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## Positive inheritance: inter (generational) dependence can work to end elder exploitation and abuse

By **Brett Joseph**

People in the helping professions—including attorneys—occasionally encounter situations that point up the vulnerability of older adults. Without mutually supportive family ties or long-term relationships with trusted professionals, older adults who are living alone may be preyed upon by individuals, posturing as benefactors, whose sole motive is to expropriate an elder's monetary wealth and assets. These predators work to socially isolate their victims, and incrementally obtain control of their financial and material possessions.

This type of abuse involving finances occurs especially (but not exclusively) in areas plagued by high unemployment and a lack of community cohesion; in these venues, some enterprising people have actually chosen the “vocation” of elder abuse.

This is abuse that easily escapes detection by local law enforcement and human services agencies: there will be no victim complaints, and no calls to the abuse hotline. Family members are often unaware of the situation, and those who are concerned may be frustrated in their efforts to intervene, as the interloper manipulates family dynamics and the social environment to interject distrust and isolate the victim.

### **Family Exploitation**

While economic exploitation by predatory con artists remains a significant problem for our aging population, today's uncertain economy can also give rise to exploitive relationships within the family. One common situation is when a younger family member leans heavily on a grandparent, perpetuating a dependent relationship long past the age when most young adults would move on—and when they instead could be stepping into the caregiver role.

Families may find it difficult to track the gradually changing needs of their younger and older members; they may fail to recognize when a legitimately dependent relationship has moved into exploitation.

These common situations are the most vexing because they prey upon our basic human needs for intimacy and interdependency—needs that often go unmet within our highly individualistic American culture. When the human need for relational intimacy runs headlong into our society's individualistic orientation, many times neither victim nor family members will be prepared to intervene until it is too late. Plus, our legal and social welfare systems are not set up to deliver effective interventions when no one is complaining.

Solving this problem means relearning what a healthy, intergenerational relationship of interdependence and mutual support means. As our aging society embraces wellness care, aging in place and similar community-based alternatives to the costly and dehumanizing prospect of institutions, we must learn to discern between genuine helping relationships and those that are abusive.

Family members and helping professionals who suspect an exploitive relationship involving an elder loved one should not accept surface appearances, but ask probing questions and conduct independent investigations—similar to the way a responsible parent might scrutinize the social relationships of their teenage children.

### **Rediscovering Interdependence**

This is not a call to abandon informal, within-the-family and community-based caregiver arrangements. Rather, it is a call for us to rediscover what it means to be interdependent. If joblessness and social isolation operate as risk factors that increase the likelihood of elder abuse, then let us envision a way forward where we cultivate intimate relationships between generations.

Elders value the gifts of youth: their craving for authenticity, an ability to challenge cynicism (in their best moments!) and a tendency to pour boundless energy into any venture that captures their imagination. Young people, in turn, may experience the presence of an attentive elder as a soothing balm; the telling of stories of past struggles and dreams can infuse the relationship with a transcendent quality and place both youth and elder on a common path. When elders share the gift of attentive presence, coupled with authentic storytelling, they guide younger people on their journey from dependence to engaged maturity.

During transitional eras such as the present one, longstanding legal and social institutions adapted to the bygone industrial era seem to offer few solutions, but the practice of intergenerational sharing promises to serve as an avenue for both cultural transmission and cultural revisioning. Laws and institutions that perpetuate dependent relationships must be called into question, and the concept of inheritance must be reconstrued in other than material terms.

Ultimately, the solution to the economic exploitation of our elder population lies in learning to build intergenerational relationships and communities based on a well-cultivated respect for our common humanity. ■

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