

Techniques and Tips for Interviewing Older Adults

A law enforcement officer interviews an older adult who is the victim of a crime. An adult protective services (APS) social worker interviews an older adult as part of an APS investigation. An attorney interviews an older adult as part of the attorney's representation of the adult in a guardianship case or civil litigation.

This resource provides information for these professionals and others to consider when interviewing older adults in connection with elder abuse cases.

I. Selecting the Interview Location

The interviewer may

- conduct the interview in the older adult's home or at a location that is comfortable to the older adult (note: conducting interviews in the homes of older adults allows interviewers to assess living conditions and ask questions about what they see around them);
- ensure that the location is free from distractions for both the older adult and the interviewer; and
- ask about and be aware of any physical limitations the older adult might have, such as hearing or sight impairment, and make sure that the older adult has access to accommodations that will empower him or her to participate meaningfully in the interview.

II. Conduct of the Interviewer

The interviewer may

- provide his or her name and contact information to the older adult;
- explain the role of the interviewer and the purpose of the interview to the adult;
- develop a rapport with the older adult by asking about the adult's life and daily routine;
- ask the older adult whether he or she has any questions, needs, or concerns before going into the substance of the interview;
- make sure that cell phones, televisions, and other electronic devices that will distract from the interview are turned off and/or put away;
- treat the older adult with respect;
- ask the older adult how he or she prefers to be addressed;
- refrain from stereotyping the older adult; and
- be prepared to offer the older adult referrals to supports and services in the community, including protective services against further abuse.

III. Special Considerations for Older Adults with Cognitive Impairments

The interviewer may

- remember that a cognitive impairment does not always prevent an older adult from relaying what happened (i.e., don't discount what the older adult has to say because of a cognitive impairment);
- ask short, open-ended but specific questions;
- ask about one thing at a time, building on what the older adult has already disclosed;
- give the older adult time to answer each question without interrupting the adult but redirect as necessary;
- speak slowly and clearly but not condescendingly;
- speak at eye level with the older adult and maintain eye contact;
- NOT correct the older adult; and
- consider the timing of the interview, asking, for example, whether the older adult is more or less alert because the interview is occurring:
 - after a meal,
 - after the adult has taken medication(s),
 - after physical exercise, or
 - earlier in the day.

Older adults with dementia may experience “sundowning,” which is a restlessness, agitation, and confusion that worsens later in the day as the sun goes down. A caregiver may be able to provide information about the best time of day to conduct the interview with the older adult.

IV. Joint Interviews with Other Professionals

There are advantages and disadvantages of conducting joint interviews of older adults with other professionals. For example, consider the case of law enforcement joining an APS social worker to interview an older adult.

A. Advantages

- The older adult only has to give a statement once.
- The interview may be more comprehensive; one interviewer may ask a question another interviewer had not thought to ask.

B. Disadvantages

APS and law enforcement serve different societal purposes. APS provides protection to older adults who are victims of elder abuse, while law enforcement conducts investigations to prosecute perpetrators.

- An older adult may be wary of sharing information needed by APS to provide protective services to the adult if law enforcement is present, particularly if the perpetrator is a family member or caregiver of the older adult.

- The presence of law enforcement may be intimidating to the older adult and could make the adult afraid that he or she did something wrong.

V. Presence of Family, Friend, or Caregiver

It may be necessary, for confidentiality purposes or for other legal reasons, to conduct an interview of an older adult alone. Doing so also helps build trust with the older adult and ensures that the adult's story, and not another person's version of it, is told to the interviewer. It may be necessary for the older adult to have a support person present for some of the interview, until the adult feels comfortable. The support person may leave after introducing the older adult to the interviewer, so that the older adult may be interviewed alone.

Resources

- *Elder Abuse Guide for Law Enforcement (EAGLE): Interviewing Older Adults*, available at eagle.usc.edu/law-enforcement-resources/interviewing-older-adults/.
- American Bar Association & American Psychological Association, *Assessment of Older Adults with Diminished Capacity: A Handbook for Lawyers*, available at apa.org/pi/aging/resources/guides/diminished-capacity.pdf.
- *San Diego Elder and Dependent Adult Abuse Blueprint 2018*, main document without addenda available at <https://www.sdcda.org/helping/elder-abuse-blueprint.pdf>.
- National Institute on Aging, *Coping With Agitation, Aggression, and Sundowning in Alzheimer's Disease*, available at nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-changes-behavior-and-communication/coping-agitation-aggression-and-sundowning.
- Sheri Gibson, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Elder Justice Initiative, *Forensic Interviewing of Older Adults* (Dec. 8, 2017), webinar presentation slides available at justice.gov/file/1064541/download.
- Kay de Vries, "Communicating with Older People with Dementia," 25(4) *Nursing Older People* 30–37 (May 2013), available for purchase at ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23789241.
- Gerontological Society of America, *Communicating with Older Adults: An Evidence-Based Review of What Really Works* (2012), gsaenrich.geron.org/communicating-with-older-adults.