



# Spiritual elder abuse in culturally diverse communities

Connection to any spiritual and religious beliefs that you hold is a valuable and positive part of life when you're older, and you should be free to practice them.

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As an older person, do you have spiritual beliefs that an important part of your life?  
Are you free to practice them?

The ability to connect to and practice your religious and spiritual beliefs is recognised as a fundamental human right under article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And research suggests that people who practice their faith and regularly visit a religious place of worship – such as a church, synagogue, mosque or temple – may experience greater wellbeing and live longer than those who don't.

Religious or spiritual beliefs can play a fundamental role in a person's culture and cultural practices, with some form of religion being long and deeply embedded in culturally diverse communities. Yet some older people in these communities are prevented from connecting to their beliefs, for a variety of reasons. This can constitute a form of elder abuse known as 'spiritual elder abuse'.

Considering that over a third of the Australian population was born overseas, spiritual elder abuse of people from culturally diverse backgrounds is an issue that needs particular attention.



# What is spiritual elder abuse?

According to 1800RESPECT, spiritual abuse ‘happens when someone uses spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare or control you’. It can happen to anyone, and it can be deliberate or unintentional. Spiritual elder abuse specifically targets older people, and it often happens within families, care settings or religious communities. The draft National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2023–2034<sup>[i]</sup> recognises the need for governments to consider ‘cultural or spiritual abuse as an emerging and distinct form of abuse’ (p 14).

Spiritual elder abuse commonly happens when an older person is prevented from connecting to their beliefs by carers, family members, religious leaders or friends, either deliberately or inadvertently. This may happen through ignorance – for example, a care worker may not understand how important it is to the older person that they attend a particular religious service or place at a particular time of the day.

A stark difference in personal beliefs can also contribute. While many older people in culturally diverse communities like to continue observing spiritual practices, younger people are often less religious (including those outside the communities) and other people of any age may move away from religion. These differences can magnify the risk of spiritual elder abuse in culturally diverse communities through a lack of understanding or respect.

## Examples of spiritual elder abuse in culturally diverse communities

Spiritual elder abuse in culturally diverse communities can take many forms.

- **Coercion** – using religious teachings to pressure older people into making decisions that are not in their best interests. For example, an older person may be pressured into remaining in an abusive relationship on religious grounds. An older person may want to divorce their spouse, but their religious leader tells them they cannot because ‘divorce is a sin’.
- **Isolation** – preventing older people from practicing their faith or attending religious services. For example, an older person may want to attend a culturally relevant Christmas service in person, but their adult child may not want to help them attend, so they don’t make the appropriate arrangements. An older person may wish to attend a religious service presented in their own language, but their supporter fails to find such a service for them.
- **Using shame or guilt** – making older people feel ashamed or ‘sinful’ for asserting boundaries or seeking help. For example, an older woman from a culturally diverse background may have experienced domestic violence perpetrated by her spouse. Her religious leader may advise her not to seek help, claiming that she will not only bring shame on the whole community, but also commit a sin by leaving her partner.
- **Exploitation** – manipulating older people into giving money, property or other resources under the guise of religious obligation. For example, an older person from a culturally diverse background may be pressured to contribute a substantial amount of money to their religious organisation with the promise that they will be ‘rewarded in the afterlife’.

- **Control by people in authority** – religious leaders or caregivers using their position to dominate or silence older people. For example, older people may not be given opportunities to contribute to organisational processes, they may be excluded from important meetings, or worship gatherings may not be accessible to them, particularly those with mobility, vision or hearing impediments.
- **Failure to support** – not providing the older person with the support they need to practice their religion. For example, supporters may not allow or enable them to attend church or follow religious practices such as wearing head coverings. They may deprive an older person of important religious items, such as prayer beads or books, while they are in hospital or otherwise away from home.

## Why is spiritual elder abuse harmful?

Spiritual elder abuse can deeply affect an older person's sense of identity and community and their emotional and physical wellbeing. Spirituality and religion are often a core part of someone's life – especially in later years – so this kind of abuse can be particularly devastating.

Many older people from a culturally diverse background have spent a lifetime engaging with regular religious practices they consider fundamental to their daily life and wellbeing. Preventing them from continuing those practices could be highly distressing for the older person.

In a world that is increasingly less focused on religion, the difficulty of accessing an empathetic ear can be distressing for an older person. In culturally diverse communities, language barriers can make it even more difficult. For example, an older person from a culturally diverse background may be living with cognitive impairment, such as dementia. While they may have acquired English and spoken it well during their lifetime, their condition may affect their current ability to communicate in English and ask for help.





# How to stop spiritual elder abuse

If it's safe to do so, you could have a conversation with the person who is committing the abuse – they might not understand that what they are doing is harmful. The conversation might be enough to make them change their behaviour. If it doesn't, there are services available to help you.

If you are concerned about someone else, talk to them to understand the situation and how they are feeling. Once you know more about what's happening, you could help them access a relevant support service. (If they don't feel safe or comfortable speaking with you, see if there is a trusted friend or family member – who is not participating in the abuse – who could have the conversation with them.)

The best way to prevent spiritual elder abuse is to educate yourself and others about what it is and where to seek help.

## Where can I get help with spiritual elder abuse?

If you think you are experiencing spiritual elder abuse, or that someone you know is, you can seek support from these channels:

- **Trusted faith leaders** – approach faith leaders to discuss your situation. Only do this if the faith leaders are not part of the spiritual elder abuse.
- **Pastoral care support** – if pastoral care support is provided by the faith institution, you can reach out to them for assistance. Only do this if the pastoral care providers are not part of the spiritual elder abuse.
- **Advocacy services** – speak to a lawyer or local community legal service. If you, or the person you know, is receiving government-funded aged care, you can contact the Older Person's Advocacy Network to speak to an advocate.
- **Domestic and family violence services** – If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000) immediately. Otherwise, contact one of the following services:
  - the Elder abuse phone line 1800 ELDERHelp (1800 353 374)
  - Services Australia family and domestic violence information, referrals and support
  - the National Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Counselling Service 1800RESPECT.

If the person suffering the spiritual elder abuse doesn't speak English or has difficulty understanding and communicating in English, engage an independent accredited interpreter for them. You can find an interpreter in the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) online directory.

### REFERENCES

[i] The plan is an initiative of the Australian Attorney-General's Department in consultation with the attorneys general of the states and territories. It was published for consultation from December 2024 to February 2025.