

Having the tough talk: When should senior drivers give up their car keys?



How to start a conversation with a family member who may have lost ability to drive. What to say and what not to say.

Source: Florida Department of Transportation's Safe Mobility for Life Program



By **Mike Clary**
Sun Sentinel

AUGUST 5, 2017, 6:10 AM

After a close call in which Charles Rubin narrowly missed hitting a woman with a baby carriage, the retired businessman's son suggested it might be time for dad to hand over the car keys.

No way, said Rubin, then in his early 80s. "I still needed my independence," he said.

In a state that leads the nation with more than 19 percent of its population over the age of 65 — and an estimated 750,000 drivers over 80 on the road — discussions among family and friends about when to quit driving take place every day.

In South Florida, these uncomfortable talks took on added urgency in the past week, after an 81-year-old driver in **Boynton Beach struck two people** when she smashed into an ATM machine. One of the injured lost a leg to amputation. Louise Szakacs was cited for careless driving. Police, who are still investigating, said she may have mistaken the accelerator for the brake.,

The discussions of when seniors should stop driving for their own safety and that of others often are not easy to have, and don't always lead to happy solutions.

"Changes with age happens to everyone, but it is hard to say if at a particular age is too old to drive," said Gail M. Holley, research manager for the Florida Department of Transportation's Safe Mobility for Life Program, which provides tips on how to hold those discussions and helps drivers recognize when they have become a danger on the road.

"The goal is to make people aware of how age can affect driving, and then help them transition from driving," said Holley. "What are their other choices to get around?"

On its website, the program has published a guide on how to start a conversation with a family member who may have lost the ability to drive. Suggestions include:

- Do not bring the issue up at a family gathering.
- Do not bring it up during another stressful situation.
- Do not threaten or bully.
- Be calm at all times, even if they are not.
- Be respectful and recognize that the loved one has years of driving experience.
- Be informed about aging issues.
- Discover how to improve functioning through different strategies.
- Find out how to use adaptive equipment.
- Explore what community transportation options are available.
- Limit access to the vehicle or keys, or disable the vehicle, if necessary.

"Be hopeful, since alternatives to driving may not be apparent to the aging road user who feels they will lose their independence," the guide recommends.

Like many other seniors, Rubin feared losing his independence. He equated giving up his car keys with giving up control of his life. But the near-miss with the woman and baby two years ago in a shopping center near

Southwest 10th Street and Military Trail forced the Deerfield Beach man to admit to himself that a change had to come.

“It was a scary situation,” Rubin said. It prompted difficult discussions with his son, who told him he’d be safer using buses, trains and Uber to get around. It led to negotiations because while Rubin didn’t want to hurt anyone or himself, he didn’t want to stop driving.

What came next, experts say, is a vital step for families having this dreaded debate: An occupational therapist evaluated Rubin to help address the difficulty he was having behind the wheel and looked for ways he could adapt. In his case, he was having trouble finding the brake pedal with his foot, which is why he nearly hit the woman.

The solution: Fitting Rubin’s silver 2016 Hyundai Sonata Sport with hand controls that allow him to operate the car without using legs that have lost feeling due to nerve damage.

Rubin was insistent, and the option to install hand controls satisfied his son’s concerns, he said. “We finally got to a point where he did give in,” Rubin said.

Now 85, Rubin is still driving.

After completing a 10-lesson course in using the hand controls, and passing a driver’s test, Rubin said he feels perfectly comfortable on the roadways, from the 25 mph streets of his home in Century Village to the breakneck speeds of **Interstate 95**.

“My eyesight is good, my mind is sharp, and I feel comfortable,” said Rubin, who was in the grocery business in New York before moving to South Florida 22 years ago. “I stay alert, careful, and don’t get tensed up.”

Those who work with what Florida officials call “aging road users” caution that concerned family members need to keep in mind that older drivers are not necessarily dangerous drivers.

“It is not a matter of being too old; it’s matter of driving ability,” said Alice Pomidor, a professor of geriatrics at Florida State University. “I am sure there are people much younger who should not be driving.”

Driving ability does often decline with age, however, and the state’s Safe Mobility for Life Program website offers an array of information on how to recognize the signs. On its website the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles also provides a way to report unsafe drivers.

Since 2004, Florida drivers over the age of 80 are required to pass a vision test when they renew their license. But there is no physical or other examination required.

The warning signs are often first recognized by the drivers and their families, said Pomidor: “It can start for someone as early as in their 50s,” she said. “Fender benders. Getting lost, weaving in your lane, not using turn signals.”

Davis Sapper, an occupational therapist in Boca Raton who runs Progressive Health Works, said that over a 30-year career she has worked to keep many elderly drivers on the road, scores of them in their 80s and 90s. She did the evaluation of Rubin that found he could benefit from hand controls and taught him to use them.

“Just because they are seniors does not mean that there is cognitive decline,” Sapper said. People of all ages suffer from disabilities that can affect driving safety, she said.

For many aging motorists, “there is a whole spectrum of options between giving up the keys and being able to get to the store or a doctor’s appointment,” said Sapper. “Maybe you can no longer drive on I-95 to Miami but you can get to that store in your neighborhood where you know where the stops signs and signals are.”

The goal, Sapper said, “is to keep them driving and keep their independence as long as possible. People want to feel they have some control of their life.”

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