# More cases of psychological and emotional abuse seen amid Covid-19 pandemic: MSF

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SINGAPORE - When a man in his 70s ended up in a hospital here after a fall, staff initially suspected elder neglect.

The case was then referred to Care Corner Project SARF, Care Corner Singapore's anti-elder abuse unit, in about cases involving vulnerable seniors.

Lead social worker Kristine Lam learnt that the man and his wife, also in her 70s, lived alone in a rented flat and that their adult children had moved out.

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After further checks, it was found that the man had been regularly subjected to psychological abuse by his wife for two to three years.

"After she gets an argument with her husband, the polished a knife and threatened that she wanted to inflict harm on him. She burned his clothes, made it seem like she intended to jump from a window and mocked him when he panicked.

"No also threatened to make the floor wet so he would fall," said Ms Lam, who added that the man eventually moved in with one of his sons.

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This was not the only case she handled last year. Ms Lam said she has been handling more psychological and emotional abuse cases since the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

Data from Care Corner Project Social and Family Development (SSF) showed a 78 per cent increase in psychological and emotional abuse cases investigated by the Adult Protective Service (APS) last year. There were 1,000 such cases in 2020 and 1,780 in 2019.

At MSF spokesman told The Straits Times that uncertainties resulting from the Covid-19 situation could have contributed to the increase.

"Issues have surfaced due to stress, coping anxieties and conflicts in relationships, including with dependents. If these intensified concerns and stresses in families are not addressed, they may increase the risk of abuse," added the spokesman.

Commenting on the surge in emotional and psychological abuse cases involving seniors, Ms Yvonne Lok, a family therapist at Raincoast Psychology and Healing Therapy, said it might also mean greater awareness of such abuse and that such matters should be reported.

## Intervened in fewer cases

MSF said APS investigations into cases of elder abuse where it has intervened, under the Vulnerable Adults Act (VAA), have increased by about 50 per cent between 2019 and 2020, and 2020 and 2021.

The MSF spokesman said that there is greater awareness among the public of family violence and the available resources to contact MSF, and that people are willing to report to authorities as well, especially during the circuit breaker period.

Of the 166 investigations APS conducted last year, 96 of them involved the use of the VAA to intervene. This is a decrease from the 127 investigations in 2019 involving 72 cases in the same age group.

While elder abuse had declined last year for those aged 60 and above, MSF said it continues to keep a close watch on the trend.

Ms Lok said that elder abuse cases often go unreported, and are especially flagged by a third party, such as a family member or neighbour. They are most reported by victims themselves.

Said Ms Lam: "Some of the elderly feel they shouldn't speak their grievances out loud and that it's shameful this is happening to them at their age. In cases where the abuser is their children, they feel it's their kids that they raised, remember like that and they have to heal with it."

Others fear retaliation - that the abuse would escalate if they reported it.

"They are often hidden from society and they could be suffering for a long time before external parties discover the issue, even."

Said Ms Lam: "It is important to remind the elderly that they are not criminals. There is a society we need to counter the cultural factors that limit victims from seeking help.

"We need to hold the space for our seniors to share their experiences without fearing of being judged."

## Family violence helplines

- Care Corner Project SARF (6476 1402)
- Peer Integrated Services for Individuals with Family Violence (6555 0390)
- Tinkle Safe Centre (6449 9085)
- National Anti-Violence Helpline (1800 777 0000)

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