

The Prevention and Mitigation of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults Part IV: Case Studies

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When considering the position of any adult as “vulnerable”, we must also look at persons in the caregiving role. A vulnerable adult can be anyone who shares a caregiving or ministerial relationship with another person where there is a presence of unilateral power. For example, relationships such as those between a teacher and an adult student, a spiritual director and a directee, a psychotherapist and a client, or a doctor and their patient all constitute helping relationships where one person has power over the other. Despite the age, consent, and disposition of an adult in this type of relationship, the adult who is ministering is always responsible for upholding professional boundaries. When a professional or person who is ministering or volunteering abuses their position of power with another adult, it is a serious violation of trust, ethics, and morality. Persons approaching others for help are always vulnerable in this regard.



There are those with psychological or character logical disorders who approach others for assistance in ministry. In many cases, these are not known until you are well into the caregiving relationship. Careful attention must be paid in all situations, and supervision is always beneficial, if not required, when a member of the clergy, religious or minister/volunteer offers pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, or pastoral advice in any manner. In these cases, outside assistance should be sought immediately to assist you in determining the best course of action to protect yourself and others for any potential harm.

The voices of those who have been abused suffer from being silenced. It may bring us a better understanding to hear their stories through these case studies so that we can grasp the depth of the pain and difficulties one must endure when abused.

Let us hear now from four individuals whose voices have been stifled, silenced, or taken away.

CASE STUDIES:

John

My name is John. I am 44-years-old and have been living in a beautiful home run by the Brothers who have always been so nice and kind to me. I am a person living with Down syndrome and my family is too old to take care of me. They brought me here 10 years ago and I love it. The food is good, and we have lots of things to do. There used to be lots of Brothers here, but a lot of them died because they were too old. I miss them; they were always nice to me. My parents can't come too often anymore because my dad has a hard time to drive, but they come as often as they can and bring me nice things. I miss them, but I talk to them on the phone.

There are lots of new people working here. I miss the old ones who were nicer. I try to clean my room and keep everything nice, but the new workers get mad. I am not supposed to say anything. Some of them yell at me, but then they get to be nicer when I give them some of the chocolates my parents give me. Sometimes I given them some of the presents I get from people and then they don't yell.

I have been having a problem and I can't make it to the bathroom at night fast enough and then I have an accident. The man who works at night gets really mad and I am afraid of him. He yells all the time and he pinches me really hard and makes me sleep in my wet pajamas. It gets really cold and he takes my blanket away.

Last week he hit me and it hurts. I am really afraid to tell anyone because he told me that if I do they will throw me out and I will have to sleep on the road. I don't know what to do.

Lisa

My name is Lisa. I can't talk; I can't move my fingers or my arms or legs. I can't do anything. I am 28 or 29 now. I forget. The days and nights seem all the same. I have been living in this nursing facility for seven years since my parent's insurance ran out and I had to leave the rehab. I was in a car accident when I was 19. My three friends died in the crash; I survived, sort of. We weren't drinking and driving or doing anything wrong, but the man driving the truck who hit us was really drunk. The doctors diagnosed me with complete quadriplegia, and I need a ventilator to breathe.

I cannot begin to describe all of my feelings to you because much of what I feel I forget. I am sad most times, but happy when friends and family visit. They take good care of me here and make me feel comfortable and loved. I feel loved.

A while ago a new guy who works here was hanging in my room a lot. He seemed very nice. He comes to wash and sweep the floors and empty the trash and things. One night, very late, he came into my room and raped me. I couldn't move, I couldn't scream, I couldn't say anything. I didn't feel anything. He came back three more nights and did the same thing. He didn't hurt me, but I don't know why he is doing this to me. I wish he would go away and it would stop.

My body is changing and they don't know why. I keep hearing them talk about pregnancy. My parents are furious and I can't say anything.

Agnes

Hello. I am Agnes. I am almost 89 years old and very proud of it. I live at the same home I shared with my husband and family and my own mother and father since I was born. Can you believe that I have lived here for 89 years? This was my grandparents' house. They lived and died here and my parents did, too. When my husband died 12 years ago, I made my children promise to never send me to a nursing home. I want to live and die here. This is where I belong.

Everything had been going along very well for a long time, but I am getting older now, and things are harder to accomplish. My children come and visit and my grandchildren come, too. They help me with chores around the place and keep the house in good shape. All of my friends and old neighbors have died or moved and gone away.

I watch mass on TV and the priest and deacon visit. They suggested to my daughters for me to get food delivered every day from Catholic Charities. They said I was eligible. They have free hot lunches made by the vocational high school students delivered five days per week. I didn't want any part of it, but they said I should try it. I did and the lunches were great. They tasted good, and the elderly man who delivered them every day was so nice. We became good friends. He used to do extra things for me and never ever charged me a penny. He did take a piece of pie or some candy once in a while, but was always so nice. Then he got sick and couldn't work anymore. I found out later that he was a volunteer! God bless him.

It has been a real nightmare since. He was replaced by a young man around 26 years old. At first he was very nice. He came in and asked to use the bathroom once, and then another time asked for a glass of water. We became friendly too, but he became very mean. The first time he asked to borrow money was fine. I gave him 10 dollars and he gave it back a week or so later. Then he asked for 20 and then more and more. He kept saying that he had a sick mother at home without food. He even took some of my free meals to give her. I finally had to say that I couldn't give him any more money, and then he said that he would hurt my granddaughter who is only 17 years old. He saw all of my family pictures and asked about everyone and I told him all about them. He asked where one of my granddaughters lived, where she went to school and so on. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but I soon found out why he wanted to know. I am so afraid. I don't sleep anymore, and I am quickly running out of money. Now he says that he wants me to give him some of my jewelry. I am afraid to tell anyone. I feel trapped and alone. How did this happen?

Jeff

My name is Jeff and I am 21 years old. My life is really a mess. I am drinking more and more to forget about my problems. I lost my job and I am living in my parent's basement. I have lost all respect for myself and everyone in my family has lost respect for me.

I was having some trouble after I broke up with my girlfriend. I couldn't get over it. I loved her since we were both 16 years old, and then she broke it off. I got very depressed, started staying out late and hanging with my buddies. They basically drank on the weekends, but that wasn't enough for me. I kept at it all through the week. I lost my job because of it.

My parents gave me an ultimatum and told me to clean my act up. They suggested a therapist and I went for a few sessions, but it wasn't working. I started going to AA meetings and that was helpful and I started all over again being sober. One of the people at the AA meeting told me that she knew a really good spiritual counselor who worked in one of the local churches. She said that the counselor had a background in addictive behaviors and she only charged twenty-five dollars per session, so I called her and gave it a try. I went to a few sessions and she was really understanding and helpful. She was about 49 years old and still very attractive, and she seemed to know me better than I knew myself. She really was a wonderful person. I had been going to see her every week for a few months and then she told me part of my problem was sexual. I trusted her. I don't know what happened, because it happened so fast, but now I am in a sexual relationship with her. She says that it is healing for me. I really feel weird about the whole thing and I don't know how to end it. I tried once, but she became very sad and started crying saying that she failed me, and she only wanted me to be better. I don't know what to do or who to tell. I feel responsible for this whole mess and I don't want her to get in any trouble or anything. I am so upset and confused; all I want to do is to go back to drinking.