

## **Bullying isn't just on the playground**

It's like "Mean Girls," but everyone is 80.

So reads a [2018 Associated Press headline](#) about a problem you may be surprised exists: bullying among older people living in assisted living facilities.

Shunning people from cafeteria tables, gossip, vandalism, physical scuffles and residents checking their mail at night to avoid running into an unkind cohabitant are just some examples.

While the issue may not be widespread, experts are telling the 65+ population, their loved ones and their caregivers why the problem exists and how to confront it.

### **Causes**

[Ari Lakritz, PsyD](#), is a clinical psychologist at OSF HealthCare who has taken a keen interest in mental health care for older folks. He points to a few reasons why senior home bullying might happen.

One, the seniors arrive with untreated (or sometimes even unknown to their caregivers) mental health issues.

Dr. Lakritz sums up the second reason: old habits are hard to break.

"The same types of personality dynamics, the same types of biases these individuals hold maybe as a product of the particular generation they grew up in. Any types of biases or beliefs about individuals different than them. Why would those go away just magically as they grow older?" Dr. Lakritz says.

Another simpler explanation: older people are cranky due to issues that come with age like chronic pain or feelings of helplessness.

### **Solutions**

There's not a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of senior bullying. But Dr. Lakritz says it must start with the caregivers.

"A clinician not just reacting to different problems in the facility but proactively speaking with residents at least for a few minutes each day," Lakritz suggests. "As well as having a really good referral system set up to psychiatrists, psychologists or another type of clinician if mental health concerns really do become a problem with individuals in that facility."

And the facilities can take short-term steps, such as holding anti-bullying or anger management classes for staff and residents. Don't allow residents to "claim" things in common areas like chairs or televisions to prevent others from being excluded. Include language on bullying in admission agreements that could allow staff to remove someone if they are a menace.

Families of the residents should check in with them frequently, too. Watch for changes in how they talk and act. A sudden desire to move out of a facility may be a sign of a bigger problem. Drop in for lunch and see if you witness any bullying yourself. If so, report it to staff.

The National Center for Assisted Living also has [a document](#) with tips to spot and stop bullying.

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for behavioral and mental health resources. If you or a loved one – of any age – are experiencing a mental health crisis, call 9-8-8, [the digits](#) for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.