

YOUR ELDERLY PARENTS' CAR KEYS

By Jane Wolf Waterman, MSW, JD

THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT TAKING AWAY
THE "KEYS TO THE KINGDOM" OF FREEDOM

Table of Contents

- 2 - The Hazards of Driving While Old
- 3 - How to Tell if Your Parent Could be a Danger on the Road
- 4 - Why Restricting Anyone's Driving is So Difficult
- 5 - How Your Thinking Differently Helps Everyone



Some time ago, the nation became riveted when an elderly driver, then 86 years old, lost control of his vehicle, killing 10 and injuring 63 people in an open air market in Santa Monica, California. A topic we didn't want to think about -- the dangers of letting our aging drivers stay behind the wheel – took such prominence that everyone was forced to stop and think.

What would happen if your senior parents hurt themselves or someone else when they were behind the wheel? And what is your responsibility as POParents in this matter?

THE HAZARDS OF DRIVING WHILE OLD

Although you may still have vivid memories of asking Dad to borrow the car, it may be the time in life when you may need to take away your Dad's car keys or, at least, insist he limit his driving in some critical ways. We need to acknowledge that, as we age, we're likely to develop one or more of the following "driving-perilous" conditions:

- Failing Vision
- Slower Reflexes
- Stiffer Joints
- Poor Spatial Skills
- Loss of Memory

Once a person reaches age 75, the accident rate per mile increases. In addition to potentially harming others, due to one of these many age-related limitations, the older driver may also be at risk from self-injury. A frail senior's physical conditions make it far more difficult for him to recover from the consequences of an auto accident than a younger person.

Drivers who take medications – most of our aging population – and those many more with cognitive limitations present the most serious perils. People with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia are often the hardest to "persuade" to give up their car keys, in spite of being the last people who should be on the road.

Who among us has the courage to pull the "driving plug" on ourselves? Interestingly, many people do. An MIT Study cited in July/August's AARP 2003 Bulletin states that most older drivers voluntarily limit their driving or stop driving altogether for reasons of safety.

For every elderly person who rebels against their POParents' expressed concerns and fears the blow to their "independence," apparently an equal number feel enormously relief that they no longer have the responsibility for driving and navigating today's highways and byways. Others are relieved when their driving spouses give up their car keys, having lived in dread of their partner's driving but being fearful of speaking up or losing the benefits of "freedom."

Even if your aging loved ones still drive acceptably, it might still be a good idea to suggest that they limit their driving by doing one or all of the following:

- Avoid driving in bad weather -- especially in the rain, snow and fog
- Drive only on city streets and country roads rather than on freeways or highways
- Abstain from driving after sunset and during commuter drive hours
- Take only short distance “road trips”

HOW TO TELL IF YOUR PARENT COULD BE A DANGER ON THE ROAD

First, without being obvious, observe your parents while they’re behind the wheel. Notice their reflexes, eyesight and especially their night vision. Read the labels on your parents’ medications and check for possible impairments to alertness from the drugs they’re taking. Observe how any shrinkage in your parents’ height or seatbelt accessibility might affect their driving.

Second, take advantage of the various objective tests that assess a person’s driving ability and other educational tools. The assessment tests may be taken repeatedly as your parents age. These can be very helpful; especially should you become increasingly concerned and feel that, as a POParent, you need some more “neutral backup” for your car key position.

The Veterans’ Administration, for example, has a free program to determine an individual’s ability to maneuver a vehicle. AAA’s Safety Foundation for Traffic offers tips, videos and other educational tools where POP family members can educate themselves and, most importantly, learn how to talk about these types of matters. And in a more preventative approach, AARP and others offer courses for those over 50 to “refresh and improve” driving skills.

Third, in many states a physician has the responsibility, upon diagnosing certain conditions, to contact the Department of Motor Vehicles to revoke a patient’s driving privileges. Talk over your POParental concerns with your parents’ physician. It can often be a simpler route to have your parents’ doctor initiate the “car key” conversation rather than having a family confrontation. Moreover, your parents’ doctor can also write DMV and/or a “prescription reminder” with the medical suggestion: “No Night Driving” or “Retire Your Car Keys and Let Your Kids Do the Driving.”

WHY RESTRICTING ANYONE'S DRIVING IS SO DIFFICULT

Some seniors suffer emotionally when they recognize their driving days are over. This may result in depressed thoughts and feelings which are primarily caused by two things: the meaning a person associates with the "dis-ability to drive" and the potentially realistic fear of being cut off from many activities outside the home. Often this time of transition and contemplation is filled with loneliness and fear.

Having family around to listen to their sense of loss and restriction can really make a profound difference to your parents. But after you've done that, you can also give your folks a useful life perspective: giving up their car keys is likely to be a well-reasoned choice and can even offer them some attractive "trade-offs." If you can do so, allow your parents the time and respect to logically conclude for themselves that NOT driving may offer them many new advantages.

As you hear your parents' fears about being unable to get to the market or their doctor's appointments without their car, you can turn that negative into several "positives" that involve expanding your taking care of them, easing their lives and helping in your evolving relationship. Why? Not having the responsibility for a car and driving can be a way to:

- Spend more time with you, their kids / POParents.
- Reduce the stress they've been feeling while navigating dangerous, crowded and confusing roads.
- Feel safer and less anxious while driving, in anticipation of driving or of their spouse's driving.
- Simplify much in their life, like the burdens of marketing or the uncertainties of making medical decisions without your help, support and advice.

Rather than have your old parents drive all the way to the market, park, shop for their food and supplies, deal with paying, unload the groceries back into the car, drive back home, park and unpack everything at home alone, you can shop with and/or for your parents. In sharing that time together, you can also help them learn to make wiser food choices or just allow them to save their precious and limited energy for something more enjoyable to them than food shopping.

Similarly, rather than having your aging folks drive themselves all alone to their physicians, you can go with them and often you can be very useful by providing more accurate reporting of their medical histories, by learning more about what ails them and how you can help.

HOW YOUR THINKING DIFFERENTLY HELPS EVERYONE

Spending more “everyday” time marketing with them and going to their doctor visits can do wonders to make you closer to our parents in their waning years. When you assist them with the tasks that take more and more from your parents -- like going marketing and to the doctor alone – they will feel increasingly loved, less stressed and more focused.

Often feeling your elderly parents’ gratitude for your time and attention will offset the extra time and effort you’re putting in to POParenting them. By choosing to see and then work with this car key challenge as an opportunity for greater connection and caring rather than as one yielding more loss, you will lighten your own attitude as well as that of your aging parents. It is just one of so many examples of the healing power of POP.

As you “give back” some of the attention and affection your parents gave you when they parented you, you will get the opportunity to heal old wounds and to think differently, newly -- in expanded ways -- about so many different things you thought you already knew.

Thinking differently about Parenting Our Parents will change your lives!