurring relatively minor [financial losses](#), a high level of brutality and disregard for human life characterized these crimes. Even more disturbing is the revelation that family, friends, and neighbors were identified as perpetrators in 45 percent of these cases and the overall dollar losses at the hands of family and friends were higher than from any other category of perpetrators.

"Our findings support what service providers have long suspected, [older adults](#) are particularly vulnerable to financial abuse during the holidays," said Roberto, who also serves as a professor of human development in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. "This might be due to the increase in the frequency of visitors in- and-out of their homes, money flowing more freely, and [distractions](#) that take them out of their normal routines."

The research study, which also analyzed newsfeeds from April through June of 2010, determined that older Americans are losing \$2.9 billion annually to elder financial abuse, a 12 percent increase from the \$2.6 billion estimated in 2008. "A trend," said Roberto, "that perhaps is a reflection of the state of the economy."

[Elderly women](#), especially those between the ages of 80 and 89, were found to be nearly twice as likely to fall victim to financial abuse as men. They often lived alone and frequently required some level of assistance with either health care or home maintenance. Conversely, nearly 60 percent of perpetrators were found to be younger males between the ages of 30 and 59. In almost all cases reported through the newsfeeds studied, financial abuse was achieved through deceit, threats and emotional manipulation of the elder.

Financial abuse cases tend to bundle into three distinct types of crimes: occasion, desperation and predation. Crimes of occasion evolve when the victim is perceived to be in the way of what the perpetrator wants be it money, jewelry, or a bank account.

Crimes of desperation are typically those in which family members or friends become so desperate for money that they will do whatever it takes to get it. Many of these family members are dependent on the elder relative for housing and money.

Finally, crimes of predation occur when trust is engendered for the specific intention of financial abuse later. A relationship is built either through a bond of trust created by developing a relationship (romantic, caregiving, or otherwise) or as a trusted professional advisory, and then used to financially exploit the elder.

10 tips for seniors to consider now and throughout the

year

Preventing financial abuse begins with the elder. Some key considerations in avoiding such a situation include:

1. Stay active and engage with others; isolation increases both vulnerability and opportunity for victimization.
2. Monitor your financial affairs. Even if assistance is needed, you or a trusted friend or family member should double check bank and credit card statements and other financial transactions. It is advisable to use direct deposit when possible and to sign your own checks if able.
3. Stay organized. Know where your financial documents are (including wills, trusts, and power of attorney). Keep them safe and review annually; update as circumstances change.
4. Discuss benefits of appointing a Power of Attorney with your attorney so that your directives can be adhered to even if you become incapable of stating them yourself.
5. Be cautious in making financial decisions. Do not allow anyone to pressure you into making a hasty decision. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Never give out bank account, social security or credit account numbers to solicitors.
6. Protect your passwords. Do not share banking, computer or ATM passwords with others, and notify company or bank if you notice any questionable charges or transactions.
7. Beware of telephone solicitations. It is not rude to hang up when an unknown caller tries to talk you into doing something you don't want to do or buying something you don't want. Hang up! Then call the National

Do Not Call Registry at 1-888-382-1222 to reduce the number of solicitation calls you receive.

8. Be careful of individuals who may take advantage of you. Elder financial abuse can be committed by anyone, including caregivers or family members. Be wary if anyone pressures you to do something with your money or possessions that you are not sure you want to do (e.g. adding their name to your bank accounts or property titles). Be especially careful of someone who tries to keep you isolated from others, and call a trusted family member or the police.

9. Recognize potential financial abusers. Most abusers are very persuasive in convincing the elder of their trustworthiness. Again, never make a monetary decision without talking it over with someone you are sure has your best interests at heart.

10. Know what to do if you believe you are a victim of financial abuse. Put aside your fear or embarrassment and discuss your concerns with someone you trust, be it another family member, clergyman, bank manager, or attorney.

Provided by Virginia Tech

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