



## The Sojourner Project

...help for the journey

### WHEN DRIVING BECOMES A PROBLEM

Making the decision for someone else that they should not be driving has the potential to create significant amount of conflict so it should be done so cautiously and only as a last resort. This difficult decision needs to be handled as compassionately as possible. Working through alternatives and finding compromises is the best approach. Slowly reducing the need or opportunity to drive will also help alleviate the sense of loss our loved one will feel and may be a more acceptable compromise than not driving at all.

#### HOW NORMAL AGING EFFECTS OUR ABILITY TO DRIVE PHYSICAL ABILITY

##### VISION

Normal aging will impact a person's physical ability to drive. As we age our eyesight weakens, it diminishes both our range and peripheral vision. Our ability to judge distances and "see" as wide a field becomes impaired as our range of vision shortens (front/back) and narrows (side to side). Most times these changes occur slowly over time so a person adapts and adjusts their driving skills to meet their changing physical ability. Many people will naturally reduce the amount of night driving or drive much more slowly and cautiously in rainy or lowlight conditions. Sometimes we are less aware of the changes and are caught by surprise as we find it more difficult to merge or change lanes, noticing that our "blind spots" have gotten larger. We may find left hand turns more stressful because it is more difficult to accurately judge the distance and speed of the oncoming traffic. We may be more prone to accidents driving in reverse or in parking lots as we misjudge distances or not see obstacles.

##### REACTION TIME

Aging's most significant impact on our driving is in slower reaction times. As our brains age the ability to react quickly tends to diminish. So many find that they are unable to stop in time, merge or change lanes quickly or easily. Making turns either across traffic (left hand turns) or turning into traffic (from a parking lot onto a busy road) become much more difficult. In a crisis, a driver might accelerate rather than stop because they couldn't switch their foot quickly enough.

***Clear thinking adults are aware that their physical abilities are diminishing and will naturally change their behavior and routine to maintain their personal safety.***

They will naturally engage in *self-regulating behaviors* such as:

- Not driving at night or in bad weather
- Not driving on highways or on very busy roads
- Only going to and from routine places
- Limiting the number of trips in a day or week
- Driving during the day or when traffic is light
- Letting others drive them more often than in the past.

***Most people decide to stop driving on their own when they no longer feel safe.***

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(continued)

#### COGNITIVE ABILITY

Memory loss and impaired judgment will significantly impact a person's ability to drive. Someone who has even the earliest signs of cognitive impairment or memory loss may still be physically able to drive but find themselves getting lost or easily confused. Some people in the early stages of cognitive decline are aware of their decreasing ability to drive. They will find themselves frightened and confused getting lost or not able to find their way to usual places, even back home. While they may physically be able to drive well it is best that they not drive alone, to new places or drive far distances. These individuals will usually stop driving on their own or with very little prompting. But some are unaware of their cognitive decline at all and least of all its impact on their driving ability. These circumstances create a much more challenging situation for family caregivers. Any lack of awareness of their diminished capacity (either physical or cognitive) is a warning sign that a caregiver needs to intervene in a more assertive manner. Their inability to be an active part of the solution requires more creative interventions to avoid conflict and confusion.

***No one agrees to a solution to a problem they don't know or believe they have.***

Convincing someone who is consistently forgetful or easily confused that they cannot drive will only work for a limited time - until they forget the conversation. Someone who is unable to think logically and in the present moment is unable to understand the consequences or process an alternative solution. So how do you get someone to stop driving in these circumstances with the least amount of stress and prevent on going conflict.

- Avoid direct confrontation, their inability to understand or remember will only create, escalate or perpetuate conflict. More creative solutions are required.
- Begin by asking where they wanted to go to and why
  - Offer an alternative - why don't I drive you
  - Redirect "You can go there later" but we need to do this now
  - Postpone – it is the wrong day or time – the store is closed, that is not until next week or that person is not home today.

Usually there is an underlying need that can be met another way, so redirect them to something that will meet that need.

- Suggestions to prevent someone from driving on their own
  - The key is "missing" or "doesn't work"
  - The car won't start (battery is removed or disconnected)
  - The car is "in the shop" (out of sight is usually the easiest solution)

#### SUMMARY

The inability to drive is a significant loss that most people fear more than any illness or symptom. The loss of independence and self-determination can have a devastating impact on a person's mental and emotional well-being. Families and caregivers should move cautiously and compassionately as they help someone through this difficult life transition.

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