For older adults, participating in social activities can protect against physical and mental signs of aging, but it may also pose risks, especially for women.

A new analysis of national data led by UC San Francisco found that older women who were broadly engaged in social activities before the COVID pandemic had 76 percent higher odds of experiencing emotional abuse or mistreatment than women who were less engaged.

The analysis centered on three areas of elder mistreatment—emotional, financial, and physical—starting at age 60.

Researchers found that 40 percent of the older women and 22 percent of men reported at least one form of mistreatment. Older women who were broadly engaged in organized community social activities had higher, not lower, rates of some kinds of elder abuse or mistreatment, compared to those without broad engagement. In contrast, older women who reported more "informal" socialization with friends or family had lower rates of elder abuse or mistreatment.

According to Ashwin A. Kotwal, MD, a UCSF geriatrician researcher who is the second author of the paper, there are multiple possible explanations for the study's findings. "One explanation is that older women who engage in more community social activities have more opportunities and contact points for experiencing mistreatment," he said. "These women may experience abuse from people they encounter outside the home."

"But another possibility is that older women who are already experiencing abuse may try to get more involved in the community to seek support in coping with abuse," said Kotwal.

The researchers concluded that while social engagement can connect people with valuable community support, clinicians and geriatric researchers should be on guard for unintended consequences.

"Different types of social activities can lead to both positive and negative social interactions for older
adults," said first author Emmy Yang, BS, a student at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. She conducted her research as part of the Medical Student Training in Aging Research program through the UCSF Division of Geriatrics.

"Most importantly, our paper shows that clinicians and others shouldn't assume that older adults who appear actively engaged in the community are not experiencing mistreatment," said Yang. "Asking about older adults' social activities could be a window into identifying sources of mistreatment and support."


Provided by University of California, San Francisco
APA citation: Socially engaged older women more likely to be emotionally abused or mistreated (2021, June 10) retrieved 14 June 2021 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-06-socially-engaged-older-women-emotionally.html

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