

PUSHED

Guidelines for a Sensitised Approach to Supporting Older Victims of Domestic Violence

For the Staff of Domestic Violence Shelters

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Introduction

According to available statistics, violence against women most often occurs within the family. More than 80% of incidents of domestic violence escalation, including murder, have been committed by men against women. Therefore, violence against women is considered one of the most serious social problems.

When domestic violence occurs, it is crucial to have the possibility of timely protection of victims by providing them with accommodation where they will be safe from violence. Apart from physical protection, it is very important to offer adequate psychological and counselling support, which includes assistance in meeting a number of everyday social needs and exercising rights arising from positive legal regulations. All of this helps victims to act without pressure

and fear and to effectively overcome specific problems on their way out of the cycle of violence.

These Guidelines, as well as the Handbook for Professionals which they build upon, were created and printed as part of the project “puSHEd - protect, understand, support; help the elderly” The project seeks to prevent and combat gender-based violence against older women by developing gender-specific responses in providing support to victims and raising the capacity of relevant professionals from the protection and support system. It also aims to raise awareness among the general population and improve the community’s response to gender-based violence against older women. This primarily implies a higher rate of reporting violence, but also its prevention. The project, known by

the acronym “puSHed”, is carried out by the organisation B.a.B.e (Be active. Be emancipated) in partnership with the City of Zagreb, the Common Path Foundation and the Home for Children and Adults Victims of Domestic Violence “Duga – Zagreb”, with the support of the Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, the Victim and Witness Support Service and the European Social Network. The project is funded by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme of the European Union.

The Guidelines are based on the available literature, experience and relevant data gathered through ten semi-structured interviews with older women victims of domestic violence, as well as through three focus groups held with professionals working in this field at various levels (institutions, care facilities, public administration, shelters, associations, etc.). The objective was to map the needs and experiences of older victims, as well as the challenges we are facing as professionals trying to provide adequate

support. What we offer in these Guidelines is information that can help one develop a more sensitised approach in working with older victims of domestic violence, focusing on the needs of older women victims.

Admission of an older person to a shelter and establishing a relationship

When making initial contact with an older beneficiary who has entered a safe house, pay attention to the possible psychological and physical consequences of ageing-related processes, which must be recognised in time. Keep in mind that this is a very heterogeneous group. Do not assume anything, but ask the beneficiary for details regarding her health status, such as sensory difficulties and multiple or chronic health issues. It is also important to consider the possibility of changes in the state of health during the stay in the facility, such as developing chronic conditions.

The level of awareness in the new situation is crucial for developing a sense of safety. Take enough time to provide insight into all the rights of the beneficiary, with a particular focus on independent decision-making.

Clearly inform the beneficiary as to whom she may turn to if she requires support or has concerns at any time during her stay.

Communication during psychological treatment

Apart from ensuring space for the older person to express their personal priorities and wishes, gradual and continuous psychological support is crucial for accepting the life situation in cases of domestic violence (in addition to seeking help and providing crisis accommodation). The above-mentioned psychological and physical factors also include adjustment to retirement (including impoverishment) and exposure to age-related stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, which also affect treatment conditions. Some of the signs you may notice are increased response time, difficulty understanding, and impaired sensory perception.

Therefore, take enough time to understand what the older beneficiary wants to show and share with you. Gather information on her physical and health status, psychological condition (especially in terms of her current needs, fears

and concerns), family relations and socio-economic status. Try to gain insight into her complete history, but keep in mind that older people may find it more difficult to open up and need to be supported and given the required time.

Older victims of domestic violence, especially women, are often withdrawn in character. Sometimes professionals pay more attention to younger beneficiaries, who are “louder”, show more initiative to solve current problems and voluntarily approach the team of professionals to have a conversation. Be aware of this and continuously invite older victims to talk so that they do not go “under the radar”. In this way, you will encourage them to actively engage in their recovery while acknowledging the specific features of their age. It is extremely important to adapt the approach so that older people feel welcome to use the available support.

Basic rules of communication with older people

During the beneficiary's stay in the shelter, the professional and technical team should be familiar with the communication guidelines for working with older people:

Know what is expected in the ageing process

Pay attention to the possible presence of the listed common characteristics of older people, from the physical to the experiential level.

Avoid stereotyping – both negative and positive, because it significantly hinders contact. Expressions such as “old grump” and “what a sweet old lady” are examples of stereotyping, too.

Establish a collaborative relationship

The goal is to create an environment of shared power in a helping relationship. In doing so, it is crucial not to assume what the

beneficiary needs, but to ask for her opinion, support her decision-making and inform her about possible strategies and options.

Adjust your communication style

Taking into account ageing-related processes, adapt your language and non-verbal communication with older beneficiaries. Be authentic and clear, while adhering to professional boundaries.

Refrain from the habitual spontaneous tendency to address older people in inappropriate ways:

- *elderspeak* – emphasising words, simplified speech, using a high-pitched voice, talking loudly, repetition, redundancy and subtle control, for example, by asking “are we having a good day?”
- *babytalk* – “My dear, you look so cute today...”
- *patronising speech* – “For your own good you should...”

Approach to working with older people during their stay in a shelter

Two aspects are key in working with older people during their stay in a shelter: encouraging the beneficiary to actively use her (free) time (engagement in activities within and outside the shelter, involvement in tasks/obligations) in order to prevent social exclusion and withdrawal and raising awareness of the potential and capacity for developing their independence. Provide support for the beneficiary to gradually start performing a range of activities independently – from leisure to obligations. Empower and foster self-confidence through a collaborative helping relationship. Truly listen to what the person is saying and comprehend. Praise them for results accomplished within the spectrum of their skills. Highlight the qualities and knowledge they already possess (e.g. as part of group work).

Advice for a sensitised approach to older people



Encouraging them to engage in activities that make them happy and to fill their schedule with activities they have stopped doing and supporting them to discover what makes them happy and has a beneficial effect on their mental health
activity suggestion: assign the person to perform tasks/obligations suitable to their physical fitness within the facility, which also contributes to their integration, so that they feel equal with other beneficiaries and useful (the sense of contributing to the collective)



Encouraging the beneficiary to engage in social activities, strengthen their existing social networks and create new ones (to the extent that suits them)
suggestion: link in with organisations and facilities that offer diverse (educational and social) services suitable for older people



Encouraging activities that improve cognitive abilities (such as reading, writing, solving crossword puzzles, Sudoku...)
suggestion: have materials available (e.g. in the shelter living room)



Informing about available support in case of need for medical assistance (services and support available as part of crisis accommodation, such as taxi service, psychological support, calling emergency medical services, provision of information, available on-call person, etc.)

Leaving crisis accommodation

Leaving the emergency accommodation is preceded by the process of preparing a safety plan, empowerment, encouragement of independence and psychological support for taking that step. Older beneficiaries usually go back to their home, to another social welfare facility (such as a nursing home), a rented apartment, another shelter, the home of one of their family members, etc.

Preparing a safety plan implies gathering information about the current status of the perpetrator and of pending court proceedings and, in general, the possibilities and outcomes of various situations.

If the beneficiary moves to another social welfare facility, it is important to inform her of her options and the rights she may exercise based on her status. It is also important to

inform the beneficiary about possible alternative support systems, such as those provided in the community, by civil society, etc.

Contacts

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telephone: 032 414 910

mobile phone: 098 982 4641 (svaki dan od 0 do 24h)

**City of Zagreb Department for Social Welfare,
Health, Veterans and Persons with Disabilities**

address: Trg Stjepana Radića 1, Zagreb

telephone: 01 610 1271

email: socijalneustanove@zagreb.hr

web: www.zagreb.hr

**Home for Children and Adults Victims of Domestic Violence
“Duga - Zagreb”**

(secret location)

official address: Ozaljska 93, Zagreb

**toll-free helpline of the counselling centre for children and adults
victims of domestic violence:** 0800 88 98

email: savjetovaliste@duga-zagreb.hr

Duga Home - general information: 01 383 1770

email: info@duga-zagreb.hr

web: www.duga-zagreb.hr

**National Call Centre for
Victims of Crime**

telephone (dostupan 0-24h): 116 006

email: npc@pzs.hr

web: www.pzs.hr

The Common Path Foundation

Središnji ured

address: Miljackina ulica 42a

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Notes



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