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Personal Health

A Graceful Entrance to the Passenger Seat, When the Road Becomes Too Rough

By JANE E. BRODY

Alice Riddle of Brooklyn was 70 when she found herself getting increasingly nervous behind the wheel and decided it was no longer a smart idea to continue driving. Fortunately, she lives in New York City, with access to public transportation, car services and taxis, and she has many relatives nearby who are willing to take her wherever she wants to go.

Walter Smith of Scandia, Minn., was another story. Never a good driver in his youth, Mr. Smith in his mid-80's was declining physically and a serious threat to himself and anyone he might encounter on the road in rural Minnesota.

But try as they might, Mr. Smith's children, who lived a mile away and would take him anywhere anytime, were unable to persuade him to stop driving. So they took his keys away. When Mr. Smith had another set made, they took his pickup away.

But after two months without wheels, Mr. Smith lapsed into a serious [depression](#) and the family relented. Just as his family feared, not long after his truck was returned, he backed out of his driveway into the path of a car and died in the crash.

Signs of Trouble

There may come a time - if you live long enough - when it is no longer safe to continue driving. Or you may develop an ailment that precludes safe handling of a vehicle. But will you know when it is time to stop or limit your driving, will you do it willingly, and what will take its place?

Many older adults now outlive their driving life span. The gap, now six years for men and nine for women, is expected to increase as people live longer, leaving growing numbers of older people with challenging transportation needs.

While most drivers are like Ms. Riddle - willing to limit their driving or stop driving altogether when they feel it is no longer safe - others either don't recognize their limits or fear the consequences of giving up driving.

There can certainly be unpleasant consequences: dependence on other people who may not always be able to take them where they want to go; lack of public transportation or difficulty accessing it; and an enforced cutback in social and leisure activities.

If you are concerned about the driving ability of an older relative or friend, you might consider being a passenger and observing the person's driving skills firsthand. Follow that with a caring conversation based on your observations.

You might also suggest that the driver begin to explore other ways of getting around. Consider going along for the first ride to enhance the person's comfort, uncover possible problems and suggest solutions.

The first conversations about safe driving should occur long before driving becomes a problem, inspired perhaps by news of an accident, a discussion of increasingly stressful road conditions or just a casual comment like "driving's not what it used to be."

The preferred initiator of such a conversation, drivers say, is a spouse or personal physician, followed by adult children or close friends.

If you expect conflict, having a doctor refer the driver to a driving-skills assessment program may be a preferred approach. These programs are administered by rehabilitation centers, hospitals and the Department of Veterans Affairs and can cost \$200 to \$1,000, but this could be money well spent if it prevents an accident or saves a life.

Many older people face an immediate obstacle if they give up driving: they don't have willing and able relatives or friends living nearby to take them wherever they want to go, whether it's a trip to the doctor or the movies.

Although many transportation options

are available, they may not always be user-friendly. The Beverly Foundation, a nonprofit transportation organization for the elderly, based in Pasadena, Calif., points out: "Many traditional transportation options, such as buses, taxis or metros are

too difficult to access, too expensive or don't address the mobility and disability issues facing many older people. And in smaller communities, alternative transportation may not exist."

Older people often are unable to walk to a bus stop or train station, may have difficulty climbing into a van, and may be unable to afford taxis and car services. The same disabilities that make it hard or impossible for some older people to drive may also make it hard or impossible for them to use public transportation.

Preparing for Problems

These are some comments made by older people at focus groups about the use of public transportation: "I have lots of problems carrying loads when I use public transportation." "I am concerned about security on public transportation." "I couldn't step up on the bus, I would have to crawl." "I want to go places for recreation, but don't find it easy at night." "It's just not available."

The Beverly Foundation fosters the development of what are called supplemental transportation programs, or S.T.P.'s, for older people and others with disabilities that make driving risky. The organization lists these five essential characteristics of useful alternative transportation:

Available - it exists and is available when needed.

Accessible - it can be reached and used by people with mobility limitations.

Acceptable - it is clean, safe and user-friendly.

Affordable - costs are similar to driving expenses, or services are publicly financed, subsidized or offered by volunteers.

Adaptable - it can be modified to meet special needs, like making more than one stop on a trip.

After decades of driving, many people are not even aware of possible alternatives in their communities.

Look and you may find - in addition to public transit, taxis and car services - hospital-based services; transport sponsored by churches and interfaith organizations; services provided by centers for the elderly; adult day care programs; and agencies like the Red Cross, American Cancer Society and, in some areas, volunteer programs established as a community service.