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Tips for communicating with older adults

Talking with older adults can be challenging, whether you're just trying to carry on a friendly conversation or discussing serious matters related to their health, finances or other critical topics. Add to this the complications of communicating with someone who has dementia or Alzheimer's disease, and the interaction can become frustrating. Here are a few tips for improving your communication with your older loved ones, even as their own skills begin to deteriorate.

General tips for good conversation

No matter one's age, communication is vital for happiness and well-being. We must learn not only how to recognize and help seniors express their needs, but also to develop effective and positive ways to talk about important issues and

When and how to take away the car keys

Overall, many older adults are capable of driving safely, even into their seventies and eighties. But people age differently. Several factors place seniors at much greater risk for road accidents. More important, a person 70 or older who is involved in a car accident is more likely to be seriously hurt, more likely to require hospitalization and much more likely to die than a young person involved in the same crash.

Knowing the risk factors and warning signs of an older loved one who has become unable to safely operate a vehicle will help you gauge when it's time to take away the keys. There are also strategies to help you talk to seniors sensitively

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Home Care Assistance News

- Home Care Assistance caregiver honored on NBC's *TODAY Show*! The segment, "Natalie Gives Thanks to a Caring Woman," features Terri Suryn, of Home Care Assistance in Denver. *TODAY Show* host Natalie Morales interviewed and praised Terri for the dedication and time she gave to Natalie's mother-in-law, who has early onset Alzheimer's Disease. **You can watch the video now by visiting our Web site at www.HomeCareAssistance.com!**
- Home Care Assistance opens offices in five new cities!
 - Dallas and Fort Worth, TX
 - Birmingham, AL
 - Philadelphia, PA
 - Pittsburgh, PA

Communicating (continued):

provide instructions. No matter the topic, here are some suggestions for improving your interactions with older adults.

- **Treat the person as a mature adult.** Avoid speaking in a condescending, child-like or belittling way, which creates tension and resentment. Speaking to them with respect and interest gives them dignity.
- **Speak at a medium volume** unless asked to speak up. Yelling right away can seem demeaning.
- **Listen actively** to understand, rather than just wait to speak your own thoughts. Don't just selectively hear what you expect or want to hear. Ask questions to clarify, add positive interjections, or summarize their words to show you understand. Give them an opportunity to correct you.
- **Maintain eye contact**, showing that you are interested in what they are saying.
- **Observe their nonverbal cues** and control your own, especially those indicating frustration, boredom or anger. Avoid fidgeting and maintain an open, friendly body language. Remember to smile!



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Taking the Keys (continued):



about giving up driving and present them with practical transportation alternatives.

Risk factors that impair driving

Many of the changes that often come with age can adversely affect driving ability. These include:

- **Visual decline**—including poor depth perception, narrowed peripheral vision, poor judgment of speed and poor night vision, along with increased sensitivity to bright sunlight, headlights and glare.
- **Hearing loss**—especially the ability to hear important warning sounds while driving.
- **Limited mobility and decreased flexibility**—which increases response time slows pedal selection and steering control, and limits the ability to turn one's head to look for hazards.
- **Chronic conditions**—such as rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's disease, sleep apnea, heart disease or diabetes can impair driving skills, even suddenly.
- **Medications**—as older people often take more medications, which, in combination or taken with alcohol, can result in risky,

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Caregiver spotlight

Mary Oladapo, a NJ Certified Home Health Aide and Certified Medical Assistant, started her career working at a New Jersey-based nursing rehabilitation center for the elderly. She has been working in nursing homes facilities and private duty for over 20 years.



*Our Caregiver of the Month:
Mary Oladapo, of New Jersey.*

In her two years with Home Care Assistance of Central NJ, Mary has worked with a number of clients, providing everything from simple companionship to attending bedbound clients with Advanced Alzheimer's. Her breadth of experience has served her well, giving her great flexibility and compassion. One client in particular, Rina D. from Watchung, NJ, has high praise for her.

"Mary is extremely dedicated to her profession," says Rina. "She has personally helped me regain so much strength in my rehabilitation. Truly a wonderful caregiver."

Mary represents the type of caregiver that Home Care Assistance is all about. We are so pleased at the wonderful job she has done. Her passion for what she does speaks for itself.

Taking the Keys (continued):

unpredictable and dangerous side-effects and drug interactions.

- **Drowsiness**—is often due to medication side-effects or sleep difficulties that come with age, resulting in daytime tiredness and an increased tendency to doze off during the day (or while driving).
- **Dementia or brain impairment**—makes driving more dangerous and more frustrating. It can also cause delayed reactions and confusion on the road.



Warning signs that say *stay off the road*

According to the National Institute on Aging, there are several critical indications that a senior may be losing the judgment or ability to drive.

- **Incompetent driving at night**, even if competent during the day.
- **Drastically reduced peripheral vision**, even if 20/20 with corrective lenses.
- **Struggling to drive at high speed** even if he or she drives well locally at slow speeds.

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Communicating (continued):

- Use **touch** to offer encouragement and support, however, only according to each person's individual comfort level.

Some things are better left unsaid

Samantha Garcia, a professor of Kinesiology at Simon Fraser University, says there are a few things to avoid when speaking to older adults.

- **Don't ask seniors their age**, unless it's required to help them with a form.
- **Avoid using slang.**
- **Don't joke around** with seniors unless you know them well, or the joke is about yourself. Also never tell jokes that poke fun at them or at aging in general.
- **Similarly, don't use sarcasm**, as it can be easily misinterpreted.

Tips for communicating with someone who has hearing loss

- **Minimize background noise and distractions**, eliminating or reducing sources of noise by turning off the TV or radio or closing a window to a busy street.
- **Always greet someone from the front.** Saying hello from behind may be startling. Get the person's attention before you begin to speak. Never start a conversation from another room.
- **Keep your face and mouth as visible as possible** by avoiding sitting with your back to a window or bright light.
- **Make your lips easier to read** by avoiding gum chewing, smoking or covering your mouth. Speak at a normal pace and don't exaggerate your lip movements.

Taking the Keys (continued):

- **Erratic driving**, such as abrupt lane changes, braking or acceleration, hitting curbs, missing turns or scaring pedestrians.
- **Getting lost** frequently, even while driving on familiar roads. Trouble reading street signs or navigating directions.
- **Frequently startled**, claiming that cars or pedestrians seem to appear out of nowhere.
- **At-fault accidents or more frequent near-crashes** or dents and scrapes on the car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc.
- **Failing to use turn signals** or keeping them on without changing lanes.
- **Drifting into other lanes** or driving on the wrong side of the road.
- **Range-of-motion issues**, such as failing to look over the shoulder, trouble shifting gears or confusing gas and brake pedals.
- **Increased traffic tickets** or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers.

When it's time to hang up the keys

Talking to a relative about his or her need to stop driving is one of the most difficult discussions you may ever face. However, it's better if it comes in the form of advice from you or someone he or she knows rather than by an order from a judge or the DMV.

One of the main reasons seniors are reluctant to give up driving is that it is one of the few ways they can continue to feel self-sufficient. The discussion becomes even more difficult when the person still maintains most of his or her faculties, just not those that enable safe driving.

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Communicating (continued):

- **Never speak directly into a person's ear.** Not only can this distort your message, but it hides your lips from their view.
- **Rephrase, don't repeat.** If the person doesn't understand, rephrase your sentence using simpler words or phrases, rather than speaking louder.
- **Verify understanding** of important messages by asking the person to confirm what you've said.
- **Ensure hearing aids** are in place and functioning, if prescribed.

Communicating with someone with Alzheimer's or dementia

It requires special techniques patience and sensitivity to successfully communicate with someone who has Alzheimer's Disease or dementia. Here are a few suggestions, in addition to the tips already discussed, that can help you communicate more effectively.

- **Pay extra attention to your facial expression and body language**, since these become extra important when talking to persons with neurological problems. If they feel threatened, undermined or confused by you, they may react negatively, become increasingly agitated, lose confidence or feel increasingly isolated.
- **Identify yourself and address the person by name.** This helps someone with Alzheimer's to orientate. Make sure you have the person's attention before beginning to speak.
- **Do not get angry** even if you begin to get frustrated. Avoid speaking loudly or treating them like a child.

Taking the Keys (continued):



Preparation is the key

Before you even broach the subject, it's best to have a thorough and sensitive plan in place.

- **Build a case**—by keeping a record of traffic tickets, fender-benders or other incidents that worry you. Be specific.
- **Calculate the monetary savings** that will benefit the senior by giving up driving, such as costs of insurance, gasoline, maintenance, repairs and registration fees.
- **Get others to back the decision**—such as a physician, pastor or another authority figure your relative trusts. You might even ask the elderly driver's doctor to write a prescription stating "no driving."
- **Research and arrange transportation plans.** Many seniors find it demeaning to have to ask for help. The more you can do in advance to have alternative means in place, the easier the transition will be.
 - √ Offer rides or find others who can drive, including the senior's friends.

Communicating (continued):

- **Use simple, direct statements and information**, with words the person can understand. Do not give more than one instruction at a time. Identify people and things by name, rather than using general pronouns like “they” or “that.”
- **Be positive.** Instead of saying, “Don’t do that,” say, “Let’s try this.”
- **Ask “yes” or “no” questions** if that aids conversation and understanding
- **Ask them to repeat** something if you do not understand them.



- **Be patient.** Encourage the person to continue to express his or her thoughts, even if he or she is having difficulty. Be careful not to interrupt. Avoid arguing. Do not press for an answer if that worries or causes confusion.
- **Try again later** if your conversation has not been successful.

Sometimes conversing with someone with Alzheimer’s is not necessarily about understanding; it is about showing care, concern, inclusion and love towards them.

Taking the Keys (continued):

- √ Investigate ride services offered by churches, senior centers and other nonprofit groups to the elderly.
- √ Plan bus or other public transit routes or research local taxi services.
- √ Purchase alternative means of mobility, such as a power chair or a 3-wheeled adult tricycle.
- √ **Enlist the services of a Home Care Assistance caregiver** to drive your relative to run errands, go to appointments, visit friends, etc.
- **Investigate home delivery** for groceries and meals, suggest purchasing by catalogs, and even help the senior learn to use the Internet for shopping.

How to approach “The Talk”

It helps to have a thoughtful, caring plan in place before saying anything, says Harriet Vines, author of “*Age Smart: How to Age Well, Stay Fit and Be Happy.*” She suggests:

- **Be empathetic.** “Imagine how you would feel if you were in your parent’s place,” Vines says.
- **Ask others to join** in the meeting. It helps to involve other family members in the discussion—to help, but not to confront.
- **Keep the conversation non-accusatory**, honest and between “adults,” not “child and parent.” Say things like, “We’re concerned,” “We care” or “We don’t want you to get hurt or to hurt others.”

Taking the Keys (continued):

- **Explain that they won't be permanently homebound.** Discuss the available alternative means to remain mobile.

What if you can't drive an agreement?

If the conversation doesn't go well, or you're unable to get started, there are a few strategies you can employ.

- **Ask a physician** to talk to the reluctant older driver. Seniors often regard advice from a doctor very highly.
- **Plan a gradual curtailment** of driving, for example: "No children in the car, no highways, no driving at night, no driving above 45 mph."
- **Tell them the vehicle doesn't work**, if it is necessary to prevent someone with dementia from attempting to drive (and you're okay with fibbing to a family member). As a last resort, you could actually disable the car by removing the battery cable or distributor cap.

Don't disregard any opposition. "If a senior is obstinate and still sharp of mind, they could still be OK to drive," said Anne Dickerson, a specialist in geriatric occupational therapy at East Carolina University. "It's the person who has beginning dementia that shouldn't." There may be other issues that actually underlie the poor driving and could be addressed first, including correctable losses in vision or hearing, or side-effects from contra-indicated medicine, treatable physical pain or even addiction.

At the very least, you can try to agree on circumstances that will signal it's time to give up the car keys for good.

Once you've both come to an agreement, you can continue to support your loved one in ways beyond just offering rides.

- **Encourage the senior** to use positive language to describe their situation to others and help them gain comfort in asking for assistance.
- **Help the senior make a schedule.** He or she can plan activities and combine trips on one day when a caregiver can drive them.

"Often, seniors realize after a couple of weeks that their life is actually better not driving, and say, 'Why didn't I do this before?'" says geriatric care manager Kathy Johnson, Ph.D. "They may have been frightened and overwhelmed while driving, and find their new role as dedicated passenger to be a relief."

Senior care news

Free Eye Exams Available to Senior Citizens in March to Fight Macular Degeneration

Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) is the leading cause of vision loss in people 65 years or older in the United States. EyeCare America and the Macular Degeneration Partnership national organizations would like to connect people with a free eye exam through its AMD EyeCare Program. People can call the toll-free helpline at 1-866-324-EYES (3937) to see if they qualify for a free eye exam. The eye exams will be provided by more than 7,000 volunteer ophthalmologists across the US. More information can be found at: www.eyecareamerica.org

Contact your local office 24/7

1 (866) 4-LiveIn
1 (866) 454-8346

