

# Giving Up the Keys

## Navigating this difficult decision.



### The final straw.

The policeman's call to the son was brief compared to prior conversations regarding his father's driving. The officer's now familiar voice recounted yet another incident involving the son's father. This time, when the father returned to the parking lot after going to a local pharmacy, the father claimed his car was nowhere to be found. Before filing a stolen vehicle report, the policeman walked to the public parking lot with the father, and together they located the parked car several rows away. The sedan was easy to locate since the car was angled across two spaces and the keys were in the ignition. There was no denying the potential impact of his father's diminishing short-term memory. The lost car made painfully clear for the son that his father's continued driving was now a safety issue. The son knew his father should not drive, and yet he did not know how to begin this conversation.

### Framing the conversation

Communication is often the first casualty in a conflict or an emotionally charged situation. We avoid discussing sensitive and volatile topics when we lack the tools and skills to systematically evaluate what is important to us and why. Continued driving is one such topic. As an adult child, how do you discuss with a parent the topic of not driving? Do you avoid the conversation hoping someone else takes action? What if something drastic happens in the interim?

As a mediator and a daughter, the topic of when to stop driving hits close to home. All too frequently, our local news outlets report motor vehicle

accidents citing elderly drivers behind the wheel. Web sites such as [www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com), [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org) and [www.automedia.com](http://www.automedia.com), detail poor driving habits, accident circumstances and fatality rates. There is an abundance of research and data focusing on safety records for adult drivers age 70 and older.

The data is formidable, but statistics and what defines a safe driver does not make the conversation with a loved one about giving up the keys to the car any easier. Whether you are proactively planning to have the conversation about continued driving, or dealing with safety issues in the moment, you can learn how to prepare for and have a difficult conversation. With every difficult conversation, there are six concepts to consider:

- Separate the person from the issue
- Seek to understand the other person's perspective
- Identify issues and why each issue is important
- Acknowledge and recognize emotions, concerns
- Brainstorm ideas and options to meet interests/wants
- Document agreed upon ideas and actions

### Separate the person from the issue.

Engage in conversation about the topic of driving in a manner that is collaborative and respectful. Set the tone by signaling your intent is problem solving and not accusation. In the example above, the son might begin the conversation with his father by saying: "Let's talk about the car and your driving", rather than assessing blame with statements such as: "You're a bad driver", "Do you know how many times the Lexington police have called me?" Focus on the problem, not the person.

### Seek to understand the other person's perspective.

The son could begin his conversation with a question rather than a demand: "What, Why, How, Where, When or How" questions elicit more information and understanding compared to questions eliciting a yes/no response. "Did you forget where you parked the car?"

provides little information compared to: "What is important to you about driving?" "Where do you drive?" "How should we define safe driving?"

### Identify, acknowledge, and seek to understand why an issue is important.

The answer to 'why' an issue is important for the driver may include intangibles such as independence, health, and spontaneity. The answer to 'why' an issue is important for a family member may include safety and peace of mind. Acknowledgement and validation of 'why' an issue is important to the driver and/or the family allows all involved in the discussion to shift the focus from accusations and denials toward the creation of options.

### Brainstorm options and ideas.

Options meet expressed wants and interests. In the above scenario, the son's concern may be a potential accident; his interest is safety for his father as well as pedestrians and other drivers; his options may include measures and criteria to assess continued safe driving. The father may be concerned about isolation. His interest may be in maintaining continued connection with friends, local businesses and the larger community. This family may look for options providing for continued

interaction, autonomy, and safety without use of a car. Certainty and clarity regarding needs, wants and next steps are important, especially if there are memory issues and if some family members live out of town. Capturing on paper the list of issues, wants and potential ideas for options provide all family members with clarity regarding next steps.

### Summary

Currently in the Commonwealth, there is no required vision testing beyond a certain age, or a required road test for Massachusetts' drivers. Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 90, section 8, offers only general guidelines for licensing Massachusetts' drivers, although discussions are underway regarding testing for older drivers. Locally, driver rehabilitation specialists assess driver readiness through <http://www.adaptivedrivingprogram.com> and the Registry of Motor Vehicles provides resources for families and seniors at [www.mass.gov/rmv/seniors](http://www.mass.gov/rmv/seniors). Lexington residents have access to professional resources including the Lexington Police Department, the Human Services Department and the Lexington Council on Aging. Our town is also home to many geriatric care managers and private companies providing services and support for seniors and their families. Do not wait until the car is lost or the keys are left in the ignition. You can learn *how* to be competent in conflict. To drive or not to drive: how will you answer?

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