Abuse and the Myth of Caregiver Stress

How we label a problem shapes how we respond to it.

Until recently, most abuse of adults receiving care was thought to be because of stress. This is now known to not be true. Most of the abuse is due to domestic violence. Often, domestic violence is wrongly labeled as caregiver stress. Caregiver abuse from stress is rare and quite different from domestic violence.

No matter how much stress, most willing and able caregivers do not reduce their stress by hurting people in their care. Research shows that both abusers and non-abusers report equal amounts of stress.

Domestic violence is a pattern of abuse with the goal of having power and control over someone.

A way to tell if the caregiver abuse is not domestic violence is that the caregiver feels remorse and makes changes to prevent it from ever happening again. Significantly, the abuse stops.

When abuse is from domestic violence, the caregiver blames the person needing care. The caregiver does not see himself or herself as the problem. People think-if the stress is lifted, then the abuse will stop. Sadly, the abuse continues.

Treating abuse as caregiver stress is dangerous for vulnerable adults:
- Attention is given to the caregiver rather than the elder
- Respite and support are provided for the caregiver rather than the elder
- The abuser is given more power and control
• Blame is placed on the person needing care rather than the abuser
• Lessens the receiver of care’s sense of dignity and worthiness

To end abuse of people who receive care:
• Caregivers should know their red flags and get help
• Others can report abuse and advocate for training and support caregivers
• Recognize that abuse is abuse and cannot be excused
• Never blame a person for needing care

To end domestic violence by caregivers-improve the safety and freedom of person receiving care. Solutions include:
• Safety planning
• Breaking the power and control cycle of the abuser
• Increasing the power and value of the person being abused.
• Listen and support the person being abused

The best practices come from your local domestic violence agency.

References: