

Maryland Judiciary
Types and Signs of Abuse

In this video, we'll define the types of abuse, including physical, sexual, and emotional, and discuss how to recognize their signs. It is important to keep in mind that a single indicator is not always proof of abuse. Be on the lookout for patterns or suggestions that there might be a problem.

Physical abuse is the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment. It includes hitting, beating, pushing, shaking, kicking, slapping, pinching, choking, pulling hair, and burning. The definition also includes inappropriate use of drugs or physical restraints, as well as force-feeding, reckless driving, and physical punishment.

What are the signs of physical abuse? An obvious sign is if the individual makes a specific complaint about mistreatment. Other signs to watch out for include unexplained or poorly-explained injuries, such as fractures, sprains, dislocations, internal injuries, or bleeding. Pay attention to bruises, bites, cuts, sores, burns, scars, or head trauma. Another sign of physical abuse can be a sudden change in the victim's behavior, such as aggression, withdrawal, regression, substance abuse, depression, attempts to escape, wariness of physical contact, or fear of certain places. Signs of physical abuse also include sudden loss of weight, teeth, or hair.

Be concerned if the person under your care and the people around them have different explanations for the cause of injuries. Another red flag may be if he or she seems afraid of, or wants to avoid, a particular person. Pay close attention if you notice frequent or suspicious hospitalizations, or if there are delays between the onset of an injury and seeking medical care.

Sexual abuse is non-consensual sexual contact of any kind. It includes rape and molestation, but also any sexual conduct with a person who is unable to consent. Both women and men may be victims of sexual abuse, and children and people who have physical or cognitive disabilities are particularly vulnerable. So are people who lack social support or are isolated.

What are the signs of sexual abuse? One clear sign is if someone specifically communicates that they have been sexually abused. Other signs include reports of genital or anal pain, irritation, or bleeding, and difficulty walking or sitting. Watch out for torn, stained, or bloody underclothes or sexually transmitted diseases. Behavior changes may also be a clue to possible sexual abuse, such as inappropriate, unusual, or aggressive sexual behavior. Also keep an eye out for bedwetting or changes in sleep patterns, such as over- or under-sleeping and nightmares. Is the person under your care suddenly afraid of the dark and avoiding undressing? Is he or she wearing extra layers of clothing? All of these could be signs of sexual abuse.

Emotional abuse is the infliction of pain, anguish, or distress, and is sometimes called psychological abuse. Someone may cause emotional abuse by using verbal assaults, threats, or insults. This type of abuse also includes intimidation, humiliation, and harassment, but may also be more subtle, such as isolating a person from their family, friends, or regular activities.

What are the signs of emotional abuse? Of course, a specific complaint is a clear sign. But there are less obvious signs, such as significant weight loss or gain, depression, confusion, agitation, and withdrawal. Pay attention to unexplained rashes, hives, facial tics, stomach aches, or elevated blood pressure. Other red flags may be new nervous habits such as biting, rocking, head-banging, bedwetting and thumb sucking.

Anyone can be a perpetrator of abuse. Most victims of abuse are harmed by someone they know, such as family members, acquaintances, dating partners, or caregivers.

Remember, it's important to distinguish between types of abuse. The signs of physical abuse, for example, are different than the signs of sexual or emotional abuse. In any type of abuse, the perpetrator may be anyone and is often known by the victim.