Subtle Resident Abuse

Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

"Advocating for Excellence in Long Term Care"

- Elderly or disabled residents of long-term care facilities are often quite dependent upon the staff in order to get their basic needs met.
- In many ways, they are at the mercy of the staff and very vulnerable. In turn, the facility staff has a lot of "power."
- Abuse of that power can be very subtle. A staff member may be totally unaware that he or she is being careless, thoughtless, tactless or insensitive in his or her words or actions. And the staff person may be completely unaware of the very adverse impact that this is having on the resident(s).

Definition of Subtle Abuse

As defined on Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

- **Subtle**

  1 a : delicate, elusive

  b : difficult to understand or perceive

  2 a : perceptive, refined

  b : having or marked by keen insight and ability to penetrate deeply and thoroughly

  3 a : highly skillful : expert

  b : cunningly made or contrived : ingenious

  4 : artful, crafty

  5 : operating insidiously

Definition of Subtle Abuse continued…

- **Abuse**

  1 : a corrupt practice or custom

  2 : improper or excessive use or treatment

  3 *obsolete* **:** a deceitful act

  4 : language that condemns or vilifies usually unjustly, intemperately, and angrily

  5 : physical maltreatment

Defined by Virginia Department of Social Services – Code of Virginia

- "Adult abuse" means the willful infliction of physical pain, injury or mental anguish or unreasonable confinement of an adult.
- "Mental anguish" means a state of emotional pain or distress resulting from activity (verbal or behavioral) of a perpetrator. The intent of the activity is to threaten or intimidate, to cause sorrow or fear, to humiliate or ridicule.

Code of Virginia Definition Continued…

- "Unreasonable confinement" means the use of restraints (physical or chemical), isolation, or any other means of confinement without medical orders, when there is no emergency and for reasons other than the adult's safety or well-being or the safety of others.

Ponder These Questions in the Following Examples:

- Why is this abusive?
- Why might the staff person be doing it? (Is it intentionally done or not?)
- What harm can the resident suffer from this?
- What should the staff do instead?

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- Avoiding or ignoring residents. Ignoring a resident's call light.
- Demonstrating favoritism towards one resident in front of others.

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- The staff member makes promises he or she has no intention of keeping.
- Giving complaints the brush-off. Staff listens to a person's complaint (which is good), but reacts by communicating through words, body language or actions, that they aren't taking the complaint seriously.

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- Curt replies, sarcastic comments, deep sighs that convey disgust or irritation. Shrugging one's shoulders in an "I don't care" attitude; silently shaking one's head in exasperation.
- Taking for granted a resident's response to a given situation. For example, a group outing is planned and a particular resident Mrs. B isn't invited because "She didn't want to go last time," or "Mrs. B wouldn't enjoy something like that."

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- Speaking about the resident in front of him as though he wasn't there. For example, two staff members are in a resident's room caring for Mr. L. and they talk only to each other, excluding him from the conversation.
- The same dynamic can occur when staff meets with the resident and his family—the staff directs their comments and questions only to the family member.

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- Coming into the room to clean it or repair something without greeting the resident or explaining why you are there.
- Doing a treatment or procedure without telling the resident what you are going to do beforehand.
- Knocking and coming in before the resident acknowledges the staff person.

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- "She's not my patient" is an inappropriate response when a person needs help.
- Laughing ***with*** a resident is different than laughing ***at*** her. Make sure she knows you are not ridiculing her.
- Treating the resident as an object, not an individual.

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

- Laughing or talking loudly in the hallways during nighttime sleeping hours.
- Retaliation. "Getting back at" or "getting even" with someone who has complained. Actions that say, "Don't report me. I can make life uncomfortable for you."

Examples of Subtle Resident Abuse

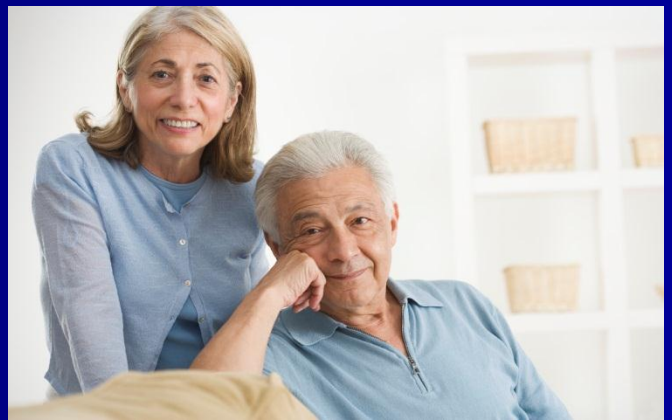
- Leaving a person in wet clothing or on wet bed linens as a punishment for being incontinent or for any other behavior is a form of abuse. So is scolding the person for this behavior.
- Withholding small privileges can be a form of abuse. For example, making a resident wait for his shower or cigarettes until the staff member is "good and ready."

Ah-ha Moment…

- If residents are irritable, anxious, or become angry, you will be most helpful to them (and yourself) if you understand that they are reacting to their situation – not to you.
- Realize your actions and how they make the resident feel. Put yourself in their place. How would you want to be treated?

Some tips from *Life's Little Instruction Book* by H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

- *Seek out the good in people.*
- *Be kinder than necessary.*
- *Don't forget, a person's greatest emotional need is to feel appreciated.*
- *Smile a lot. It costs nothing and is beyond price.*



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