To Drive or Not to Drive

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Stephanie writes the column "Age'n Community" on planning for the urban and senior population boom.
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Unfortunately, many older adults avoid ever asking themselves the question in this headline, as our culture largely dictates that you must be autonomous in order to be valued.

So instead, older adults independently reduce their driving in stages, with nights and highways the first to go. But they refuse to contemplate a time when they can’t drive at all (or the possibility that they should not be driving already).

However, proactively making a plan for driving less and ultimately ceasing to drive can considerably reduce a person’s anxiety about this transition.

This is the rationale behind the new Jewish Social Service Agency (JSSA) program To Drive or Not to Drive. Each older driver’s story is different, so the program provides assistance to individuals and their families. The first step is to assess the individual’s circumstances. Typically we think of impaired hearing, vision, and reflexes, yet other declining abilities pose serious
dangers, like no longer being able to turn your head to one side or the other or not feeling the petals because of lost sensitivity in the bottom of your feet.

The program’s creator Beth Shapiro, a licensed clinical social worker in JSSA’s Senior Services Department, says “we first need to get people talking about this often taboo issue.” Once a conversation is begun, Shapiro can utilize both self-assessment tools (by asking questions such as, “Has anyone in your family expressed concern about your driving?”) and research-based assessments. One helpful professional tool is the ARMT (Assessment of Readiness for Mobility Transition), which gauges a person’s emotional readiness to give up the keys.

With this information, Shapiro is able to develop a plan that may be implemented immediately, or one that can be shelved for when it is needed. She is sensitive to messages that a person may not want to hear and takes care to frame them in a particular way, yet ultimately she “feels a great responsibility to say it and to get it right.”

Inquiries about To Drive or Not to Drive come from both older adults and from their adult children who are concerned about their parent’s driving. Shapiro provides insight and guidance to family members: for instance, empowering a wife who no longer feels safe as a passenger in her husband’s car to cease enabling him and endangering them both.

Once a person understands the circumstances, the program’s partner agency – the Jewish Council for the Aging (JCA), through its Connect-a-Ride program – provides knowledge and resources about alternative mobility options, such as mass transit, volunteer driver programs, and paratransit. Shapiro notes that the person answering the phone often establishes a relationship with the client, adding a personal touch that is supportive and comforting during this transitional phase.

JCA also provides travel training to acquaint people with the variety of transportation options and how to navigate them. Shapiro creates mobility plans for individuals and often advises them, while they are still able to drive, to practice and get comfortable with taking public transit and other modes.

While the program is only two months old, Shapiro is already finding that these initial conversations are empowering people approaching driving retirement. She stresses that people in our society need to talk about this – with friends, with family. Having this conversation is the first important step.