

PREVENTION

Module 8: Risk factors and protective factors

In this module:

- Risk factors and perpetrators;
- Risk factors and protective factors;
- Relationship among risk factors that contribute to the problem of violence against older persons;
- Stories from the front lines; and,
- Questions for reflection.

Risk factors and perpetrators

A **risk factor** is a condition or characteristic that increases a person's risk or vulnerability to harm. In contrast, a **protective factor** is a condition or characteristic that helps people deal more effectively with stressful events and lessens risk of vulnerability, such as skills, strengths, resources, supports and coping strategies.

A **perpetrator** is someone who commits a criminal, illegal or violent act. Perpetrators can be family, friends, volunteers, caregivers or other health care workers. They vary by gender, education, sexual orientation, religion, and social, cultural and economic backgrounds.

Violence against older persons is a complex social problem. It cannot be explained by any one single risk factor. A range of factors determines who might be at risk and why. In this module, we will look at what places older persons at risk of violence. We will also look at factors that protect them from harm.

Note: In this module, we look at risk factors for older persons who live in the community. In Newfoundland and Labrador, most older adults live independently in their own homes and less than seven per cent of older persons live in residential care facilities. Refer back to Module 3 for

information on violence against older persons who live in residential care facilities.

Risk factors and protective factors

The presence of any of the risk factors listed in the table below does not necessarily prove that violence is occurring. The presence of any of the protective factors below may reduce the risk of violence, but does not mean that risk is not present.

RISK FACTORS	
Personal and health-related factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age and gender (women age 75+ are most at risk). • Lack of knowledge of civil and human rights. • Ethnicity, language barriers, isolation. • A health condition (stroke, loss of vision or hearing) may hinder reporting incidents of violence. • Impaired decision-making (due to health) may result in older person making poor decisions such as giving perpetrator access to the home, finances, etc. Gambling addiction, alcoholism or other substance abuse.
Environmental factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cash and valuables hidden at home. • No money to leave a violent situation. • Social isolation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No transportation; ○ No phone or internet; ○ Lack of contact with others; and, ○ No one to turn to for help. • Living in rural regions where there are fewer formal support systems.

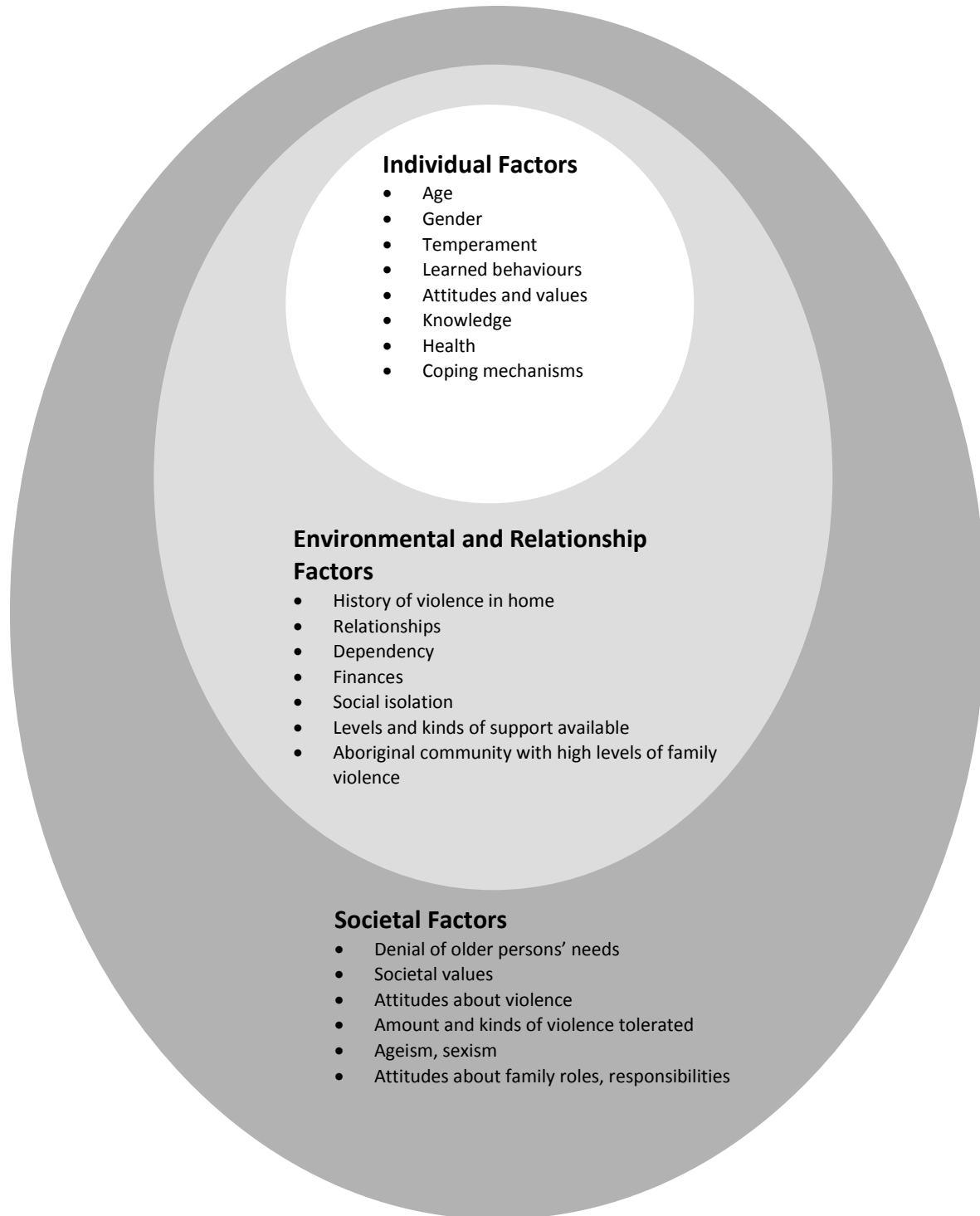
Relationship factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of violence in the home. • Not wanting to report violence for fear of making things worse or being left without care. • Physical, financial, emotional or intellectual dependence on a spouse, partner or other family member. • Having a dependent adult child.
Societal factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignorance or denial of the needs of older persons. • Societal values (youth, paid labour, and independence versus age, unpaid labour and interdependence). • Tolerance of violence. • Ageism: mistaken beliefs and lack of understanding of aging. • Dated views on gender, family roles and responsibilities that create imbalances in power and control.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS	
Personal and health-related factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good coping skills. • Being aware of civil and human rights. • Personal safety plan in place and shared with a trusted family member, neighbour or doctor.
Environmental factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated government and community resources that serve older persons. • Living in a community that is responsible to its citizens. • Accessible transportation, community facilities and housing. • Services for older persons available in all regions. • Monitoring in institutions. • Solid policies and procedures on resident care in residential care facilities. • Staff in residential care facilities trained to recognize, intervene in and prevent violence.

Relationship factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring families. • A variety of relationships, including friends, neighbours, volunteers, clergy, caregivers, other service providers.
Societal factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes positive images of older people. • A culture of respect that values the wisdom and contributions of older persons.

Remember: violence of any kind is *always* wrong. Everyone has the right to make choices about their own life, and to live and grow older in a safe environment with dignity and respect.

Relationship among risk factors that contribute to the problem of violence against older persons



STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

John

John, 82, lives alone in his own home. He has no close relatives. Alma is John's home-care worker. John has bruises on his face and arms because Alma restrains him and forces him to take more pills than he needs. John has given Alma power of attorney over his affairs. He has put his house in her name.

Annie

Annie is an 83-year-old widow. She lives in her own home with her son Tom, 54. Tom often yells and swears at her. She is scared when his friends are in the house. They smoke marijuana and drink alcohol. They also leave a mess for her to clean up. Tom will not let her friends or other family members visit. He has threatened to harm Annie if they meddle. Annie will not ask her son to leave because he is financially dependent on her.

Payphone Caller

An older male called a seniors' organization from a payphone during Christmas week. He said that his daughter had been beating him on a regular basis. His reason for calling was not to report this, but to ask if this was acceptable. The volunteer on the phone at the seniors' organization tried to persuade him to call again. She thought he sounded very frail and sad. The volunteer never heard from him again.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What surprised you in reading the list of risk factors above?
2. Does the information in this module reflect your own experience with older persons at risk?
3. Are there other risk factors that have not been mentioned? Protective factors?
4. How might your own personal biases affect your assumptions as to who may be at risk of violence?