

Should Seniors Be Driving?

How to navigate the conversation.

By Anthony Cirillo, Contributor Feb. 27, 2019, at 6:00 a.m.

Prince Philip, who's 97, was recently involved in a car crash that injured two women and prompted a debate on older drivers in Britain. Two days after the accident, he was photographed driving a Land Rover and not wearing a seatbelt. Of course, that reignited a debate about seniors and driving.

An Emotionally Charged Issue

What if I told you that tomorrow, just for a day, you would all of a sudden not have a car available? What if I said a week? You can start to see how your independence would be affected.

A car represents different things to people: a way to get to places for some; status and identity for others; freedom and spontaneity. What it represents also says a lot about how you approach the situation.

Just because you're older doesn't mean you have to stop driving. We see so many distracted driving accidents from much younger people on phones or texting, and that's not representative of how seniors drive.

Spotting Problems

If you're geographically close by, the best thing is to observe directly. In other words, go for a ride-along. Buckle up!

Distinguish between serious signs of trouble and those that are less so. For example, confusing the gas with the brake is serious. Riding the brake is perhaps less serious. If a problem is serious, take immediate action. If it's less so, observe over time, take notes and look for a consistent pattern. These facts will help when having a conversation.

Things to look for:

- Struggling to change lanes.
- Problems turning, particularly with left turns.
- Driving too slow or too fast.
- Reaction time.
- Other drivers honking.
- Hitting curbs.
- Following signals.
- Scrapes on cars.

Often, older adults will start self-correcting, not driving at night, in bad weather and on freeways. My mom started going places by making all right hand turns. Praise these behaviors, but also take them as a sign that things might be changing.

Check in with your loved one's friends, as they may know more than you do. Has your older driver gotten lost or had near accidents? Check with their physician or pharmacist, since medication changes can impact driving.

Is There a Certain Age When People Should Stop Driving?

The process of aging is different for everyone, so it's hard to regulate this. Every state has its own rules.

Seniors are often over-represented in fatality statistics. They are, after all, more likely to be injured in an accident and more likely to die of that injury.

In my state, North Carolina, drivers who are 70 or older at the time their current driver license expires are generally required to renew their license in person at a local DMV office. Licenses issued to drivers ages 66 and older are valid for five years.

A DMV reevaluation may be done based on the driver's physical or mental condition or driving record. A DMV reexamination may be recommended by a family member, EMT staffer or police officer. Information in your driving record may prompt a reexamination.

The reexamination involves the immediate evaluation of an individual by a DMV authorized officer. It consists of an interview and may involve a vision test, written test and/or a driving test.

Start the Conversation Now

Ideally, start a conversation over time, and not in a crisis situation. You should initiate casual conversations. Look for an opening in something your loved one says, as well. For example: Say you're watching the news and there's a report on an accident. Or perhaps the weather is turning bad and might affect driving. Both are great times to start a conversation.

Don't gang up on your loved one. Studies have shown that this kind of conversation is best initiated by a spouse, and then by adult children or a physician.

Have empathy. Validate the person's emotions and go back to why a car is important for him or her. So, for example, if it's to get places, have a plan in place for alternative transportation. If it's about status and identity, have the car parked at their house and let others use it to drive them. If it's about freedom and spontaneity, plan spur of the moment trips.

So, what if you ultimately have to take the keys? What are some ways to ease the transition? Have a plan. It's so much easier today with ride services. Every town has its own resources. Start at the local area agency on aging.

In your conversation and planning, first seek to see if there's a way to keep the person behind the wheel. Make modifications like not driving at night, avoiding major highways and not driving in bad weather. Designate places where they can drive safely and easily.

Caregivers need to be especially aware of the burden this can place on themselves. While depending more on you to get around may be seen as an opportunity to spend more time with a loved one, it also can burn you out. Remember: Make that plan and enlist others to help.