

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Helping Your Parent Give Up the Car Keys

We are a nation of drivers. In the United States, getting one's driver's license is more than obtaining the state's permission to operate a motor vehicle. Every sixteen-year-old knows it's a rite of passage. A giant step on the road to adulthood. A key to independence. A time to celebrate.

In the same way, losing one's driver's license, losing access to one's own car, is more than forfeiting the state's or the family's permission to drive. Every elderly driver knows that this too, is a rite of passage. It's seen as a giant step on the road to one's final days. A tremendous loss of independence. A time to mourn.

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In many families—perhaps most—it was a parent who taught the children, one by one, how to drive. A child felt safe with Mom or Dad at the wheel. But the aging process—that gradual and, in most cases, inevitable deterioration in vision, hearing and reaction time—changes that.

If an older person has some general confusion, a distraction, a minor irritant in everyday home life can be dangerous or even fatal when it comes to driving.

Again and again, you must ask: Is this safe? Is it safe for my parent to keep driving? Is he in danger of harming himself and also of harming others?

It's the lucky family that has an older parent who realizes and can admit the physical limitations that have occurred, who understands the danger to himself or herself and others, who voluntarily says, "I can no longer drive."

Unfortunately, sometimes those who have become least capable, those at the highest risk, can be the ones who not only refuse to admit any problems but refuse to even discuss the possibility with a concerned adult child. And self-imposed restrictions ("I don't go out on the freeway," "I don't go down that busy street," "I don't go out at night") might offer only a false sense of security.

These are some suggestions if you're concerned about your parent's driving:

- Talk with Mom about your concerns with her driving, early, before the situation is critical. Let her know that when she is no longer able to drive, you will be available to help her get around or to arrange rides.

- Watch the news reports. Unfortunately, reports on accidents involving older drivers are not uncommon. This can be the catalyst to start the conversation. An approach might be "In the future . . ."

- Don't swoop in one day and confiscate the car keys. This almost guarantees anger, resentment, and a nearly total lack of cooperation.

- Prepare what you're going to say. Stick to the facts. (Accidents, close calls, rising insurance rates, failing eyesight and so on.) Don't get caught up in your parent's anger and begin firing back.

- Enlist the help of your parent's doctor to explain why this action is necessary.

- If Dad has given you power of attorney, refer to that when discussing this issue, not as a threat but as a reminder that he trusts your judgment. If someone else has power of attorney, ask that person to help you with the discussion.

- Check with the Department of Motor Vehicles in your state. Ask what the procedure is for reporting your concerns. As drivers become older and older, many states have implemented plans to address this issue. (Also, ask about getting photo ID that is not a driver's license.)

- Perhaps most important of all, keep in mind that you cannot take away the car keys without actually providing some backup. You need to help your parent figure out how he or she is going to get around now. When can you drive? When can your siblings? When can your spouse or children? Can someone in your parish help out? What about neighbors or friends? Are taxis or buses a possibility? Call the local Senior Information and Assistance number to find out about special low-cost van rides for the elderly.

- The goal is not to *take away* the keys, but rather that your parent has decided to stop driving. Do your research and gather information about older drivers. AARP and most insurance companies have material already prepared. With that information in hand, your parent may more easily realize that your suggestions, your concerns are valid. It becomes his or her decision and resistance doesn't play a part.

- And, finally, know that your love, respect and concern can ease your parent's sense of loss, but can't eliminate it. □

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