

Report: Understanding
the Experiences of
Older Victim-Survivors
- A Thematic Analysis

Executive Summary

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This report, 'Understanding the Experiences of Older Victim-Survivors: A Thematic Analysis' explores the lived experiences of people aged 60 and over who have experienced domestic abuse from intimate partners or adult family members. Research conducted by the Dewis Choice Team at Aberystwyth University, identifies how systemic failings and social attitudes combine with personal barriers to make older victim-survivors largely invisible within current service provision.

Barriers to Support

Older adults face a dual set of barriers: structural and individual.

- Structural barriers dominate. Most services, campaigns, and assessment tools are designed with younger adults in mind, leaving older people excluded. Referral pathways are often unclear, fragmented, or absent—particularly for older men. Limited accessibility (physical, sensory, digital) and a lack of targeted outreach mean many do not know support exists or cannot reach it. Professionals frequently address symptoms (e.g. anxiety, isolation, health problems) without asking about underlying causes, leaving abuse undisclosed. Ageism in policy, practice, and data collection further reinforces invisibility.
- Individual barriers compound these systemic issues. Many older adults struggle to recognise their experiences as abuse, shaped by generational norms of privacy and self-sufficiency. Fear of retaliation, shame, embarrassment, and self-blame deter disclosure. Some worry about burdening their families or believe they will not be believed, particularly where perpetrators are respected in the community.

Together, these factors create an environment where opportunities to seek help are rare, fragmented, and often missed.

The Need for Safe Spaces

Older victim-survivors stressed that safe spaces are not just physical locations but relational environments where they feel protected, listened to, and believed. Safe spaces must be age-inclusive, accessible, and proactive, designed to overcome the structural barriers that prevent older adults from engaging with traditional services. They include:

- Confidential and private settings where older adults can speak without fear of repercussions.
- Trusted relationships with consistent professionals who provide stability and continuity.
- Informal community contexts where disclosure feels less intimidating than in formal appointments.
- Relational safety—professionals who demonstrate respect, empathy, and accountability, enabling older people to explore choices without judgement.

Safe spaces, whether physical or relational, are the foundation upon which disclosure, trust, and recovery are built.

The Importance of Professional Curiosity

A recurring theme is that disclosure rarely happens spontaneously. Older victim-survivors often do not know that they can—or should—discuss abuse with professionals. Practitioners across health, social care, housing, and community services must therefore:

- Proactively ask direct but sensitive questions about home life and wellbeing, rather than waiting for disclosure.
- Make it clear that disclosure is appropriate within their role, signalling readiness to listen and respond.
- Use accessible, empathetic language that avoids alienating terminology and builds understanding over time.
- Explain confidentiality clearly to build trust, particularly in small communities where fears of gossip or reprisal are acute.

Professional curiosity, combined with safe relational spaces, transforms fleeting encounters into genuine opportunities for disclosure and support.

Priorities for Services

Older victim-survivors consistently prioritise:

- Proactive, personalised contact from services, rather than reliance on self-referral.
- A single, trusted point of contact to navigate fragmented systems and reduce the strain of repeated disclosures.
- Practical support with housing, finances, and everyday tasks alongside emotional support.
- Opportunities for community connection, tackling the loneliness and disconnection that often follow abuse.
- Long-term, trauma-informed recovery support, recognising that the impact of abuse and trauma often spans decades.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that structural failures in service design, policy, and practice—exacerbated by individual fears and generational norms—are the key reasons older adults remain invisible within domestic abuse responses. Without proactive engagement and safe, relational spaces created by professional curiosity, many older victim-survivors will continue to suffer in silence. Age-inclusive, trauma-informed approaches are urgently needed, underpinned by practitioners who are explicit in their readiness to listen, ask, and respond.