

What Is Abuse?

Definitions of forms of abuse

There are some commonly accepted definitions of abuse, which fall into the broad categories of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect (failing to keep safe and well), financial abuse, institutional abuse and spiritual abuse, but these categories often overlap and interconnect. The term 'abuse' describes various ways people harm others, either knowingly or by failing to act to prevent harm.

Abuse and harm differ. According to www.quora.com **abuse** relates to repetitive behaviour over time whereas **harm** is the effect that abuse has. All abuse is harmful but not all harm is abuse. That said, a single act may be described as an abuse of position, power, influence, etc. In any event, harm must be addressed.

The following descriptions provide a general understanding of various types of abuse. The descriptions are not intended to exclude other understandings or explanations that may be held, but rather to guide awareness in order to prevent abuse and/or harm happening.

Physical abuse: This may involve, but is not limited to, hitting, slapping, pushing, throwing, kicking, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm. Sometimes a parent/caregiver may fabricate symptoms, or deliberately induce illness (fictitious illness by proxy). Not all injuries are a result of abuse - accidents do happen. What matters is whether the child or vulnerable adult was knowingly put at risk of harm - be that physical, emotional, sexual or neglect.

Emotional abuse: This abuse consists of severe and persistent maltreatment, which causes adverse effects on emotional development, and undermines an individual's self-worth. Emotional abuse may involve conveying to individuals that they are worthless, unloved, inadequate, or valued only when they meet the needs of another person. It can also include exposure to the abuse of others. Emotional abuse can also entail imposing unrealistic expectations - for example, expectations that are inappropriate to the development of the individual; or it can be overprotecting - limiting opportunities for exploration and learning or preventing them from taking part in social interaction. Bullying or exploitation, which cause an individual to feel frightened or in danger are also forms of emotional abuse.

Psychological abuse: This is characterized by a person subjecting or exposing another person to behaviour that may result in psychological trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Psychology is more medical (mental illness, health, studying human behaviour) and emotional is a psychological experience. They are close, particularly in simple practical terms but psychological is more to do with the mind and its health, whereas emotional is to do with feelings.

Sexual abuse: This occurs when someone exploits his/her power, authority or position and uses a child or vulnerable adult to gratify personal sexual desires. Abusers may be family members or close associates, who are often known and trusted by the individual concerned. Sexual abuse involves someone (an adult or young person) forcing or enticing a child, young person or vulnerable adult to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child/vulnerable adult is aware of what is happening.

Activities may involve: physical contact, including penetrative (e.g. rape, sodomy), or non-penetrative acts such as kissing, touching or masturbation; or non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at or producing sexual on-line images, watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Spiritual abuse: This can affect both children and vulnerable adults and is often described as a misuse of power occurring when a leader, church or belief system, whether well-intentioned or not, dominates, manipulates or castigates individuals through fear tactics, mind control, or some other psychological or emotional means. D & J Johnson describe spiritual abuse as *“The mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing the person’s spiritual empowerment.”*¹

Neglect: This is abuse and is where a carer/parent fails to meet the physical or psychological needs of the child, young person or adult, and harms his/her health or development. Neglect can be described as a lack of action to meet a person’s basic physical or emotional needs.

Internet abuse: This is the improper use of the internet; the use of computers in criminal activity is known as cybercrime. Cybercrime is defined as: *“Offences that are committed against individuals or groups of individuals with a criminal motive to intentionally harm the reputation of the victim or cause physical or mental harm to the victim directly or indirectly, using modern telecommunication networks such as Internet (chat rooms, emails, notice boards and groups) and mobile phones (SMS/MMS)”*² In terms of safeguarding, it is essential to be aware of two types in particular: child pornography and cyber-bullying.

Child pornography occurs where children are exploited for sexual stimulation. Such activity may involve the recording of sexual assault of the child and distributing the results through child sexual abuse images or simulated child pornography. Simulated child pornography includes other techniques such as modified photos of real children, the use of non-minor teenagers made to look younger, fully computer-generated images of adults made to look like children. Pornography abusing children uses a variety of media genres including photos, writings, cartoons, drawings, sounds, animation, film, video and video games.

Cyber-bullying is bullying using the internet, mobile phone or other technology like a camera to hurt or embarrass somebody. As a result, bullying can happen wherever and however a child or young person is communicating with friends on social media, e.g. website, online chat rooms and mobile phone. It also means that bullying can follow them wherever they go and can lead to a situation in which there is nowhere they feel safe. Adults also engage in cyberbullying as means of control and intimidation.

Social media can be used to manipulate and groom children, young people and adults through chat rooms, Snapchat, Facebook, emails, notice boards, groups, mobile phones and messaging, e.g. SMS/MMS. Sexting refers to the act of sending sexually explicit photographs or messages electronically. Grooming occurs when an adult manipulates a child to establish an emotional relationship and lower the child's inhibitions so they can sexually abuse the child or young person. On the Internet, this is done by creating false identities and encouraging secretive behaviours. Such manipulative behaviour can be used to lure children into child prostitution or child pornography and is a behaviour characteristic of paedophilia.

Grooming is not limited to the internet. It is evident in many forms of abuse and often involves the grooming of parents, other adults, colleagues and parishioners. The person creates an environment of pseudo-trust, as the adults as well as the children are taken in and lower their defences, which means:

- grooming targets the victims and the victims believe the person doing the grooming
- grooming people close to the primary victim can result in the victim being the one who is disbelieved and disregarded.

Even when offending is proven, due to the establishment of relationships between the offender and the victim's family or associates, the culpability of the offender and the impact on the victim may be downplayed.

Self-harm: This refers to deliberate and voluntary physical self-injury that is not life-threatening and is without any conscious suicidal intent, in an attempt to cope with strong feelings such as anger, despair or self-hatred. It may be by direct means including cutting and burning but could also be by engaging in serious risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol/substance abuse, recklessly dangerous physical activities and/or unsafe promiscuity. Some cases of self-harm may be an indication of sexual or other form of abuse.

Financial or material abuse: This abuse includes theft, fraud, exploitation, pressure in connection with wills, property or inheritance, and misuse of property, possessions or benefits. Many grooming and manipulative behaviours are present with these forms of abuse.

Discriminatory abuse: This is abuse that focuses on difference or perceived difference. It is usually based on a person's race, sex, religion, disability, etc. It is intended to dehumanize a person and may result in other forms of abuse.

Institutional abuse: This involves the collective failure of an organisation to provide appropriate and professional service to vulnerable people, leaving them at risk or causing them harm, be that physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect. This has occurred particularly when children and vulnerable adults are isolated from the wider community as is seen in many of the cases reported, and where there are poor systems of supervision and accountability. This is an area which the Catholic Church, along with other institutions, has needed to address on multiple levels. Institutional abuse in the context of the Catholic Church has been depicted in films such as *Philomena* and *Spotlight*, in novels such as *A History of Loneliness*, and in the submissions to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care in this country.

1. Johnson, D & VanVonderen, J. (1977), The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse
2. Halder, D & Jaishankar, K (2011) Cyber crime and the Victimization of Women: Laws, Rights, and Regulations. Hershey, PA, USA: IGI Global. ISBN 978-1-60960-830 as cited Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_crime#cite_note-4