

Withdrawing into the Castle



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It is heartbreaking when it happens. A friend or loved one becomes ill and frail, and suddenly he no longer wants to talk to you on the phone, he never answers the cards you mail him, and he's always "napping" when you come to visit. It is an unfortunate, but natural, progression that seriously ill people often engage in, right?

Not necessarily. Were all of those phone calls and doors answered by a caregiver or a "new friend"? Does the caregiver have access to the mail before your loved one does? Have you been allowed to talk to your friend without the caregiver being present? If the answers to those questions were, respectively, yes, yes, and no, there's a very good chance that it is not your loved one who is freezing you out – it's the caregiver.

Why would a caregiver do that? To gain power and control over the elder or person with disabilities, usually in order to financially exploit and/or otherwise harm the person without anyone else discovering it.

"Isolating" a victim is so common in elder abuse cases that it is frequently listed as a warning sign all by itself. Besides monitoring and controlling the mail, phone calls, and visits the victim receives, abusive caregivers often go further. They frequently tell the victim that no one cares about them anymore, except the caregiver. "Look," they say, "No one is calling, writing, or visiting you any more; I'm all you have." This kind of isolation causes depression and dependence and further lowers the chance the victim will recognize he or she is being abused and get help.

Sometimes the isolation methods are subtle. In one Canadian case, a son effectively isolated his blind mother by moving her to a house with unsafe steps leading up to it and moving all her things to the second floor, where there was no telephone. A Montana abuser moved her victim into a nursing home, where she refused to install a telephone, directed the nursing home to send all the mail to her, and told the victim's attorney that the victim no longer required his services. In a California case, a neighbor obtained a power of attorney over an older man and just "forgot" to call his out-of-town family members when he became ill, so they wouldn't visit and possibly discover her thefts.

It is not easy to get through the walls of isolation many abusers build, but finding out who built them is critical. If you are the person being told that no one cares about you any more, do your best to make your *own* calls, or get a neighbor your caregiver isn't familiar with to help you make calls. You may well find that people *do* care, but they had been told that *you* didn't want to talk to *them*!

If you are the friend or loved one who is being kept away, keep trying to contact him or her when the caregiver is not present. If you do not succeed at establishing direct contact and become more suspicious that you are purposefully being kept apart, call the police or Adult Protective Services and discuss your concerns. If the one you are being kept away from is a nursing home resident, call the long-term care ombudsman for help. His or her number must, by law, be posted in the facility.

What You Can Do

- Try to contact friends and loved ones when the caregiver is not present.
- If you can't, report your suspicions to Adult Protective Services. You can remain anonymous.