



## **On World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, 5 things everyone should know about elder abuse**

USC experts provide insights about this important issue.

BY FIONA PESTANA | June 15, 2018

### **1. It's a bigger problem than you might think**

From [Sumner Redstone's claims](#) to [Stan Lee's lawsuit](#), elder abuse has made headlines recently — and for good reason. One in 10 Americans over 60 years-old has experienced some form of elder abuse and globally the number is more than one in seven, says [Kathleen Wilber](#), professor of gerontology at the USC Leonard Davis School and the co-director of the National Center on Elder Abuse.

“The term elder abuse is used to describe a range of problem behaviors, including physical assault, emotional abuse, sexual coercion, financial

exploitation and caregiver neglect. Although it is gaining attention, mistreatment typically occurs in the shadows, most often committed by family members or other close friends and neighbors,” says Wilber.

## 2. Not all elder abuse is intentional

**Recent research** from the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology revealed that a significant amount of abusers, 37% of the study sample, were actually well-intentioned caregivers.

“Elder abuse perpetrators are a diverse group who would benefit from a variety of interventions to help stop abuse and prevent it from occurring in the first place,” said USC Leonard Davis School Research Assistant Professor Zach Gassoumis, a co-author on the study. “In the case of caregivers, this may include education about minimum standards of care, proper financial management and fiduciary practices, or referral to caregiver support services,” he said.

The **USC Center for Elder Mistreatment** is currently working with the National Institute of Justice and Kaiser Permanente to develop an elder abuse prevention program targeting caregivers.

## 3. Brain changes can make some older adults more vulnerable

“Financial exploitation of older adults is a devastating form of elder abuse that results in profound consequences to the health, wellbeing, and independence of older adults, and the loss of billions of dollars annually to our national economy. However, little is known about the risk factors of financial exploitation in old age.” says Duke Han, associate professor of family medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

To address this, Han leverages neuroscience tools to investigate the brains of older adults vulnerable to financial exploitation.

Results of this work suggest that deterioration of specific brain networks that serve crucial prospective imagery and decision making functions may

lead to greater susceptibility to scams and fraud in vulnerable older adults.

“The results of this work can ultimately inform the development of interventions to protect vulnerable persons in order to support autonomy and wellbeing in old age,” he says.

## 4. Prevention methods are lacking

“Although current research indicates that the problem is widespread, effective treatments and approaches demonstrated to prevent abuse are lacking,” says **Kathleen Wilber**, professor of gerontology at the USC Leonard Davis School and the co-director of the National Center on Elder Abuse.

“The problem affects all of us; given the high personal, social and economic costs. Investing in developing and testing remedies has the potential to directly benefit those affected, including older adults, their families, providers who treat victims and government, which often ends up paying the costs.”

Variations of family violence interventions — including both domestic and child abuse — could be used as starting points to develop elder abuse prevention methods, according to **studies** from Wilber and her colleagues.

## 5. Collaboration is key

Diana Homeier, MD, FAAFP, is an Associate Professor of Clinical Family Medicine and Clinical Internal Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, as well as the medical director of the Los Angeles County Elder Abuse Forensic Center, which is at the forefront of advancing a dynamic response to elder abuse that brings together practitioners from multiple fields, including medicine, law enforcement, legal and social services.

“Since its founding in 2006, the Los Angeles County Elder Abuse Forensic Center has allowed professionals involved in elder abuse cases from very different perspectives to come together,” says Homeier. “This enhanced communication and collaboration increases the probability of agencies working together to achieve the desired goal of better protecting and serving our elderly clients.”