

Caregiver's Corner Column (August 2012)

Driving: Family Communication and Alternatives

By Colleen Mahon-VanDoren

Home Care Assistance

St. Patrick's Day, 2002, my Irish father hitch hiked to an Ann Arbor pub. He took a cab home. This was after driving was no longer safe for him and others on the road. Hitch hiking was not one of the alternatives for travel that we suggested but I had to give him credit for getting where he wanted to go. It all started that March when dad had showed signs of dementia and his gerontologist suggested a formal driving assessment, among other things. The driving assessment had not gone well. At first, to my father, it felt like a death sentence, but then tenacity kicked in. If my dad could survive this huge milestone, anyone can!

Although there are many older adults capable of driving safely, remember that people age differently. Several factors place seniors at much greater risk for road accidents. A person 70 or older who is involved in a car accident is more likely to be seriously hurt, require hospitalization or die than a younger person involved in the same crash. Knowing the risk factors and warning signs of an older loved one who has become unable to safely operate a vehicle will help you gauge when it's time to take away the keys.

Changes that can adversely affect driving ability:

- Visual decline
- Hearing Loss
- Limited mobility and decreased flexibility – effecting response time
- Chronic health conditions – can impair driving skills, even suddenly
- Medications - side effects and drug interactions can cause drowsiness
- Dementia or brain impairment – makes driving more dangerous, frustrating and confusing

Warning signs that say stay off the road:

According to the National Institute on Aging, there are several critical indications that a senior may be losing the judgment or ability to drive.

- Incompetent driving at night, even if competent during the day.
- Drastically reduced peripheral vision, even if 20/20 with corrective lenses.
- Struggling to drive at high speed even if she/he drives well locally at slow speeds.
- Erratic driving, such as abrupt lane changes, hitting curbs, missing turns, or scaring pedestrians.
- Getting lost frequently, even while on familiar roads.
- Failing to us turn signals or keeping them on without changing lanes.
- Drifting into other lanes or driving on the wrong side of the road.
- Range-of-motion issues, such as failing to look over the shoulder.
- At-fault accidents or more frequent near-crashes.
- Increased traffic tickets or “warnings”

When it's time to hang up the keys:

Talking to a loved one about his/her need to stop driving is one of the most difficult discussions you may ever face. However, it's better if it come in the form of advice from those who are trusted. One of the main reasons seniors are reluctant to give up driving is that it is one of the

few ways they can continue to feel self-sufficient. The discussion can become even more challenging when the person still maintains most of his/her faculties, just not those that enable safe driving. You know your loved one the best, so think through how you want to address this sensitive issue. If you need the intervention of a driving coach to “prove your point,” it is worth the effort and cost. The pro-active approach works for many. “Mom/Dad, let’s look for other alternatives for you to get where you want to be before there is an accident.” This approach is logical and works well following a news article or personal experience of an accident occurring.

How to approach “The Talk:”

It helps to have a thoughtful, caring plan in place before saying something, says Harriet Vines, author of “Age Smart: How to Age Well, Stay Fit and Be Happy.” She suggests:

- Be empathetic. “Imagine how you would feel if you were in your parent’s place,” Vine says. It helps to involve other family member in the discussion – to help, but not to confront. Think about who generally keeps a situation calm and non-argumentative.
- Keep the conversation between ‘adults,’ not “child and parent.” Say things like, “We are concerned,” or “We don’t want you to get hurt or to hurt others.”
- Encourage the senior to use positive language to describe their situation to others and help them find words to ask for assistance.

What are the alternatives for getting where one wants to be? Be creative and use all community resources. Consider:

- Utilizing a home care agency to combine transportation and companionship services.
- Set a day of the week for errands and appointments, and alternate between family members and friends. This is a great way to combine a visit.
- Car Pool with other seniors whose family members are transporting.
- Contact your church about their “transportation ministry” to church.
- Use Dial a Ride, when appropriate.
- Take the city bus, when appropriate.
- Use Go Bus, when appropriate.
- Take a Cab.
- Call Red Cross for medical appointments.

My son is getting his driver’s permit this month. It causes me to pause and recall my days of learning to drive and the joy and convenience of being able to get around independently. We tell our children that it is a privilege as well as a huge responsibility. We guide them with our love, advice and even wisdom. We are now on the other end as we guide our parents with our love and advice. We hope they will listen to us as we keep ourselves open to how this difficult transition affects them. My advice is to be patient and empathic.

Caregiver’s Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American’s Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.