

Memory Loss Connection

Watch Out! Granny's Backing Up!

By Mary Ross

Editor's Note — This is a new monthly column provided by the Big Stone County Memory Loss Connection Committee.

Recently we purchased a new vehicle. Some benefits of new cars are the built-in safety features. A safety feature in our new car is a beeper that goes off when I put it in reverse. The beeper doesn't just sound off inside the vehicle when an obstacle is in the way, it beeps the entire time I am backing up. Anyone within earshot is warned... "here comes granny, She's backing up!" I feel like I am driving a county plow that needs to let everyone know there is danger afoot.

In reality, as an aging driver, I appreciate any available safety features that keep me (and others) safe while I continue to enjoy the opportunities and freedom of driving. Thinking about how long I'll be able to continue to drive, and when and how to determine when I need to give up that privilege is daunting. It is true for every driver, and when memory loss is a factor there are additional responsibilities and safety considerations.

You may hear an older driver say something like "my dad drove well into his 90's and he did fine. And I'm going to do the same." What another driver did, however, or managed to do with their own driving skills actually has no bearing on what your decision should be. Every situation is unique. And a person with memory loss is faced with these tough decisions sooner, rather than later.

What to do?

1. Start driving discussions early, and involve your doctor
2. Seek a professional driver's evaluation by a certified occupational therapist, available at Pipestone County Medical Center (#507-825-6054) and at Lake Region Healthcare Fergus Falls (#218-736-8388.)
3. Recognize that reasoning and judgement are both affected by dementia, and appealing to a person's sense of responsibility may not be possible
4. Start making transitional arrangements. Appointments, and errands can often be arranged with the help of family, or friends. Home deliveries are increasingly available for groceries and other merchandise. Alternative transportation services should be explored. Prairie Five Rides provides transportation for individuals and families in-town, regionally, and to the Twin Cities (for medical appointments or to the airport.) Call #877-757-4337 for prices and availability.
5. Tracking devices installed on smartphones or in cars may provide some peace of mind during a transition-from-driving stage.

Signs of Unsafe Driving (as outlined by Mayo Clinic staff)

1. Getting lost when driving to familiar places.
2. Not staying in the lane
3. Confusing the brake and gas pedals
4. Failure to observe (or understand) road signs

5. Poor, or slow decision-making
6. Hitting the curb while driving
7. Driving too slow, or too fast
8. Agitation and confusion while driving
9. Accidents/traffic violations

Strategies for Difficult Transitions

1. Control key access
2. Disable the vehicle
3. Sell the vehicle

These are hard decisions to consider. There are self-image, independence, and moral implications. And, just as a shout-out to the community, when I put my car in reverse, remember to watch out because ... "granny's backing up!"