

Tips For Caregivers of Loved Ones With Dementia



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STELLA
MONTANO

insist on driving even when it is no longer safe. This is when families and caregivers may have to intervene.

Caregivers and families should observe behavioral signs and try to assess their loved ones level of functioning by observing day to day behavior outside of a motor vehicle. Some signs indicating that a person no longer has the necessary skills to drive safely can be they have become less coordinated, are having difficulty judging distance and space, are getting lost or feel disorientated in familiar places, have difficulty engaging in multiple tasks, have increased memory loss, especially for recent events, are less alert to things happening around them, have mood swings, confusion or irritability, need prompting for personal care, have difficulty processing information, have difficulty with decision-making and problem solving.

It's important to compare present behavior with behavior before the onset of dementia. Changes in behavior will be most noticeable to family and friends who have closely inter-

acted with the individual over time. Observations should be shared with other family members and especially health care providers. Health care providers can be very helpful to caregivers when the time comes that a loved one is no longer safe to drive. A health care provider may even contact Department of Motor Vehicles regarding need of a driver's license revocation. Caregivers should not take this task on alone!

The objective of monitoring an individual's driving ability is to detect a problem before it becomes a crisis. If there are any doubts about safety, the person with dementia should not be driving. Involve the individual with dementia in discussions about driving. Try to imagine what it would be like if you could no longer drive. A person may adjust better if they are involved in discussions and decisions about when to stop driving. The Department of Motor Vehicles can also be a resource to both the caregiver and the person with dementia in offering ideas and support for safe driving.

It is often helpful to keep a

written log of each incident of poor driving behavior. Watch for common warning signs such as driving too slow or too fast for road conditions, stops in traffic for no reason or ignores traffic signs, becomes lost on a familiar route, has difficulty with turns or lane changes, drifts into other lanes of traffic, signals incorrectly or does not signal at all, is increasingly nervous or irritated when driving, has accidents, near misses or fender benders.

When persuasion fails and the person with dementia does not recognize they are no longer safe when driving, a caregiver may need to hide car keys or replace car keys with a set that will not start the car. While it is important to maintain respect for the individual's feelings, you must put safety first.

Organizations like AARP, Alzheimer's Association and Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center on Caregiving can be very helpful to caregivers faced with these situations.

Stella Montano is the former caregiver director at The Hub in Sheridan.

When someone is diagnosed with dementia, one of the first concerns that families and caregivers face is whether or not their loved one should drive. Most dementias are progressive so symptoms such as memory loss, visual-spatial disorientation and decreased cognitive function will worsen over time. This will also mean that a person's driving skills will decrease.

Many people associate driving with freedom and self-reliance. Some individuals, recognizing the risks, will limit or stop driving on their own. Others may be unable to assess their own driving skills and may